

Social Capital from the Perspective of Garment Workers in Vietnam: Implications for Workplace Well-being and Collective Empowerment

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Abstract: This study investigates the multi-dimensional nature of social capital-bonding, bridging, and linking-among garment workers in Vietnam, examining how these dimensions influence job satisfaction, skill development, and bargaining power. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 300 workers across six factories in Hanoi, Bac Ninh, and Hung Yen, supported by ten in-depth interviews. Quantitative analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) revealed that bridging social capital had the strongest positive impact on job satisfaction and skill development, while linking social capital significantly enhanced perceived bargaining power. Qualitative findings highlighted structural and institutional constraints, including limited independent union representation and hierarchical workplace cultures. The study concludes with policy recommendations to strengthen multi-dimensional social capital as a pathway to social upgrading in Vietnam's garment sector.

Keywords: Social capital, Garment workers, Vietnam, Workplace relations, Labour rights, PLS-SEM

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Concept and Significance of Social Capital

Social capital is widely recognized as an intangible asset that facilitates cooperation and collective action through social networks, shared norms, trust, and common values. Putnam defines it as “connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” [15], positioning it as an organizational tool for resolving collective action problems and enhancing community effectiveness. Coleman similarly emphasizes that social capital is a feature of social structures that enables actors to pursue their interests within that structure [8]. Contemporary interpretations highlight its multidimensional nature, encompassing values, beliefs, networks, relationships, information channels, and social institutions that collectively underpin cooperation and socio-economic development [7].

Fukuyama succinctly describes social capital as the “existence of a certain set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permit cooperation among them” [9]. From an analytical perspective, social capital is typically classified into three dimensions: structural capital, referring to the configuration and density of network ties; relational capital, comprising trust, norms, and mutual obligations; and cognitive capital, denoting shared language, codes, and narratives that enable collective meaning-making [14]. These dimensions interact to enhance knowledge exchange, innovation capacity, and organizational resilience, making social capital a critical driver of sustainable development in both economic and social spheres.

1.2. Relevance to Vietnam's Garment Industry

The garment sector is one of Vietnam's economic pillars, contributing substantially to national export turnover and providing employment to millions, especially women. Following Vietnam's accession to the WTO in 2007, the industry surpassed crude oil in export value by 2010 [22], sustaining an average annual export growth rate of nearly 18% between 2001 and 2017, and attracting significant foreign direct investment (FDI), which accounts for over 60% of total garment export value [22].

However, this growth in scale and value has not been matched by commensurate improvements in labour quality or working conditions. Most Vietnamese garment enterprises participate in low value-added segments of the global value chain (GVC), relying primarily on low-skilled labour and foreign capital to increase productivity, rather than upgrading technology or enhancing worker welfare [10]. Studies on economic and social upgrading reveal that while the industry has achieved notable economic growth, social progress—such as better working conditions, labour rights, and welfare—remains limited [10], [11].

Recent evidence underscores this disparity: despite rapid industrial expansion, average monthly wages for many workers—particularly young female migrants—remain below USD 300, and workplace safety and benefits are inadequate [21]. This reflects a persistent gap in workers' social capital, including the weakness of support networks, the absence of independent unions, underdeveloped social dialogue mechanisms, and limited collective bargaining power [1], [9], [18]. These shortcomings hinder the translation of economic growth into sustainable social improvements.

From the workers' perspective, social capital is not merely an abstract resource but a tangible determinant of access to information, workplace support, and the ability to claim rights. Bonding ties among co-workers, bridging links to management and external actors, and linking connections to institutional mechanisms all play a decisive role in shaping employment quality, job security, and empowerment [17], [20]. The Vietnamese garment industry's challenge is thus not only technological or market-related but also social: building robust, multi-dimensional social capital for workers is essential to achieving sustainable and equitable development outcomes.

2. METHODS

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to provide a snapshot of garment workers' social capital across the three dimensions of bonding, bridging, and linking, and to examine how these dimensions relate to key worker outcomes. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews to contextualize and enrich the findings.

The survey was conducted with 300 garment workers drawn from six factories in Hanoi, Bac Ninh, and Hung Yen, representing both domestic and foreign-invested enterprises. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure proportional representation by gender, age, contract type, and years of service. The final sample comprised 88% female and 12% male participants, with a mean age of 29.4 years (SD = 6.1) and 55% under the age of 30. Regarding employment status, 72% held permanent contracts while 28% were on fixed-term contracts, and the average tenure was 3.2 years (SD = 2.4).

Social capital was measured using a Vietnamese-adapted version of the Workplace Social Capital Inventory (WoSCi) [17], comprising 15 items evenly distributed across bonding, bridging, and linking subscales. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Example items included: "I can rely on my co-workers for help with work-related problems" (bonding), "Supervisors listen to and consider workers' opinions" (bridging), and "I know how to access external organizations that can help me with workplace disputes" (linking). Additional outcome variables included job satisfaction, self-reported skill development, turnover intention, and perceived bargaining power.

