

# Weaving together social capital to empower women artisan entrepreneurs

Weaving  
together social  
capital

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This research paper aims to explore the impact artisan cooperatives have upon women employed in Sub-Saharan Africa. Impacts were detailed using the theoretical framework of social capital theory to demonstrate the networks within artisan cooperatives that connect to greater opportunities for social and economic benefits.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A phenomenological approach was used for this study based upon the shared experiences of women who were leading artisan cooperatives in Sub-Saharan Africa. This study included semi-structured interviews over Zoom with Chief Entrepreneur Founders of artisan cooperatives located in Sub-Saharan Africa. Documents from the cooperatives were analyzed to triangulate the cooperatives' current projects and efforts.

**Findings** – Three prevalent themes emerged: (1) key partnerships, (2) benefits of the cooperative and (3) change and growth among the women and communities. Empowerment was felt through both economic and social impacts upon the women.

**Research limitations/implications** – This article captures the perspective of the Chief Entrepreneur Founders and their observations and experiences the women shared with them. Emic perspectives from the women who participate in the artisan cooperatives is the focus of future research.

**Practical implications** – These social enterprises serve as exemplary models for other cooperatives to provide dignified and sustainable work to impact the lives of women serving in these communities.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes research on social entrepreneurship within artisan cooperatives. It provides a baseline for further research on the artisan sector specifically for the sustainable development goals of gender equality, decent work and economic growth.

**Keywords** Artisan sector, Women empowerment, Women cooperatives, Social enterprises, Social entrepreneurship

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The use of social capital within the artisan industry to advance and develop the fragmented sector continues to be an area of interest for both researchers and practitioners alike (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2015; Bhagavatula *et al.*, 2010; Dol and Odame, 2013; Pret and Carter, 2017; Sappleton, 2009). Many artisans form natural groups or cooperatives because of their social connections within the industry. Yet even with the formation of these social connections and networks, many still face limitations within the industry, such as access to broader markets or product limitations (Dol and Odame, 2013). It is important to explore how some groups become successful while others do not and how social connections impact this difference. Artisan entrepreneurs are adaptive and willing to create markets for their products especially in response to the development of tourism and regional competitiveness (Mbaiwa, 2011;



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Popelka and Littrel, 1991; Teixeira and Ferreira, 2019; Thomas *et al.*, 2013). The artisan industry provides jobs for rural communities and has far-reaching impacts on developing economies (Fuller-Love *et al.*, 2006; Huang and Anderson, 2019; Morais, 2022). There are few studies on how social networks or connections impact artisan entrepreneurs and artisan groups in developing countries. This study seeks to further advance the understanding of social capital and collective actions in developing the artisan industry.

Artisan entrepreneurs face different barriers and factors limiting their ability to be productive. Previous studies have indicated the influence social and spacial contexts have on providing entrepreneurs access to resources (Batjargal, 2003; Hite, 2005), significant information (Chalmers and Balan-Vnuk, 2013; Johannisson *et al.*, 2002), and increased opportunities for collaboration (Coulson, 2012; Di Domenico *et al.*, 2009). Moving simply from communities working together to community-focused entrepreneurship, which addresses social needs and facilitates social value creation, is of great interest (Akemu *et al.*, 2016; Barth *et al.*, 2015; Pret and Carter, 2017; Zahra *et al.*, 2009). As entrepreneurship research seeks to solve social issues within communities, there is a need to explore gendered ascriptions on women's entrepreneurial activities. Even more of a focus is on women artisan entrepreneurs in developing countries because of the large percentage of women involved in the artisan sector (ILO, 2018). Other studies have explored intermediary organizations' role in enhancing women through entrepreneurship activities (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2015; Bruton *et al.*, 2008; Rindova *et al.*, 2009). The artisan sector needs investments in innovation, quality and entrepreneurship to facilitate growth, advancing the industry toward a global market (Teixeira and Ferreira, 2019). This innovation and investment in the artisan sector provide women artisans opportunities for economic capital and development (Matsenjwa and Musiwa, 2016; Ramadani *et al.*, 2019).

This research aims to explore ways social capital impacts women artisan entrepreneurs working in a cooperative or social enterprise. The level of social capital found within an artisan cooperative can either enhance or limit the mobility of its artisans. Artisan cooperatives provide entrepreneurs with a collective place to enhance skills and work together on related products for potentially larger markets (Dol and Odame, 2013). Entrepreneurs' connections to global markets depend on the networks the artisans have established or want to establish (Dol and Odame, 2013). Hence this paper focuses on the following research question:

*RQ1.* How does membership in a social enterprise or cooperative impact the social and economic capital of women artisans?

### Literature review

The Sustainable Development Goals set forth by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 were developed to build a sustainable future. These goals, which include gender equality, zero hunger and no poverty, provide a standard for developed and developing countries to reach collaboratively (UNDP, n.d.). One goal recently has been of greater focus because of its broad-reaching impacts: gender equality and women empowerment (Madsen, 2018). When the focus is placed on enhancing women and empowering them to become agents in their communities, it contributes toward other goals set forth by the United Nations. Providing women opportunities for dignified work can contribute to their advancement, greater economic gains and community enhancement (IMF, 2018).

