



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE AND MANAGEMENT

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EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH MICRO FINANCE: A BOON FOR DEVELOPMENT OF ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

There is growing interest in microfinance as one of the avenues to enable low income population to access financial services. India with a population of around 300 million poor people has emerged as a large potential opportunity for the microfinance sector. With only 48% of the population accessing financial services, expanding the microfinance sector is also important from the perspective of financial inclusion (World Bank, 2008). Since 2004, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has emphasised financial inclusion as an important goal.

Microfinance is emerging as a powerful instrument for poverty alleviation in the new economy. In India, Microfinance scene is dominated by Self Help Group (SHGs)-Bank Linkage Programme as a cost effective mechanism for providing financial services to the "Unreached Poor" which has been successful not only in meeting financial needs of the rural poor women but also strengthen collective self help capacities of the poor ,leading to their empowerment. Rapid progress in SHG formation has now turned into an empowerment movement among women across the country.

Empowerment is the state of feelings of self-empowered to take control of one's own destiny. Empowering women puts the spotlight on education and employment which are an essential element to sustainable development.

The paper looks at the impact of Micro finance with respect to poverty alleviation and socioeconomic empowerment of rural women. An effort is also made to suggest the ways to increase women empowerment.

KEYWORDS

women empowerment, poverty, rural women, microfinance.

INTRODUCTION

Micro-finance refers to small savings, credit and insurance services extended to socially and economically disadvantaged segments of society. In the Indian context terms like "small and marginal farmers", " rural artisans" and "economically weaker sections" have been used to broadly define micro-finance customers. The recent Task Force on Micro Finance has defined it as "provision of thrift, credit and other financial services and products of very small amounts to the poor in rural, semi urban or urban areas, for enabling them to raise their income levels and improve living standards". At present, a large part of micro finance activity is confined to credit only. Women constitute a vast majority of users of micro-credit and savings services.

In the NSSO survey it has also been estimated that a large percentage of rural women in the age group of 15 years and above, who are usually engaged in household work, are willing to accept work at household premises (29.3 percent), in activities such as dairy (9.5 percent), poultry (3 percent), cattle rearing, spinning and weaving (3.4 percent), tailoring (6.1 percent) and manufacturing of wood and cane products etc. Amongst the women surveyed, 27.5 percent rural women were seeking regular full-time work, and 65.3 percent were seeking part-time work. To start or to carry on such work, 53.6 percent women wanted initial finance on easy terms, and 22.2 percent wanted working capital facilities, as can be seen from the table below:

Assistance Required (by women marginal workers seeking or available for work at their household premises).	Percent of Women Seeking Assistance
No assistance	2.1

Initial finance on easy terms	53.6
Working capital facilities	22.2
Raw materials availability	4.6
Marketing	1.7
Training	10.5
Accommodation	0.4
Other assistance	4.9
Total	100

MICRO FINANCE INSTRUMENT FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Micro Finance for the poor and women has received extensive recognition as a strategy for poverty reduction and for economic empowerment. Increasingly in the last five years, there is questioning of whether micro credit is most effective approach to economic empowerment of poorest and, among them, women in particular. Development practitioners in India and developing countries often argue that the exaggerated focus on micro finance as a solution for the poor has led to neglect by the state and public institutions in addressing employment and livelihood needs of the poor.

Credit for empowerment is about organizing people, particularly around credit and building capacities to manage money. The focus is on getting the poor to mobilize their own funds, building their capacities and empowering them to leverage external credit. Perception women is that learning to manage money and rotate funds builds women's capacities and confidence to intervene in local governance beyond the limited goals of ensuring access to credit. Further, it combines the goals of financial sustainability with that of creating community owned institutions. Before 1990's, credit schemes for rural women were almost negligible. The concept of women's credit was born on the insistence by women oriented studies that highlighted the discrimination and struggle of women in having the access of credit. However, there is a perceptible gap in financing genuine credit needs of the poor especially women in the rural sector.

There are certain misconception about the poor people that they need loan at subsidized rate of interest on soft terms, they lack education, skill, capacity to save, credit worthiness and therefore are not bankable. Nevertheless, the experience of several SHGs reveal that rural poor are actually efficient managers of credit and finance. Availability of timely and adequate credit is essential for them to undertake any economic activity rather than credit subsidy.

The Government measures have attempted to help the poor by implementing different poverty alleviation programmes but with little success. Since most of them are target based involving lengthy procedures for loan disbursement, high transaction costs, and lack of supervision and monitoring. Since the credit requirements of the rural poor cannot be adopted on project lending approach as it is in the case of organized sector, there emerged the need for an informal credit supply through SHGs. The rural poor with the assistance from NGOs have demonstrated their potential for self help to secure economic and financial strength. Various case studies show that there is a positive correlation between credit availability and women's empowerment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Microfinance has enjoyed a wealth of literature in the past, and is quite often seen as one of the most significant tools developed (in recent history) to combat poverty at the grassroots level. This proposal focuses on five selected studies in order to survey a representative sample of literature addressing issues faced by the formal microfinance sector. Today concerns are abound regarding the sustainability of the microfinance enterprises, specifically because of the nature of the lending itself. Loans are constantly being made to high-risk low income individuals, with unique and innovative methods being utilized to create re-payment incentives. Thus, the most significant concern at the moment is whether the formal microfinance institutions are actually impacting poverty in a significant manner. It is with this idea in mind that the literature was selected.

