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**WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND MICROFINANCE: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO SINGUR BLOCK**

**Dr. JYOTIRMOY KOLEY**  
**ASST. PROFESSOR**  
**HOOGHLY MOHSIN COLLEGE**  
**P.O. CHINSURAH**

**ABSTRACT**

*Microfinance plays a key role in both poverty alleviation and the women empowerment. Women are the most vital fundamentals of the social structure and are playing a pivotal role in the socioeconomic scenario in India. Microfinance programs like the SHGs in India have been promoted for their positive economic impact and the belief that they empower women. This paper makes an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of microfinance on empowerment of women. The survey was conducted through a structured questionnaire on around 415 women respondents who are associated with various SHGs in Singur block of Hooghly district. The analysis was done to study the empowerment of women through microfinance. The findings of this study reveal that microfinance is a powerful tool in enhancing women empowerment for its all indicators like economic empowerment, social empowerment, political empowerment, legal awareness and family decision making.*

**KEYWORDS**

microfinance, women empowerment, self help groups, economic security.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

The unique feature of microfinance programme is that it focuses on women in development. There are more than ninety per cent women clients under this programme. The basic idea is to empower women by providing them financial assistance and allowing them to earn an independent income, contribute financially to their households and generate self-employment. This economic independence is expected to generate increased self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence and other forms of empowerment for women participants of the programme. The process of empowerment of the beneficiaries of the programme is not automatic, but depends upon many factors. These factors may be abilities, environment, initiative and the status of women as a group.

There is no dearth of studies which show that with the help of microfinance the status of a woman improves in the family; she earns greater respect in the family than before; she participates in the decision-making and community meetings; and she gets freedom to move for the betterment of the micro-business. It may be due to the fact that women become able to contribute financially to the family. In fact, a microfinance program increases economic, social, and political empowerment. Microfinance programme may be an important programme, but not a panacea to end all the problems that the poor face. Hence, the programme beneficiaries must efficiently use the financial support to start small businesses that will help in uplifting the standard of life and empowerment of women. The present chapter studies the impact of microfinance programme on women empowerment.

This article has been divided into eight sections. Section 2 deals with the conceptual frameworks. Section 3 shows literature review. The objective of the study is exhibited in sector 4. Database and research methodology have been discussed in section 5. Results and discussion are highlighted in section 6. Finally, the study has been concluded in section 7.

**2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS****2.1 MICROFINANCE**

Microfinance is the provision of financial services to low income clients who traditionally lack access to banking and related services. It helps in reaching out to the vulnerable segments of the society like women, SC, ST which are outside the purview of formal institutions. It is a form of financial development that has primarily focused on alleviating poverty through providing financial services which help poor to take up income generating activities and secondly it focuses on women empowerment.

**2.2 SELF HELP GROUPS (SHGs)**

SHGs is a very good idea and this encourages poor people to save small amounts and use money cautiously in emergencies like unexpected health problems, natural calamities etc. They deposit money into bank and they get interest for that money. Whenever they take loan they are charged at a very low rate than interest given on deposit amount.

**2.3 EMPOWERMENT**

Empowerment literally means making someone powerful; facilitating the weak to attain strength, enabling someone to confront injustice and oppression. Empowerment is a process which makes the powerless to acquire and control over power through awareness, capacity building, participation in decision making, acquiring information, attaining confidence and self employment.

**2.4 MICROFINANCE AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

In this study, an empowered woman is considered to be one who has made her life better by having access to and utilization of resources provided by microfinance programme. She also exerts and participates in the household decision-making. She shows self-confidence and also participates in the democratic institutions in the rural area. She has a general awareness of the existing social, economic and political environment.

**3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Many scholarly works and studies have been conducted by the academicians and researchers on the different aspects of microfinance over the years. Some of those studies are shown below:

Jain and Jain (2012) demonstrated that on an average, there was a significant increase in women empowerment of the Self Help Groups members by participation in microfinance programme.

Gangadhar and Malyadri (2015) revealed that microfinance is a powerful tool in enhancing women empowerment for its all indicators like household economic decision making, legal awareness, mobility, economic security and family decision making.

Modi. et al. (2014) examined that four of the five factors (i.e. socio-economic status upgradation, autonomy for life choices, women position in the family/society and positive approach towards child development) have significant impact on rural women empowerment.

Datta and Sahu (2017) attempted to comprehend the role of MFIs and its associated factors towards empowerment in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal. Mahesha (2016) revealed that SHGs help the deprived class of society to come out from the poverty level and by that way help in social and economic empowerment.

Vishnuvarthini and Ayyothi (2016) concluded that the women working in the SHGs were facilitated with better access health care and services and thus progressed in overall socioeconomic development and they became more confident and independent to make self-decision.