Sub-Saharan Africa is still below the global average on gender equality, with a score of 70 compared to 74.71, the global average. This means that women have around three-fourths the legal rights compared to men (World Bank Group, 2019). However, the region still falls far behind other regions throughout the world because a substantial percentage of women work within the informal economy (ILO, 2018). Prior research has investigated the roles of women found within industries in the informal sector, such as agriculture, construction, household labor, tailoring,

seasonal workers, petty goods and service traders (Eapen, 2001; Lecoutere, 2017). Firms and individuals in the informal economy are smaller and less productive than formal economy firms (ILO, 2002). Workers found within the informal sector have lower wages, lack of access to social benefits and unsafe work conditions (Bargain and Kwenda, 2014; Silva-Peñaherrera *et al.*, 2022; U.N. Women, 2015). Women informal workers are beginning to join together through collective action, such as micro-credit or savings groups, to gain access to capital and other valuable resources (Adegbite *et al.*, 2022; Gudeta *et al.*, 2022; Ona and Mukhia, 2020).

Another type of collective action is participation in cooperatives, which contributes to the African economy by generating employment (Kwakyewah, 2016). In Kenya, researchers found 80% of the population earned their livelihoods from participating in a cooperative (Mhembwe and Dube, 2017). Much of the previous literature focused on agriculture and savings cooperatives, but the artisan sector employs large percentages of women working in informal economies, particularly in rural areas (Dooley *et al.*, 2020; Dol and Odame, 2013; Ferguson and Kepe, 2011; Lecoutere, 2017). Women artisan entrepreneurs participate in collaborative production networks to meet production demands or to challenge contract constraints (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2015; Dol and Odame, 2013). Many of these artisan groups started naturally because women gathered to create products that reflected their social and cultural heritage (Atalay, 2015; Dol and Odame, 2013).

Pret and Cogan (2019) noted that much of the research on artisan entrepreneurship was focused on Western cultures, indicating a need to research other geographic areas and cultural contexts, particularly because developing countries have a comparative advantage in the artisan sector (Indego Africa, n.d.). Developing countries have culturally rich heritages deeply interconnected to the artisan industry. These cultural ties are passed along to each generation, making products that reflect culture but are also beautiful and valuable. The artisan sector is deeply rooted within these communities, which have then tried to market these products (Indego Africa, n.d.). Atalay (2015) detailed how a women's artisan cooperative in Turkey sought to develop their products and create a brand. Still, there was a need to make permanent collaborations to help give trainings and improve the quality of their designs.

The social connections that are formed between women can still be limiting if social connections are not expanded outside their own network (Dol and Odame, 2013). Horizontal networks, or social connections with other artisans, enhance their craft because culture shapes the designs and processes, and artisans can take advantage of this cultural heritage (Alberti and Giusti, 2012; Florida, 2002; Hesmondhalgh, 2002; McAdam *et al.*, 2014; Ratten and Ferreira, 2017). Artisan entrepreneurs and cooperatives benefit from structural holes found within their groups, as those holes may provide an incentive to expand outside their immediate environment (Bhagavatula *et al.*, 2010). However, suppose local artisans do not have the skills or knowledge to expand their social networks outside their local communities. In that case, they have limited potential to expand markets and skills and increase economic viability. Social media or product marketing may expand their crafts to other markets (Drummond *et al.*, 2018), but for many in the developing world, there is a lack of understanding of how to use these tools.

Social connections that create vertical bridges are essential in gaining the necessary resources to expand production and enhance products for artisan entrepreneurs (Atalay, 2015; Jenssen, 2001). Involving women in cooperatives impacts their livelihood, home and financial stability. Women who are members of cooperatives grow their agency or ability to make decisions for their own lives. Through economic enterprises, women gain access to resources, training, funding and the ability to transform society (Dooley *et al.*, 2020; Ferguson and Kepe, 2011; Lecoutere, 2017). Women gain confidence and grow together, increasing their sense of self-efficacy to enable choices and empowerment (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002). A key question to consider is if participation in a cooperative provides an opportunity for women's economic empowerment because of the social capital gained from their participation.

Previous scholars have highlighted the importance of “building bridges” rather than building innovative programs from the ground up (Lewis, 2004). This qualitative phenomenological study provides a baseline of the social and economic impacts for women artisan entrepreneurs working in a cooperative or social enterprise within a specific region in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study provides context on how these cooperatives formed and what social connections or networks enabled the associated artisans to succeed in building their own social capital.

### Theoretical framework

Researchers noted the need for artisans to expand beyond local networks and connect to outside individuals or organizations to build their brand and sell their products to other markets (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2015; Atalay, 2015; Bhagavatula *et al.*, 2010; Dol and Odame, 2013). Social Capital Theory discusses networks and connections that bridge individuals or organizations to resources necessary to enhance their growth. It states that benefits are derived from individuals, groups, or institutions’ social interactions (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). Communities with strong social networks are most equipped to handle complex issues like poverty, natural disasters and other vulnerable instances (Moser, 1996; Narayan, 1995). Social capital can be developed and grown through purposeful actions, which then can be exchanged for economic gains depending upon the nature of social connections and obligations (Sobel, 2002). Social capital is the most stable of all forms of capital in times of crisis, such as natural disasters or pandemics (Dynes, 2005; Makridis and Wu, 2021). Women working in female-operated industries were found to have higher levels of social capital as compared to females in male-dominated industries (Sapleton, 2009). Many scholars use this theory to describe sociology and economic construct’s impacts on individuals (Claridge, 2014). While there are many definitions of social capital, most include comparable items such as: social networks, cooperation, interpersonal trust, connectedness, social support, civic participation, exchange, social support and sociability (Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1988). It was determined that Woolcock and Naryan’s (2000) framework was appropriate to measure social capital found within the interactions between women artisans and their participation in cooperatives within this study. Their framework best helped frame the research questions seeking to be answered by this project.