Data collection was carried out using both paper-based and digital questionnaires administered during lunch breaks, with informed consent obtained from all participants. To complement the quantitative findings, ten in-depth interviews were conducted to capture detailed accounts of network utilization, barriers to building social capital, and perceptions of institutional support.

Quantitative data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate the measurement model and test the hypothesized relationships. Reliability and validity tests confirmed strong measurement properties: Cronbach's α values were 0.84 for bonding, 0.86 for bridging, and 0.78 for linking; composite reliabilities for all subscales exceeded 0.80; and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were above the 0.50 threshold, indicating convergent validity. The structural model revealed that bridging social capital had the strongest positive effect on job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and skill development ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$). Bonding social capital was also positively related to job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$) but showed no significant association with skill development. Linking social capital emerged as the only dimension significantly associated with

perceived bargaining power ($\beta = 0.32, p < 0.01$). Together, the model accounted for 48% of the variance in job satisfaction, 42% in skill development, and 39% in perceived bargaining power. Qualitative analysis reinforced these findings, highlighting the distinct functions of each social capital dimension. Bonding ties provided emotional and logistical support, such as shift swaps or sharing overtime strategies, but remained largely confined to small work groups. Bridging ties, though less prevalent, facilitated access to training opportunities and managerial mediation. Linking ties were rare and often depended on individual initiative rather than institutional mechanisms; many workers reported limited awareness of formal grievance procedures. This multi-method evidence underscores the critical need to strengthen bridging and linking capital to achieve both individual and collective benefits in the garment sector.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Weak Bargaining Power and Rights Violations

The dynamics of fast-fashion production-characterized by compressed lead times, low-cost labour strategies, and high-volume outputs-have intensified pressures on garment workers in Vietnam. Such conditions, combined with the prevalence of short-term contracts and performance-based pay, have substantially weakened workers' bargaining power. Evidence from the Human Rights Research Center (2024) indicates that rights violations are common, arising from low wages, excessive working hours, unsafe working environments, and the absence of effective mechanisms for negotiation [1]. In many cases, workers lack independent union representation, and enterprise-level trade unions are embedded within management structures, thereby limiting their ability to defend worker interests [9], [18].

The absence of robust bargaining structures reflects a deeper deficit in linking social capital-the capacity to connect with institutional actors who can influence or enforce workplace standards. Without these channels, workers often resort to informal complaint mechanisms or spontaneous collective actions, such as wildcat strikes, which are reactive, fragmented, and difficult to sustain over time.

3.2. Labour Force Demographics and Vulnerability

Labour statistics underscore the structural vulnerabilities of Vietnam's garment workforce. Surveys by the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (2023-2024) show that approximately 90% of garment workers are women, with over half under the age of 35 [21]. This demographic profile reflects a predominantly young, female, and often migrant labour force, with high turnover rates and limited opportunities for career advancement.

Such demographic instability erodes bonding social capital by impeding the formation of long-term trust and solidarity networks within the workplace. High turnover disrupts collective memory, weakens shared norms, and reduces the likelihood of sustained collective action. Moreover, wage data reveal that 74% of workers earn less than the global living wage benchmark, while 99% fall below the Asian regional living wage standard [21]. The economic precarity associated with these figures reinforces dependency on employers and diminishes workers' capacity to take collective risks in pursuit of better conditions.

3.3. Informal Networks and Peer Support

Despite the weakness of formal institutions, informal networks remain an important-if under-recognized-component of worker social capital. These networks, typically composed of co-workers, neighbours, and acquaintances from the same hometown, facilitate the exchange of critical information, such as changes in factory policies, health and safety advice, or strategies for managing overtime demands.

This bonding capital often serves a "survival" function, enabling workers to cope with daily challenges, but it may not translate into structural improvements in working conditions. As Putnam (2000) distinguishes, bonding capital supports "getting by," whereas bridging capital supports "getting ahead" [16]. In the absence of strong bridging and linking ties, the potential of informal networks to foster upward mobility and systemic change remains limited.

Comparative studies on vulnerable communities in Vietnam suggest that these informal ties could be leveraged into more structured support systems, such as peer circles or worker-led committees, if

adequately resourced and protected from managerial interference [20]. Such initiatives could bridge the current gap between individual coping strategies and collective empowerment.

3.4. Measurement Models for Worker Social Capital

In operational terms, the social capital of garment workers can be systematically measured across the three dimensions of bonding, bridging, and linking by employing validated multi-item scales. Nguyen and Nguyen (2025) developed a 15-indicator model tailored to the Vietnamese urban context, verified for reliability and validity through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) [5]. In workplace settings, Tsounis' (2023) Workplace Social Capital Inventory (WoSCi) offers a clear distinction between bonding social capital-relationships among co-workers at the same hierarchical level-and bridging social capital-relationships between workers and higher-level management or external stakeholders [17]. When adapted to the garment sector, these frameworks could be operationalized as follows: bonding capital encompassing trust in co-workers, the frequency of mutual assistance, and collaborative problem-solving; bridging capital covering the quality and frequency of interactions with supervisors, HR personnel, and union representatives; and linking capital reflecting knowledge of and access to external grievance mechanisms, legal aid, and labour advocacy organizations. The application of such tools enables a systematic assessment of how these forms of social capital influence critical worker outcomes, including job satisfaction, skill development, turnover intentions, and participation in social dialogue.