Samuel. et al. (2011) found that the basic problem was conflict and misunderstandings among the group members. There were also problem of improper savings and lack of involvement in group activities as well as less involvement in training activities.

Shylendra. et al. (2010) said that the linkage program has given a fillip to the formation of SHGs in the study district. It also reveals a few potential strengths as well as some inherent constraints of SHGs.

Lungbila (2016) exhibited that SHGs have been identified as a way to alleviate poverty and women empowerment. And women empowerment aims at realizing their identities, power and potentiality in all spheres of lives. But empowerment is possible only when a woman has increased access to economic resources, with more confidence and self-motivation, more strength, more recognition, more involvement in the family matters through participation.

The microfinance empowered rural women in many aspects of their life. No such study was conducted in Singur block of Hooghly district about the impact of micro finance on the empowerment of rural women. Hence, the study was undertaken in Singur block of Hooghly district, West Bengal to assess the impact of micro-finance on women empowerment.

#### 4. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To evaluate the empowerment of rural women in Singur block of Hooghly district through participation in microfinance programmes.

#### 5. DATABASES AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**5.1 Sources of Data:** The study is both exploratory and empirical in nature. The explorative part of the study is based on the existing literature on the subject, including books, journal articles and research based publications on Microfinance in various journals.

The empirical analysis has been done on the basis of primary data. The primary data have been collected from the field survey with the help of a structured questionnaire. The secondary data have been collected from various sources, including research article, Journals and web based resources.

##### 5.2 SAMPLE DESIGN

**5.2.1 Area of the Research Study:** Rural areas of Singur block

**5.2.2 Target Respondent:** Women leader of rural SHGs

**5.2.3 Sampling Technique:** Non-probability sampling technique

**5.2.4 Sampling Method:** Convenience sampling method

**5.2.5 Sampling Size:** 415 (total 2322 SHGs in Singur block<sup>1</sup>)

**5.2.6 Data Collection Method:** Survey method through structured questionnaire.

**5.2.7 Survey Period:** October'18 to December'18.

**5.2.8 Statistical Tools and Techniques Applied:** Principal Component Analysis and Paired t-test have been used to present and interpret the data to draw logical conclusion.

Internal consistency of the questionnaire has been tested by using Cronbach's alpha, which has given a result of 0.691. Usually, a reliability coefficient above 0.60 is considered sufficient. Therefore, it can be said that the measures used in this study are valid and reliable. The processing and analysis of data have been done by using statistical package (SPSS-20.0 version).

##### 5.3 Hypothesis Formulation

Hypothesis-1:  $H_0$ = There is no difference in mean income of respondents before and after joining SHG.

Hypothesis-2:  $H_0$ = There is no difference in mean of expression of views in the family as well as in groups before and after joining SHG.

Hypothesis-3:  $H_0$ = There is no difference in mean of participation in Gram Sabha meetings before and after joining SHG.

Hypothesis-4:  $H_0$ = There is no difference in mean of role in decision making related to Savings, Expenses and Children's Education before and after joining SHG.

Hypothesis-5:  $H_0$ = There is no difference in mean of interaction with bankers/Govt. officers and NGOs before and after joining SHG.

#### 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The responses obtained were analyzed using SPSS package. Principal Component Analysis and Paired samples t test are used for the analysis.

##### 6.1 RESULTS OF PRINCIPAL COMPONENT ANALYSIS

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) is a data reduction technique. It analyses all the variance in the observed variables. The main purpose of using Principal Component Analysis in this context is that, from many observable variables, it will enable one to create one synthetic indicator for each dimension considered. This involves choosing the appropriate number of latent components.

The present study has tried to analyze the various aspects of women empowerment in post microfinance programme intervention. This involves many variables. In order to keep correlated variables and to exclude the uncorrelated variables PCA technique has been used in this respect.

TABLE 1: KMO AND BARTLETT'S TEST

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.731
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3572.242
	df	105
	Sig.	.000

(Source: Field survey by the researcher)

**Interpretation:** Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test value is .731. It is expected to be satisfactory. The calculated Bartlett's Test value is .000. So, correlation matrix is not identity matrix. These tests provide a minimum standard which should be passed before a principal component analysis should be conducted. So, here both, the results are positive therefore, PCA could be run successfully.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