Woolcock and Narayan’s (2000) framework describes four views of social capital on economic development: (a) communitarian, (b) networks, (c) institutional and (d) synergy (Table 1). This study focused on using the first two views, communitarian and networks, to

Perspective	Actors	In action
Communitarian view	Women artisan formal/informal groups	Local artisans coming together with their crafts
Networks view	Artisan Entrepreneurs Artisan Collectives Artisan Cooperatives	Bridge to larger markets
Institutional view	Government Groups NGO’s	Policies promoting cooperatives
Synergy view	Community Groups Regional Trade agreements	Government and private artisan market spaces

**Table 1.**  
Four views of social capital

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work but adapting it to artisan entrepreneurs from “Social Capital: Implications for development theory, research, and policy,” Woolcock and Narayan, 2000, *The World Bank Research Observer*, p. 239. (<https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/15.2.225>)

understand women's empowerment within artisan cooperatives from the perspective of the leaders of these cooperatives. This was because the researchers felt that understanding the other two views would require a deeper dive into the laws, policies and government groups impact on the cooperatives, which would be best done in person within each country. Communitarian refers to social capital as local connections via clubs, associations and cooperatives (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000), and most often do not have connections outside the community. For example, in Uganda, the Tabiro Ladies Club was an embroidery cooperative that was not formally organized. Dol and Odame (2013) found this hindered the group because it inhibited them from accessing broader markets for their products outside their local community. Strong social ties within these communities provide women opportunities to enhance current skills or access necessary resources (Bastian *et al.*, 2023).

Networks are described as a vertical view for connecting groups outside of one's organization (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). The networks connect to greater social capital through investors, entrepreneurs, or other firms that can further the group's products. Opportunities for new ventures are enabled or blocked based on the networks of social relations and interpersonal links available to individuals (Leyden *et al.*, 2014). Women with networks have increased economic benefits with broader markets. Still, they may face a heavier workload if social benefits do not adjust at the same rate or faster than economic benefits (Majurin, 2012). As networks expand, lone entrepreneurs access more resources, training and skills needed to expand production (Atalay, 2015; Jossen, 2001).

Using Social Capital as the theory for this research allowed us to dive deeply into the social implications of social enterprises and cooperatives. These cooperatives or social enterprises are not solely created to provide a job for women artisans but also other social and economic benefits that impact lives. Other studies have noted that gathering artisan entrepreneurs into groups has positive outcomes and creates social change within communities and families (Dol and Odame, 2013; Majurin, 2012). Hidalgo *et al.* (2021) detailed how social capital acts as a driver toward social entrepreneurship and how it acts as a contributor to all groups in helping to change systemic and cultural issues within communities. Hidalgo *et al.* (2021) created a model (Figure 1) for the role social capital plays in developing social entrepreneurship, which has distinguishing features and objectives of creating social wealth compared to commercial entrepreneurs who only seek profits (Estrin *et al.*, 2013).

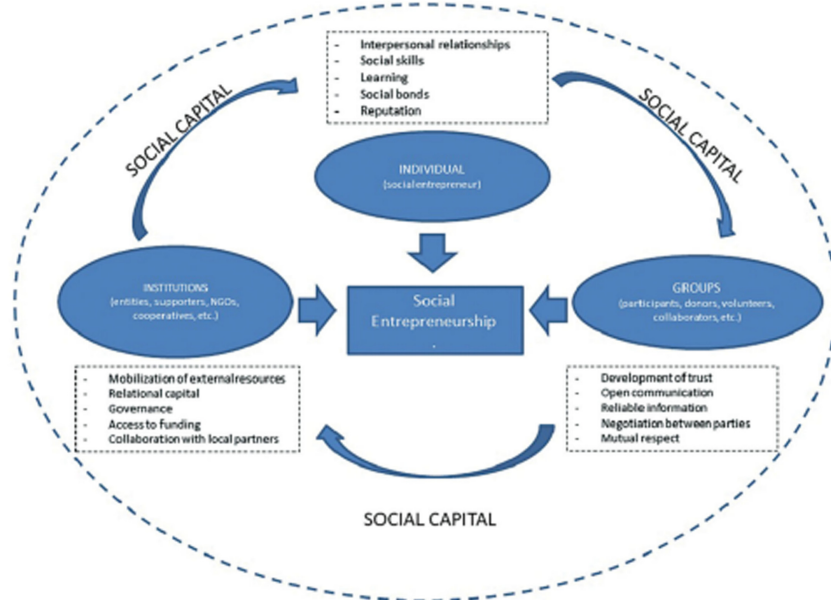
The model Hidalgo *et al.* (2021) created applies well to artisan cooperatives. Lone artisans are often well-connected with other artisans, but through expanded connections with social entrepreneurs, they can develop their network to solve issues faced within their sector.