Empirical evidence suggests that the current state of social capital among Vietnamese garment workers is constrained across all three dimensions. Structurally, it remains weak due to the absence of independent union structures and the fragmented nature of worker representation [9], [18]. Relationally, it has been eroded by high labour turnover, competitive wage systems, and limited opportunities for collaborative work. Cognitively, it is underdeveloped, with a scarcity of shared narratives or collective visions for workplace improvement, compounded by workers' limited awareness of legal rights and labour standards [1], [21]. While informal networks offer some potential for strengthening bonding capital, meaningful and sustained improvements in working conditions and rights protection will require deliberate interventions to enhance bridging and linking capital alongside these existing ties.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the multi-dimensional nature of social capital among garment workers in Vietnam and its uneven development across bonding, bridging, and linking forms. Consistent with the theoretical framework proposed by Nahapiet and Ghoshal [14] and the adaptation of workplace social capital measures by Tsounis [17], the data reveal that bridging social capital-connections between workers and management or external actors-plays a pivotal role in enhancing both job satisfaction and skill development. This aligns with prior evidence that bridging ties expand access to diverse resources, training opportunities, and channels for upward mobility [5], [16].

Bonding social capital, while positively associated with job satisfaction, functions primarily as a coping mechanism in the current industrial context. It reinforces immediate workplace solidarity and mutual aid but is insufficient to drive structural improvements in working conditions without complementary bridging and linking mechanisms. These results mirror earlier research in vulnerable labour communities, where strong bonding ties could become insular if not supported by open networks [20]. Linking social capital emerged as the most significant predictor of perceived bargaining power, underscoring the critical role of institutional linkages-such as trade unions, labour advocacy groups, and legal aid-in enabling workers to influence policy and protect rights [9], [18]. However, the qualitative evidence suggests that linking ties are rare and poorly institutionalized in Vietnam's garment sector, largely due to the absence of independent unions and the limited reach of existing trade union structures [1]. This institutional gap constrains the transformative potential of social capital by keeping worker voice fragmented and reactive rather than proactive.

These findings reinforce the notion of a "social upgrading deficit" in Vietnam's garment industry [10], where economic expansion and export growth have not been matched by proportional gains in labour rights, workplace conditions, or social protections. The weak structural and cognitive capital observed among workers-manifested in low collective awareness of legal rights and minimal shared vision for

workplace improvement-suggests that policy and practice must move beyond firm-level productivity measures to address worker empowerment and participation directly.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study point to several practical and policy-oriented measures aimed at strengthening the social capital of garment workers in Vietnam. First, bridging capital can be reinforced by establishing structured, recurring worker-management dialogues at the line or department level, creating regular opportunities for employees to voice concerns and contribute to decision-making. Such mechanisms should be supported by supervisory training modules-such as Better Work's Supervisory Skills Training (SST) or GEAR programs-that foster two-way communication, build trust, and improve the responsiveness of management to worker needs. Second, linking capital requires institutional reform to enhance the autonomy and responsiveness of trade unions, thereby enabling them to represent worker interests more effectively. Complementing these reforms, the development of accessible, multilingual grievance channels linked to recognized labour advocacy networks would provide workers with credible and secure avenues for seeking redress. Third, to convert bonding capital into collective agency, informal peer support networks should be formalized into worker-led committees empowered to present concerns in social dialogue forums. Providing legal literacy and negotiation training to peer leaders would further bridge the gap between informal solidarity and formal bargaining capacity. Finally, measurement and monitoring systems should be implemented to regularly assess social capital indicators using validated tools-such as the adapted Workplace Social Capital Inventory (WoSCi)-to track the impact of workplace interventions over time. Collectively, these measures could transform fragmented, survival-oriented networks into integrated social capital systems that enhance both individual well-being and collective empowerment, contributing to a more equitable and sustainable garment industry.

This study contributes to the literature on social capital and labour relations by offering a worker-centred analysis of the Vietnamese garment sector. By empirically demonstrating the differentiated effects of bonding, bridging, and linking capital, the research highlights the strategic importance of bridging and linking forms for advancing social upgrading in a rapidly globalizing, export-oriented industry.

While bonding capital remains essential for everyday resilience, it must be complemented by bridging ties to management and linking ties to institutional actors if workers are to gain substantive improvements in bargaining power, skill development, and workplace conditions. The current deficits in structural and cognitive capital-stemming from demographic instability, wage precarity, and institutional weakness-require targeted policy interventions that recognize social capital as both a labour right and a driver of sustainable industrial growth.

Future research should extend this analysis through longitudinal designs and intervention-based studies, testing the causal effects of specific social capital-building programs on worker outcomes. Such work would provide the evidence base needed to inform both government policy and corporate practice in achieving the dual goals of economic competitiveness and social justice in Vietnam's garment industry.

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