TABLE 2: TOTAL VARIANCE EXPLAINED

Component	Initial Eigen values			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	4.295	28.636	28.636	4.295	28.636	28.636	4.115	27.432	27.432
2	2.398	15.985	44.621	2.398	15.985	44.621	2.364	15.757	43.189
3	2.024	13.492	58.113	2.024	13.492	58.113	2.110	14.064	57.254
4	1.211	8.073	66.186	1.211	8.073	66.186	1.201	8.006	65.260
5	1.030	6.867	73.054	1.030	6.867	73.054	1.169	7.794	73.054
6	.944	6.293	79.347						
7	.774	5.162	84.510						
8	.659	4.391	88.901						
9	.504	3.361	92.262						
10	.371	2.474	94.736						
11	.237	1.581	96.317						
12	.205	1.365	97.682						
13	.159	1.060	98.742						
14	.107	.712	99.454						
15	.082	.546	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. (Source: Field survey by the researcher)

**Interpretation:** Eigen value is the measure of the amount of total variance in the data explained by a component. The cumulative % column contains the cumulative percentage of variance accounted for by the current and all preceding components. In this case, the result is 73.054. This means that the first five components together account for 73.054% of the total variance.

TABLE 3: ROTATED COMPONENT MATRIX<sup>a</sup>

	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Participation in election as contestants	.035		<b>0.935</b>	-.089	-.076
Expression of views in family as well as in groups	<b>.929</b>				
Assertiveness in participating protests against alcohol, abuse by male members of the family, environmental pollution, drinking water problem, dowry related problems and abuse of women by their husbands	<b>.900</b>		.101		
Participation in rallies for Women’s day, Child labour abolition	<b>.865</b>		-.080	.052	.062
Participation in Gram Sabha meetings	.458		<b>.749</b>	-.053	
Role in decision making related to Savings, Expenses and Children’s Education	-.077	<b>.912</b>			
Reduction of poverty in the family	.101	.075		.067	<b>0.875</b>
Increase in Income generating activities		.021			<b>0.824</b>
Voting independently			<b>.945</b>	.105	
Moving to other places independently without the support of male members	<b>.906</b>	-.063	-.018		
Ability to meet the financial crisis in the family		.108	-.238	-.154	<b>.639</b>
Interaction with bankers/Govt. officers and NGOs		-.142	.201	<b>.630</b>	
Reduction of dependency on money lenders	-.133	-.224	-.203	.222	<b>.565</b>
Increase in Savings	-.084		-.082	-.074	<b>.873</b>
Increase in Income	.442		.069	.197	<b>.562</b>

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations. (Source: Field survey by the researcher)

**Interpretation:** It can be concluded that the 15 variables are grouped under five components, 1st component has 4 variables (Expression of views in family as well as in groups, Assertiveness in participating protests against alcohol, abuse by male members of the family, environmental pollution, drinking water problem, dowry related problems and abuse of women by their husbands, Participation in rallies for Women’s day, Child labour abolition and Moving to other places independently without the support of male members), 2nd component has 1 variable (Role in decision making related to Savings, Expenses and Children’s Education), 3rd component has 3 variables (Participation in election as contestants, Participation in Gram Sabha meetings and Voting independently), 4th component has 1 variable (Interaction with bankers/Govt. officers and NGOs), and the 5th component has 6 variables (Reduction of poverty in the family, Increase in Income generating activities, Ability to meet the financial crisis in the family, Reduction of dependency on money lenders, Increase in Savings and Increase in Income).

1<sup>st</sup> component is named as ‘**Social Empowerment**’, 2<sup>nd</sup> component is named as ‘**Family Decision Making**’. 3<sup>rd</sup> component is named as ‘**Political Empowerment**’, 4<sup>th</sup> component is named **Legal Awareness** and 5th component is named as ‘**Economic Empowerment**’.

**6.2 HYPOTHESIS TESTING THROUGH PAIRED SAMPLES T- TEST**

Paired sample t test analysis was done to investigate the significant difference between women perception regarding empowerment in pre and post microfinance intervention. Microfinance intervention will be considered effective if women perception score regarding empowerment after participation in microfinance programme is found to be more than women perception score before participation in microfinance programme.

**Hypothesis-1:** H<sub>0</sub>= There is no difference in mean income of respondents before and after joining SHG.

TABLE 4: PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Increase in Income	Before Joining Group	1.7518	415	.43249	.02123
	After Joining Group	1.2072	415	.40581	.01992

(Source: Field survey by the researcher)

TABLE 5: PAIRED SAMPLES TEST

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1 Increase in Income	Before & After Joining Group	.54458	.53144	.02609	.49330	.59586	20.875	414	.000

(Source: Field survey by the researcher)

**Interpretation:** Since the P value of the test at the 5% level of significance is .000 which is less than 0.05. So, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, it can be concluded that the mean income after joining SHG is significantly higher than the mean income before joining SHG. Thus the microfinance is significantly increasing the income of the respondents.

**Hypothesis-2:**  $H_0 =$  There is no difference in mean of expression of views in the family as well as in groups before and after joining SHG.