## Methodology

The epistemological approach for this study was naturalistic inquiry in the interpretivist qualitative research paradigm (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This research is built upon a study on a women's artisan cooperative in Uganda by Dol and Odame (2013) and their research was influenced by Rowlands' (1997) research on women in Honduras. Rowlands (1997) explained that women experience empowerment in three dimensions: personal, relational (group) and collective. The research presented here adds to these studies with the incorporation of two additional dimensions of Social Capital Theory.

### Sample selection

This study described the shared experiences of founders of social enterprises and cooperatives (FSECs) and how these experiences impacted the women artisans (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenological studies explore lived experiences and seek to understand a person's experience from their point of view (Seidman, 2013). A gatekeeper



**Figure 1.**  
Social capital  
developing to social  
entrepreneurship

**Note(s):** From “Social Capital as a Driver of Social Entrepreneurship,” by G. Hidalgo, J. M. Monticelli, and I. V. Bortolaso, 2021, *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, p. 16 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/19420676.2021.1951819>)

who currently has an artisan social enterprise in Kenya used the following selection criteria to provide other FSECs for this study: the founder must speak English and be operating a women’s artisan cooperative or social enterprise. Thus, the artisan cooperatives were purposively selected for the study. In total, five FSECs were interviewed. Descriptions and backgrounds of the FSECs can be found in Table 3. All cooperatives and FSECs were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Their stories served as the baseline to view gender equity, decent work and economic growth as empowerment factors to understand further how communitarian and network views of social impact can transfer to other cooperatives and regions.

#### *Data collection*

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews over Zoom due to the global pandemic travel restrictions. As the FSECs were located in different locations worldwide, using Zoom enabled the research to continue due to travel restrictions. Each interview was 1–2 h in length. Using open-ended questions provided large amounts of rich empirical data (approximately 20–25 single-spaced transcript pages per participant). The interview questions included the FSECs previous experiences that prepared them to start the cooperative, the social and economic impacts women experienced from being part of the cooperative, and reasons women chose to become a part of the cooperative. These questions were developed and adapted from other studies of the artisan sector (i.e. Dol and Odame, 2013; Rowland, 1997) with the intent to explore women’s empowerment in greater detail. Secondary sources of data, including yearly reports, blog postings and current news updates from the cooperatives, were provided by the FSECs and used for data triangulation (Patton, 2002).

### Data analysis

The research team was guided by principles found within interpretative phenomenological analysis (Cope, 2011; Larkin *et al.*, 2021; Pret *et al.*, 2016). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to enable the analysis of this raw data. After transcription, member checking was conducted through follow-up calls or emails with each participant. Data was analyzed using open and axial coding. Each participant's interview was read through first to understand what the participant shared. The second reading highlighted quotes, phrases, or passages to discover emerging themes through open coding (Williams and Moser, 2019). The themes were compared, delineated and compiled across each other to understand common cross-cutting themes and subthemes through axial coding (Larkin *et al.*, 2021; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). To maintain dependability and confirmability, the interviewer kept a reflexive and methodological journal (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The use of thick descriptions provided transferability (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Still, the research team acknowledges that the extent to which these results apply to other contexts is up to the reader.

Additionally, the researchers acknowledge their perspectives can unknowingly influence those being interviewed and their responses (Yin, 2018). The lead researcher, who identifies as male, engaged in interviews with female participants. While both the researcher and participants have differing experiences the lead researcher was aware of gender dynamics and utilized previous coursework and research on gender related topics to best understand these dynamics. This approach aligns with recommendations for reflexive practice in qualitative research, fostering a nuanced understanding of potential biases and enriching the study's credibility (Finlay, 2002). The lead researcher lived in East Africa and had experience working with women's cooperatives. In the interpretivist paradigm, the researcher's prior experiences provided an emic perspective.

### Background and key definitions

To provide operational definitions of artisan cooperatives, social enterprises and social entrepreneurship a table is included (Table 2). Each cooperative is described as an individual case to enhance the interpretation of the results. The variation of how the cooperatives started is important for context. All cooperatives were trying to be profitable by selling the artisan crafts, but also maintained unique models for funding sources such as donations, partnerships with other nonprofits, or grants. Key details and information about each cooperative are shown in Table 3.

Term	Definition
Artisan cooperatives	Member-owned groups where artisans come together to produce similar goods and gain more socially and economically together *
Social enterprise	Organization that applies commercial strategies to maximize improvements in financial, social and environmental well-being. This may include maximizing social impact alongside profits for co-owners**
Social entrepreneurship	Applies the business principles used by entrepreneurs to a business to directly generate social change that comes from a systematic or cultural issue**

**Note(s):** \*From "Stitching Toward Empowerment: A Case Study of Tabiro Ladies' Club," Dol and Odame, 2013, *Journal of Co-operative Organization and Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcom.2013.10.005>  
 \*\* From "Social Capital as a Driver of Social Entrepreneurship," by Hidalgo *et al.*, 2021, *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, p. 16 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/19420676.2021.1951819>)  
**Source(s):** Authors' own work with adapted definitions from sources indicated below