METHODOLOGY

The paper takes a close look into the life experiences of a few women to explore the pressing question of, what makes 'poor' women entrepreneurs? Is it support from their husbands; their parents and siblings or extended kin; their education; their work experience; their health; natural and other infrastructural resource availability and access; what combination of these factors work as motivating factors? What pushes her to participate in income generation; to withstand shocks in it and to continue with it or what factors lead to failure?

The diversity in the combination of factors that contribute to women's experiences in income generation is high and beyond the scope of this paper or any research for that matter. Nevertheless, this paper based on the secondary data.

OBJECTIVE

- To know the Sources of Credit for Rural Households.
- To Analyze the women seeking financial assistance.
- To Analyze the impact of Micro finance with respect to poverty alleviation and socioeconomic empowerment of rural women.
- To study the problems & challenges faced by rural women.
- To suggest the ways to increase women empowerment.

SUPPLY OF MICRO-FINANCE SERVICES

RBI data shows that informal sources provide a significant part of the total credit needs of the rural population. The magnitude of the dependence of the rural poor on informal sources of credit can be observed from the findings of the All India Debt and Investment Survey, 1992, which shows that the share of the non-institutional agencies (informal sector) in the outstanding cash dues of the rural households was 36 percent. However, the dependence of rural households on such informal sources had reduced of their total outstanding dues steadily from 83.7 percent in 2005 to 36 percent in 2008.

This is shown in the table below.

Outstandings from Informal Sources as a Percentage of Total Dues, for Various Occupational Categories of Rural Households

Year	Cultivators	Non-Cultivators	All
2005	81.6	89.5	83.7
2006	60.3	89.2	70.8
2007	36.8	63.3	38.8
2008	33.7	44.7	36.0

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND MICRO FINANCE: DIFFERENT PARADIGMS

In India organizations like Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) among others with origins and affiliations in the Indian labour and women's movements identified credit as a major constraint in their work with informal sector women workers. The problem of women's access to credit was given particular emphasis at the first International Women's Conference in Mexico in 1975 as part of the emerging awareness of the importance of women's productive role both for national economies, and for women's rights. This led to the setting up of the Women's World Banking network and production of manuals for women's credit provision. Other women's organizations world-wide set up credit and savings components both as a way of increasing women's incomes and bringing women together to address wider gender issues. From the mid-1980s there was a mushrooming of donor, government and NGO-sponsored credit programmes in the wake of the 1985 Nairobi women's conference (Mayoux, 1995a).

The 1980s and 1990s also saw development and rapid expansion of large minimalist poverty-targeted micro-finance institutions and networks like Grameen Bank, ACCION and Finca among others. In these organizations and others evidence of significantly higher female repayment rates led to increasing emphasis on targeting women as an efficiency strategy to increase credit recovery. A number of donors also saw female-targeted financially-sustainable micro-finance as a means of marrying internal demands for increased efficiency because of declining budgets with demands of the increasingly vocal gender lobbies.

The trend was further reinforced by the Micro Credit Summit Campaign starting in 1997 which had 'reaching and empowering women' as its second key goal after poverty reduction (RESULTS 1997). Micro-finance for women has recently been seen as a key strategy in meeting not only Millennium Goal 3 on gender equality, but also poverty Reduction, Health, HIV/AIDS and other goals.

FEMINIST EMPOWERMENT PARADIGM

This paradigm did not originate as a Northern imposition, but is firmly rooted in the development of some of the earliest micro-finance programmes in the South, including SEWA in India. It currently underlies the gender policies of many NGOs and the perspectives of some of the consultants and researchers looking at gender impact of micro-finance programmes (e.g. Chen 1996, Johnson, 1997).

Here the underlying concerns are gender equality and women's human rights. Women's empowerment is seen as an integral and inseparable part of a wider process of social transformation. The main target group is poor women and women capable of providing alternative female role models for change. Increasing attention has also been paid to men's role in challenging gender inequality.

Micro-finance is promoted as an entry point in the context of a wider strategy for women's economic and socio-political empowerment which focuses on gender awareness and feminist organization. As developed by Chen in her proposals for a sub sector approach to micro credit, based partly on SEWA's strategy and promoted by UNIFEM, microfinance must be:

Economic empowerment is however defined in more than individualist terms to include issues such as property rights, changes intra-household relations and transformation of the macro-economic context. Many organisations go further than interventions at the industry level to include gender-specific strategies for social and political empowerment. Some programmes have developed very effective means for integrating gender awareness into programmes and for organizing women and men to challenge and change gender discrimination. Some also have legal rights support for women and engage in gender advocacy. These interventions to increase social and political empowerment are seen as essential prerequisites for economic empowerment.