**TABLE 6: PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
<b>Pair 1</b> Expression of views in family as well as in groups	Before Joining Group	1.8627	415	.34463	.01692
	After Joining Group	1.1470	415	.35452	.01740

(Source: Field survey by the researcher)

**TABLE 7: PAIRED SAMPLES TEST**

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
<b>Pair 1</b> Expression of views in family as well as in groups	Before & After Joining Group	.71566	.45164	.02217	.67208	.75924	32.28	414	.000

(Source: Field survey by the researcher)

**Interpretation:** Since the P value of the test at the 5% level of significance is .000 which is less than 0.05. So, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, it can be concluded that the mean of expression of views in the family as well as in groups after joining SHG is significantly higher than the mean of expression of views in the family as well as in groups before joining SHG. Thus the microfinance is considerably escalating the expression of views by the respondents in the family as well as in groups.

**Hypothesis-3:**  $H_0 =$  There is no difference in mean of participation in Gram Sabha meetings before and after joining SHG.

**TABLE 8: PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
<b>Pair 1</b> Participation in Gram Sabha meetings	Before Joining Group	1.8602	415	.34716	.01704
	After Joining Group	1.2120	415	.40925	.02009

(Source: Field survey by the researcher)

**TABLE 9: PAIRED SAMPLES TEST**

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
<b>Pair 1</b> Participation in Gram Sabha meetings	Before & After Joining Group	.64819	.47811	.02347	.60206	.69433	27.618	414	.000

(Source: Field survey by the researcher)

**Interpretation:** Since the P value of the test at the 5% level of significance is .000 which is less than 0.05. So, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, it can be concluded that the mean of participation in Gram Sabha meetings after joining SHG is notably higher than the mean of participation in Gram Sabha meetings before joining SHG. Thus, it can be said that the microfinance is substantially increasing the participation of respondents in Gram Sabha meetings.

**Hypothesis-4:**  $H_0 =$  There is no difference in mean of role in decision making related to Savings, Expenses and Children's Education before and after joining SHG.

**TABLE 10: PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
<b>Pair 1</b> Role in decision making related to Savings, Expenses and Children's Education	Before Joining Group	1.6386	415	.48100	.02361
	After Joining Group	1.1084	415	.31130	.01528

(Source: Field survey by the researcher)

**TABLE 11: PAIRED SAMPLES TEST**

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
<b>Pair 1</b> Role in decision making related to Savings, Expenses and Children's Education	Before & After Joining Group	.53012	.49969	.02453	.48190	.57834	21.612	414	.000

(Source: Field survey by the researcher)

**Interpretation:** Since the P value of the test at the 5% level of significance is .000 which is less than 0.05. So, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, it can be concluded that the mean of role in decision making related to Savings, Expenses and Children's Education after joining SHG is notably higher than the mean of role in decision making related to Savings, Expenses and Children's Education before joining SHG. Thus, it can be said that the microfinance is significantly mounting the role of the respondents in decision making related to Savings, Expenses and Children's Education.

**Hypothesis-5:**  $H_0 =$  There is no difference in mean of interaction with bankers/Govt. officers and NGOs before and after joining SHG.

**TABLE 12: PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
<b>Pair 1</b> Interaction with bankers/Govt. officers and NGOs	Before Joining Group	1.8386	415	.36839	.01808
	After Joining Group	1.1855	415	.38921	.01911

(Source: Field survey by the researcher)

TABLE 13: PAIRED SAMPLES TEST

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1 Interaction with bankers/ Govt. officers and NGOs	Before & After Joining Group	.65301	.48163	.02364	.60654	.69949	27.621	414	.000

(Source: Field survey by the researcher)

**Interpretation:** Since the P value of the test at the 5% level of significance is .000 which is less than 0.05. So, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, it can be concluded that the mean of interaction with bankers/Govt. officers and NGOs after joining SHG is notably higher than the mean of interaction with bankers/Govt. officers and NGOs before joining SHG. Thus, it can be supposed that the microfinance is increasing the interaction of the respondents with bankers/Govt. officers and NGOs.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

Empowering women is the main social objective of microfinance programs. It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of microfinance programme on women empowerment because measurement of women empowerment is a difficult task. In most of the studies women empowerment is measured as latent variable. This study also measures women empowerment as latent variable. The findings of this study revealed that microfinance is a powerful tool in enhancing women empowerment for its all indicators like economic empowerment, social empowerment, political empowerment, family decision making and legal awareness. Only participation in microfinance programme does not lead to increase in women empowerment but when it is coupled with participation in seminars, workshops and training then it helps women in enhancing their empowerment. These training programs not only provide self employment training but also facilitate good decision-making.

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