**Table 2.**  
Key definitions

Name of FSECs	Pseudonym cooperative name	Year started	Cooperative status	Size of cooperative	Artisans paid	Representative quote
Brittany and Julie	Cooperative Good (CG)	2018	Business for Profit/ Partial partnership with nonprofit	8 Artisans	Paid monthly salary ("little more than a part time salary" (Julie)) divided by amount of product bought by Cooperative Good over each production season	Motivation for this business model "would allow for sustainability while also providing the opportunity for the artisans to grow their own business" (Brittany)
Josie	Cooperative Kind (CK)	2011	Hybrid Model LLC (in charge of selling products and providing wages to employees) Nonprofit (Over holistic programs, current projects, or operation costs)	140 total employees (22 men and 118 women in three locations)	"I don't do piecework. They are employees of Cooperative Kind, and their wages are about two and a half times minimum wage, and they have bonus opportunities, but they get a monthly salary."	"Our vision at Cooperative Kind is to break the generational cycle of poverty through the transformation of a woman and we know that this transformation comes from holistic empowerment, not just through job creation." (Josie)
Lacey and Cierra	Social Enterprise Empower (SEE)	2016	Hybrid Model Social Enterprise (products sold and profits help employ more entrepreneurs) Nonprofit (Entrepreneurship program provides wage, capital and skills to start a business after completion of program)	Varies by each group of women that start program every year	Paid percentage of what earning from making goods then rest of paycheck is put into bank earning interest for future business	"Employment comes in as purely a means to enhance their lives" (Cierra)

**Table 3.**  
Background of cooperatives and CEF's **Source(s):** Authors' own work

## Results

The process of empowerment included changes in the homes and communities of the women artisans. Three themes emerged from the data; (1) key partnerships, (2) growth and change

experienced and (3) benefits of the cooperative. The interview data described the status of the women before joining the cooperative and observable changes over time. The cooperatives were diverse, with nuanced roles and impacts on their artisans. Different impacts of the cooperatives and their role in improving social capital and enabling the cooperatives to be successful are highlighted.

*Key partnerships*

The original partnerships started when the FSECs identified local artisans. Those partnerships continued to develop through FSECs identifying retail stores or “white labels” to sell products. Partnerships were formed with governments in the country, the local communities and nonprofits working in the area. These partnerships were the avenue that catapulted growth in the industry with opportunities for advancement and empowerment. Some quotes from each cooperative relating to this theme are found in [Table 4](#).

Both *Cooperative Good* (CG) and *Social Enterprise Empowers* (SEE) partner with a current nonprofit to expand and grow their operations which has become critical to their success. Brittany and Julie (CG) described how the nonprofit was an “integral” part of the business. Connecting with the nonprofit allowed both groups to understand the community and find artisans or women interested in starting their own businesses. SEE’s partnership with the nonprofit they worked with helped them find the perfect location in the country they wanted to implement their enterprise. The partnership with the nonprofit also provided a place for the artisans to work. CG works actively with its partner nonprofit as it provides training for future artisans in sewing and jewelry making.

Local partnerships have been crucial to the growth of cooperatives to survive and thrive during the global pandemic. Josie, with Cooperative Kind (CK), was able to visit and create a partnership with local sheep farmers to purchase wool for some of the products they craft. CK uses locally sourced organic cotton rather than buying from an international distributor and hyacinth from locals (a highly invasive plant) to produce paper to make journals, thus impacting their local community even further.

Partnerships also impact the communities surrounding them. As word spreads about their products, cooperatives continue to partner with other local artisans to expand their product line. CG found a local basket artisan willing to do custom designs and bulk orders of small woven earrings. Brittany and Julie were a little hesitant to push into this area for earrings, but the earrings sold quickly. Since then, this partnership with weavers has expanded, and training has been provided for the women to learn how to weave and make these earrings. CK also found another group of women artisans in a rural location doing basket weaving and expanded their production line to include their products. Creating

Cooperative good	Cooperative kind	Social enterprise empower
<p>“We saw that there was a gap, and we recognized that they needed partners to help them expand their market in order to grow a sustainable business” (Brittany)                      “Integral to our model (is) having this partnership with the nonprofit because it allows us to kind of have eyes and ears on the ground” (Brittany)</p> <p><b>Source(s):</b> Authors’ own work</p>	<p>“I want to partner with you, but this is not how you do it. You talk about co-impact sourcing oils . . . then you also need to learn how to co-impact source” for the extra items they give their members on the side” (Josie)                      “Economic empowerment goes across the board of teaching people how to do and be better” (Josie)</p>	<p>We “pounded the pavement in the beginning . . . we rented a car and drove from San Diego to San Francisco . . . we stopped at every single boutique Google maps told us about” (Cierra)</p>

**Table 4.**  
Key partnership representative quotes

partnerships with other local artisans provides more opportunities to change a community and offer up potential markets that previously would not have been available.

These cooperatives continue to create new networks and find new markets for their artisans' products. Some of this growth has come through partnerships with large international wholesale distributors or "white label" partnerships. A white-label product means one company produces an item, and another company rebrands the item while still giving credit to the original source. This is an emerging trend many artisan cooperatives follow as they partner with wholesale distributors and other companies that want their products but with a wholesale company's name on the item. Julie (CG) mentioned, "we had a huge white label partnership . . . and we were able to increase during COVID." She even mentioned the women

thought [they] might . . . have to stop [production] because [they were] not getting paid, and [their] families are freaking out because they [were] not allowed to work. We got to come and say, well, we have this partnership, so we are not only going to pay you what we normally pay you . . . like we are going to . . . double . . . or triple it.