POVERTY REDUCTION PARADIGM

This underlies many NGO integrated poverty-targeted community development programmes. Poverty alleviation here is defined in broader terms than market incomes to encompass increasing capacities and choices and decreasing the vulnerability of poor people.

The main focus of programmes as a whole is on developing sustainable livelihoods, community development and social service provision like literacy, healthcare and infrastructure development. There is not only a concern with reaching the poor, but also the poorest.

Policy debates have focused particularly on the importance of small savings and loan provision for consumption as well as production, group formation and the possible justification for some level of subsidy for programmes working with particular client groups or in particular context.

Some programmes have developed effective methodologies for poverty targeting and/or operating in remote areas. Such strategies have recently become a focus of interest from some donors and also the Microcredit Summit Campaign.

Here, gender lobbies have argued for targeting women because of higher levels of female poverty and women's responsibility for household well-being. However although gender inequality is recognised as an issue, the focus is on assistance to households and there is a tendency to see gender issues as cultural and hence not subject to outside intervention.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY PARADIGM

The financial self-sustainability paradigm (also referred to as the financial systems approach or sustainability approach) underlies the models of microfinance promoted since the mid-1990s by most donor agencies and the Best Practice guidelines promoted in publications by USAID, World Bank, UNDP and CGAP.

The ultimate aim is large programmes which are profitable and fully self-supporting in competition with other private sector banking institutions and able to raise funds from international financial markets rather than relying on funds from development agencies. The main target group, despite claims to reach the poorest, is the 'bankable poor': small entrepreneurs and farmers. This emphasis on financial sustainability is seen as necessary to create institutions which reach significant numbers of poor people in the context of declining aid budgets and opposition to welfare and redistribution in macro-economic policy.

Within this paradigm gender lobbies have been able to argue for targeting women on the grounds of high female repayment rates and the need to stimulate women's economic activity as a hitherto underutilized resource for economic growth. They have had some success in ensuring that considerations of female targeting are integrated into conditions of micro-finance delivery and programme evaluation.

Definitions of empowerment are in individualist terms with the ultimate aim being the expansion of individual choice or capacity for Self-reliance. It is assumed that increasing women's access to micro-finance services will in itself lead to individual economic empowerment through enabling women's decisions about savings and credit use, enabling women to set up micro-enterprise, increasing incomes under their control. It is then assumed that this increased economic empowerment will lead to increased well-being of women and also to social and political empowerment.

PROBLEM AND CHALLENGES

These elements are:

- Inadequate book-keeping.
- Employment of too many relatives which increases social pressure to share benefits.
- Lack of capital.
- High interest rates.
- Lack of knowledge of the market and potential profitability, thus making the choice of business difficult.
- Inventory and inflation accounting is never undertaken.
- Credit policies that can gradually ruin their business (many customers cannot pay cash; on the other hand, suppliers are very harsh towards women).

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Viability of micro finance needs to be understood from a dimension that is far broader- in looking at its long-term aspects too, very little attention has been given to empowerment questions or ways in which both empowerment and sustainability aims may be accommodated. Failure to take into account impact on income also has potentially adverse implications for both repayment and outreach, and hence also for financial sustainability. An effort is made here to present some of these aspects to complete the picture.

A conclusion that emerges from this account is that micro finance can contribute to solving the problems of inadequate housing and urban services as an integral part of poverty alleviation programmes. The challenge lies in finding the level of flexibility in the credit instrument that could make it match the multiple credit requirements of the low income borrower without imposing unbearably high cost of monitoring its end use upon the lenders.

The organizations involved in micro credit initiatives should take account of the fact that:

- Credit is important for development but cannot by itself enable very poor women to overcome their poverty.
- Making credit available to women does not automatically mean they have control over its use and over any income they might generate from micro enterprises.
- In situations of chronic poverty it is more important to provide saving services than to offer credit.
- A useful indicator of the tangible impact of micro credit schemes is the number of additional proposals and demands presented by local villagers to public authorities.
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Nevertheless ensuring that the micro-finance sector continues to move forward in relation to gender equality and women's empowerment will require a long-term strategic process of the same order as the one in relation to poverty if gender is not to continue to 'evaporate' in a combination of complacency and resistance within donor agencies and the micro-finance sector. This will involve:

- Ongoing exchange of experience and innovation between practitioners
- Constant awareness and questioning of 'bad practice'
- lobbying donors for sufficient funding for empowerment strategies
- bringing together the different players in the sector to develop coherent policies and for gender advocacy.

India is the country where a collaborative model between banks, NGOs, MFIs and Women's organizations is furthest advanced. It therefore serves as a good starting point to look at what we know so far about 'Best Practice' in relation to micro-finance for women's empowerment and how different institutions can work together.

It is clear that gender strategies in micro finance need to look beyond just increasing women's access to savings and credit and organizing self help groups to look strategically at how programmes can actively promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Moreover the focus should be on developing a diversified micro finance sector where different type of organizations, NGO, MFIs and formal sector banks all should have gender policies adapted to the needs of their particular target groups/institutional roles and capacities and collaborate and work together to make a significant contribution to gender equality and pro-poor development.

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