Josie (CK) connected with large companies such as Crate and Barrel or Doterra (an international essential oil company). Conversations with executives of Doterra transpired to expand on this partnership and help Doterra understand more about social entrepreneurship and ethical sourcing. Josie has continued to grow and develop her cooperative brand. Partnering with various companies and distributors has allowed each of the cooperatives in this study to expand their product lines and help others understand the impact locally sourced products can have on the artisan's economic stability. Partnerships impact not only the cooperatives but also the communities surrounding them.

FSECs have even used innovative measures to expand their product line and find new partnerships. For example, Lacey and Cierra's determination to "pound the pavement" for SEE has even included plans to attend music festivals in the U.K. in an ice cream truck. "We've painted it pink, and there's a disco ball on top, and we're going to be giving out snow cones and selling our products" (Cierra). All the FSECs described how their determination to improve women's lives does not stop within their own communities. Many have hopes to expand their model to other individuals, communities and countries.

#### *Benefits or impacts of the cooperative*

Social and economic impacts were mentioned in the interviews and reports analyzed. The different FSECs described numerous ways the women artisans have been impacted. The representative quotes for this theme are found in [Table 5](#).

One of the most notable impacts the FSECS described was the impact of a consistent income. Many of the women lived well below the \$1.90/day poverty line ([World Bank Group, 2019](#)). Providing them with sustainable jobs and income allowed them to experience and do things they previously could not do. With consistent pay, the women can afford a more diverse diet, pay for transportation and increase their standard of living. Brittany from Cooperative Good went to Africa twice during the pandemic and conducted visits with the women. The first time was a month after they started monthly payments. Brittany discovered that many women had no one in their homes bringing in a consistent income before they were paid monthly. Some of the women were making more than their dads or brothers, who work more hours. Brittany (CG) said she visited one of the artisans, Zoey, who lives in extreme poverty. Zoey lives with her family of nine in a one-room metal shack. But when Brittany went to visit, there was another structure in her compound . . . and she [Zoey] had taken the money she had earned over these past five months and built a structure for her brother and his family (Brittany). Zoey saved her money to improve her family's situation.

**Table 5.**  
Benefits or impacts of the cooperative representative quotes

Cooperative good	Cooperative kind	Social enterprise empower
<p>“For some of these women this was the first time that they were like asked, you know, what are your dreams . . . like what do you want for your future” (Brittany)</p> <p>“They’ve learned how to go against what the rest of their society tells them that a person like this isn’t as good as you are or isn’t as worthy” (Julie)</p> <p>“We sit around the table making jewelry all day but we’re laughing the whole time and I think about that in terms of their longevity . . . and think about how much this laughter adds to their days on this earth” (Brittany)</p> <p><b>Source(s):</b> Authors’ own work</p>	<p>“What they realize is they develop friendships and then develop a community, and then develop a family” (Josie)</p> <p>Some women “would go weeks without eating . . . it is very common they would get one [full] meal a week because it’s just famine and crisis up there” (Josie)</p>	<p>“Instead of just giving them money to start a business, you’re training them how to be efficient with that money and be those entrepreneurs, which is definitely very different than what most groups are doing” (Cierra)</p> <p>“One of the important things that we are able to facilitate is the network of support . . . supporting each other and building our community” (Cierra)</p> <p>“Women are now creating jobs and employment opportunities for other women in the community from the businesses that they are starting” (Cierra)</p>

Participating in the cooperative enables the women to have a better diet and provide meals for their families. For example, Josie’s cooperative (CK) has a location in the northwest side of the country in a semi-arid desert. The women in this area weave baskets to contribute to CK’s growing product line. Before partnering with the cooperative, many of the women struggled to have a consistent meal. Now with CK, they are provided with breakfast and lunch and an income to prepare dinner for their families. The cooperative provides, in addition to daily food, free childcare, English literacy classes, financial training and first aid training. “It’s like an overwhelming amount of goodness, really” (Josie). These women are provided with “dignified work” that has far more significant impacts than a transactional job. The FSECs shared how the cooperatives provide meals, paid time off, bonuses and transportation stipends. These improved benefits are items not commonly found in other jobs or industries these women could be employed in. The social benefits provided help them see their work as more than a job or a way to provide for themselves but a community that cares for them. This community wants to see them succeed and provides these benefits to help them have a better quality of life.

The FSECs also described their holistic training programs or educational workshops to “unleash greatness within artisans and their communities” (Impact Report CK). These classes covered items pertinent to improving women’s lives. Some classes mentioned were nutrition, female genital mutilation, setting goals, plans and dreams.

SEE has a unique model that empowers women to graduate and walk away with the skills and the capital needed to start their own businesses. Lacey and Cierra recognized that many women did not have access to the skills or capital to start their businesses. Rather than giving the women a *handout*, SEE is giving them a *hand up* for greater autonomy. Many have started businesses like selling charcoal or opening a hair salon.

SEE also has a mentor support program for all alums. This enables the women to return, ask questions and continue to grow in their skills and abilities. The income and skills they are gaining from their work not only impacts their own lives but their families and communities. Cierra mentioned how one of the graduates was a refugee with four children who used the skills she learned during the program to pay the school fees for all of her children. After graduating from the program, she now pays the school fees for eight different children while

being her home's primary source of income. This is one example of the women's sense of financial literacy and money management, which has helped their families and businesses thrive.

Being a part of the cooperative also enhanced social connections and provided a community for the women to share and talk with each other. Earlier many women were at home and did not engage with others besides their children and families. One woman told Brittany, "When Lot found me, I was just sitting at home washing clothes, and look at me now." The women have grown together as friends, even when some may have come from diverse backgrounds, tribes, or social classes. They find opportunities to meet outside work, such as planning a beach day or celebrating special events like birthdays and weddings. This sense of community enhances and grows their levels of social capital.

### *Change and growth*

The FSECs all described the amazing experience of witnessing the women change and grow in different ways as they participated in the cooperative. Table 6 provides representative quotes for the change and growth they witnessed.

The women grew in their skills and honed their craft. Things that may seem basic, such as measuring or using scissors, were things women had not known how to do before working in the cooperative. Now they have mastered more complicated skills and learned about developing a beautiful, consistent product that can be sold worldwide. Some of the women have been able to become leaders or move into higher roles within the cooperative. Some of these jobs would typically not be available to them because of a lack of formal education. Additionally, the women began to use critical thinking skills to accomplish tasks and reach goals. The ability to create change has empowered the women. Not only are they providing a steady income for their families, but also because they "do have the potential to be more" (Brittany).

These feelings of capability have helped them to encourage others to achieve. They have taught other family members the skills they have learned from their work. SEE was nervous if the women would retain the skills they learned while in the program, especially during the pandemic. They visited one of their alumnae's hair salons and found her not only doing a customer's hair but she had been able to hire another employee during this time to help with other customers. They were also sending their children, siblings, or other family members to school. "They're getting to the place where they're outpouring . . . and giving back to their

Cooperative good	Cooperative kind	Social enterprise empower
<p>"We realized like some of the women didn't know that the ruler doesn't start . . . where the ruler starts but at the little zero" (Julie)</p> <p>"Look at this thing I've learned and let's teach you because I think you have skills and ability to do this too, mom" (Brittany). Referring to one of the artisan's experiences</p> <p>The women "are stepping up and becoming such solid leaders to everyone. They never really would have had the opportunity to be a leader" (Julie)</p> <p><b>Source(s):</b> Authors' own work</p>	<p>Many of the women were hesitant "because they didn't feel like they were capable or worthy of it because, to other people, they're past that time" (Josie)</p> <p>They "feel like they have a right to be at the table when before they were just a little voice that was unheard, and they allowed people to speak up for them" (Josie)</p>	<p>"Women with access to employment can be mothers and support their family and can be employers and leaders" (Cierra)</p>

**Table 6.**  
Change and growth  
representative quotes

community” (Josie). The women feel they have a voice and can take a stand in their community on various social issues like climate change or gender violence. One woman from CG told the FSECs after a workshop on female genital mutilation that she wanted to make sure her daughter did not have that happen to her, and she planned to talk to her mother and grandmother about what she had learned. The women have grown through the social nature of the cooperative, and “it’s almost like a light switch turning on to what they’re capable of doing” (Brittany). These cooperatives are empowering artisans to improve their standard of living and “cultivate a brighter future for their families” (Impact Report CK).

Not only have the women in these cooperatives changed and grown, but these FSECs have grown by empowering others. Josie (CK) started her cooperative as a training and education program and now employs over 100 artisans and staff. She is having conversations with large companies and had to change the perceptions of others in the process. Josie believes her cooperative has no trade secrets but is approachable and wants to help other cooperatives succeed. Brittany and Julie mentioned that having a partner pushed them to start the cooperative. They both brought skills to the table; when one felt uncomfortable about a situation, the other would push them. The FSECs have been able to relate to many of the women and their struggles. Cierra (SEE) said, “our integrity as entrepreneurs ourselves has grown . . . being able to relate to (the women) in terms of customer acquisition” and how it has enhanced their ability to empower these women. The relationships the FSECs had with their close circles helped push them to bring about change in these women and grow themselves. While they empowered others, these leaders also grew in their own empowerment.

## Discussion

This research explored the impact of membership in an artisan cooperative on enhancing an artisan’s social capital through the view of FSECs. These results support the importance of establishing and expanding networks to enhance social capital and economic gains (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2015; Atalay, 2015; Bhagavatula *et al.*, 2010; Dol and Odame, 2013). Table 7 provides a summary discussion of key findings in relation to Woolcock and Naryan’s (2000) social capital framework.

The FSECs established strong networks to expand markets for the artisan’s crafts. These networks acted as bridges to opportunities, resources, knowledge and greater understanding, supporting previous research (i.e. Bastian *et al.*, 2023; Lewis, 2004). In contrast to the informal cooperative in Dol and Odame’s (2013) study, the cooperatives in this study built and established networks to expand local products to a global market. Regardless of the unique attributes of each cooperative case, social entrepreneurship was evident as the artisan sector can innovate and improve to expand toward a global market (Teixeira and Ferreira, 2019).

Increased social capital gave artisans the strength to challenge systemic and cultural issues within their own families and communities (Moser, 1996; Malhotra *et al.*, 2002; Narayan, 1995).

Communitarian view	Networks view
Women finding community within the cooperatives	Provided artisans with international markets for their products
Gained friendships and relationships	Connected artisans to capital, resources and knowledge to enhance their lives
Social skills enhanced with communication among others in cooperative	Helped groups acknowledge and change systemic and cultural issues within communities
Development of trust between CEF’s and artisans	
<b>Source(s):</b> Authors’ own work	

**Table 7.**  
Connection to social  
capital

The FSECs mentioned women creating jobs for other women or becoming the breadwinners for their families. These instances challenge the norm, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where it is a more patriarchal society and having women creating jobs for other women is not typical. Women in these cooperatives feel as if their voice mattered now and how they can contribute to solving complex issues within their homes and communities, such as climate change, female genital mutilation, or other gender-based issues. The gathering of these artisan entrepreneurs allowed them to improve their families and communities through the creation of social change (Dol and Odame, 2013; Majurin, 2012). Many of the groups lacked leadership in the beginning but formed and grew a collective identity. These artisans, already realizing they lacked different components in expanding production, found greater social capital within the cooperative, which could be exchanged for greater economic gains (Sobel, 2002). Being a lone artisan at times was limiting to production output or quality of technique. Gathering and enhancing their skills created a better environment for collaboration and growth.

The models created by the FSECs were sustainable even during a global pandemic. Women continued working and were not reliant upon local markets or tourism for income. The innovativeness and adaptability was a way artisan entrepreneurs were using social capital to create and find new markets for their products during the global pandemic (Mbaiwa, 2011; Popelka and Littrel, 1991; Teixeira and Ferreira, 2019; Thomas *et al.*, 2013). The cooperatives provided additional resources to expand their craft (Batjargal, 2003; Hite, 2005). In addition, women learned new technical skills, improved social skills and participated in varying forms of education (particularly in SEE) (Chalmers and Balan-Vnuk, 2013; Johannisson *et al.*, 2002).

Being a part of these cooperatives within the artisan industry provided many rural women with employment opportunities that previously had been unavailable to them and had positive impacts in these developing countries (Fuller-Love *et al.*, 2006; Huang and Anderson, 2019; Morais, 2022). The cooperatives provided women opportunities to learn from one another and create connections beyond work (Coulson, 2012; Di Domenico *et al.*, 2009). The FSECs described women creating friendships and building relationships that created a positive work environment. In CK's workshop, it states on the wall, "better together," which is found within many of the cooperatives. Women felt they had a community they were a part of and wanted to contribute to.

The women artisans were able to take advantage of their cultural heritage by being employed in the cooperative (Alberti and Giusti, 2012; Hesmondhalgh, 2002; McAdam *et al.*, 2014; Ratten and Ferreira, 2017). For example, women in CK were already weaving baskets, but after joining the cooperative, Josie was able to help them develop marketable products that could be sold around the world. She helped provide guidance in product design and brought their crafts to an international market. The cooperative from Dol and Odame's (2013) study discussed how they lacked access to those markets. The FSECs helped connect these artisans outside their local networks (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000).

### Conclusions and limitations

This phenomenological approach provided new knowledge regarding artisan entrepreneurship in developing countries suggested by Pret and Cogan (2019). This research focused on the perspective of the FSECs and their views of the women working within their cooperatives. Further research should explore empowerment and the growth of social capital through the women who directly work within these cooperatives. These perspectives will better enable researchers and practitioners to understand more about these cooperatives' impacts on the women working in them. The FSECs brought the network's view to the women participating in these artisan cooperatives, which support the previous work of Woolcock and Narayan (2000). Future research could incorporate the other aspects of

social capital theory not addressed in this study. Understanding the last two views found in Woolcock and Narayan's (2000) framework might be beneficial by visiting and interacting with members of these cooperatives. Having cooperatives members share more about various institutions' roles impacts their daily lives and work in the artisan sector. There should be further research on understanding current international trade policies such as Fair Trade and how they impact women artisan entrepreneurs and cooperatives. Woolcock and Narayan's (2000) framework's last view focuses on the contribution of all previous views toward synergy. Researchers should seek to understand from both the women artisans and FSECs what might need to happen within each view to increase the artisan's ability to increase their levels of social capital.

The cooperatives provided dignified work for the women and created an inclusive community that contributed to social and economic opportunities. The sense of accomplishment and empowerment individually and collectively transferred into their homes and communities. This research has several implications for entrepreneurs. The cases had different structures, but all sought to do more than provide a job or pay for a product. These models could be applied to other entrepreneurs beyond the artisan section. This implies that entrepreneurs, wholesale distributors and large corporations should engage with local artisans and seek more than just a transactional experience for the artisans. Individual artisans have been formed into informal groups by organizations like Mastercard Foundation, but women need more than simply to be a part of an artisan group (Mastercard Foundation, 2021). Organizations like Mastercard Foundation should seek to develop these groups and create others by uplifting and developing this industry through social entrepreneurship (Hidalgo *et al.*, 2021). Larger corporations and companies seeking to sell artisanal products may need help connecting to these cooperatives and expanding the cooperative's markets through social media or other appropriate sources of communication (Drummond *et al.*, 2018). Consumers may be keener to buy and be engaged with companies seeking to do good in developing countries. This pulls essentially from what social enterprises seek to do through their goals. Companies and businesses are considered positive contributors to communities and should have socially responsible practices in their activities. More consumers are willing to pay more for socially responsible products (Nielsen Global, 2020).

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