

ROLE OF MICROFINANCE FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM RURAL BANGLADESH

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Abstract

Microfinance programs are being considered as an important development strategy all over the world especially in developing countries like Bangladesh. Different studies focused on benefit of microfinance in rural development, but none explored the actual impact of microfinance in women empowerment. Thus, this study focused on the actual impact of microfinance on women empowerment in Bangladesh. Data were collected from 60 women beneficiaries from Grameen Bank, BRAC and ASA by face-to-face interview during June-July 2020. This study used average method and frequency distribution to construct women empowerment index in Bangladesh. The findings of the study reveal that the socio-economic condition and empowerment status of the respondents' female borrowers of microfinance was not satisfactory level. Only 18.3% respondents utilize the loan money herself and the other 81.7% respondents give the money to their husband. Additionally, in the study area microfinance services only help the rural women to improve their decision-making ability and it does not help to achieve other domains of empowerment.

Keywords: Decision making, Microfinance institution, and Women empowerment.

1. Introduction

Microfinance is a category of banking service provided to unemployed or lower income individual or group who otherwise would have no other access to financial services. It comprises microcredit, savings, checking accounts, insurance and other services. Microfinance enhances financial capacities of poorer segment of the population which help to mobilize small scale resources through investment especially women. Thus, microfinance is interlinked with women empowerment for creating employment opportunities and economic creditworthiness. Women empowerment is one of the most important indicators of the socio-economic development of a society (Mahmud, 2003; Singh, 2009). Sometimes women face discrimination at home, workplace and in society. Due to the lack of enough financial ability, they cannot start any income generating activities. In this situation, micro credit has given them some opportunity for starting their own business. The rising demand for credit may seem to indicate the popularity of the

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microcredit program (Chhay, 2011). In addition, microfinance program has the potential to make a large positive impact for women when applied well and where there is a good match between the program and the customers need (Parvin *et al.*, 2005; Chalfin, 2002). For many women, microfinance is the only tool to empower as many microfinance institutions target only women for changing their social status toward improvement. They offer low interest rate and no collateral for easy taking loan. As poor people can't take loan from commercial bank because they are unable to provide high collateral or some deposit. This constraint is triggered out the poverty level. This is where the plan of microfinance plays a vital role to improve the status of women as well as the underprivileged. Thus, microfinance programs are playing important role for involving women in the economic activities which helps to improve the socio-economic vulnerability of women through empowerment.

This study has focused on the effect of microfinance service on achieving women empowerment through improving the decision-making ability of rural women. The specific objectives of the study include to understand the socio-economic profile of the beneficiary rural women, to examine the role of microfinance in improving decision making ability, to analyze women empowerment at domestic level in Bangladesh and to explore the problems faced by the respondents in accessing and utilizing microfinance services.

The aim of the study is to observe the status of women in various aspects of women empowerment and find out the relationship between microfinance and women empowerment.

2. Methodology

This study was conducted in rural areas of Manikganj district in Bangladesh from June to July 2020. In total 60 women beneficiaries from Grameen Bank, BRAC and ASA were selected as sample from three villages. The significant criteria for choosing these villages were the availability of microfinance institutions and a significant number of women involve with microfinance services. Samples were selected by using purposive sampling technique and a structured questionnaire was used to collect information. Women Empowerment Index (WEI) was computed by following average method and frequency distribution with the help of SPSS. Ten different issues were identified of women empowerment through microfinance. The microfinance receivers empowered different extent of empowerment strategies against different empowerment issues through microfinance. The selected issues were presented in rank order. WEI was computed for each issue of empowerment through microfinance by using the following formula:

$$WEI = E_N \times 0 + E_L \times 1 + E_M \times 2 + E_H \times 3$$

Where, E_N = No Empowerment; E_L = Low Empowerment; E_M = Medium Empowerment; E_H = High Empowerment

In WEI through microfinance each different empowerment issues could range from 0 to 180, where the scores towards 0 indicating lowest women empowerment and the scores towards 180 indicating highest women empowerment through microfinance. The construction of 'WEI' was based on this ranking procedure. Additionally, the assessment of decision-making power is determined by the ten-household decision making questions which was answered by the respondents. At first frequency and percentage of respondents under each question was computed then an empowerment index was made based on the decision-making related question. To find out respondent's empowerment condition through the decision-making questions answered by '1' standing for a 'Yes' and '0' standing for a 'No', and every 'Yes' indicate that the decision taken by women herself, while every 'No' indicates the women have no rights to take the decision. Using the method to measure empowerment index, the average empowerment index is 0.50. Women respondents who are more empowered and this empowerment level is greater than the average level of empowerment, which was 0.50, while the no empowerment level remain below the average level of empowerment (0.50).

3. Results and Discussion

Socio-demographic profile of the respondents: Socio-demographic status has facilitated to assess the situational level of the targeted women under the microfinance programs. The age of the female borrowers of microfinance have been varied from 25 to 60 years. From Table 1, it was revealed that the respondents' female borrowers of microfinance were classified into three age groups: up to 20-30 years, 31-45 years and above 45 years. It shows from the table that 47.7 % were belonged to the age group 30-45 years while only 10 percent were belonged to the age group above 45 years. The active age (31-45) respondents were generally more involved in different income generating activities (IGAs) and for that they communicate with microfinance providing organizations and received loan for different interventions. Table 1 explains that highest percentage (25%) of the respondents are illiterate and same percentage have Secondary School Certificate (SSC) while only 10% have Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC). It implies that the illiterate and lower educated group were more credit constraint as a result they were likely to receive microfinance services.

Additionally, 4-6 members size of family constitute the highest proportion (81.6 %) whereas only 1.7% respondents had above 6 members in the family. The average family size of female borrower is 4.28 (BBS, 2018). Considering earning members and occupation, it was revealed that most of the family (63.3%) of respondents contained only 1 earning member and 81.7 % respondents were housewife. This situation influenced them to take microfinance services so that they can contribute to their family income. Considering the source of family income, 23.3% respondents were involved in business while the lowest percentage of the respondents (1.7%) involved in agricultural labor, service, agriculture and allied activities, agriculture, business, employment; agriculture, rent and employment, fixed property, rent etc.

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of the respondents

Items	Socio-demographic profile	Percentage (%)
Age category of the respondents	20-30 years	43.30
	31-45 years	47.70
	Above 45 years	10.00
	Average age distribution (Year)	38.20
Education levels of the respondents	Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC)	10.00
	Secondary School Certificate (SSC)	25.00
	Junior Secondary level (JSC)	16.70
	Primary level	23.30
	Illiterate	25.00
Family size	Up to 3 members	16.70
	4-6 members	81.60
	Above 6 members	1.70
	Average	4.28
Number of earning members	1 member	63.30
	2 members	30.0
	3 members	6.70
Types of occupation of the respondents	Housewife	81.70
	Service	18.30
Source of family income	Agricultural labor, Services	1.70
	Agriculture	15.00
	Agriculture and Allied activities	1.70
	Agriculture, Business, Employment	1.70
	Agriculture, Employment	20.00
	Agriculture, Rent	1.70
	Business	23.30
	Business, Agriculture	1.70
	Business, Employment	11.70
	Employment	20.00
	Employment, Fixed property, Rent	1.70

Source: Field survey (2020)

Monthly Income and Expenditure: Family income is dependent on the education level and employment status which is determinant livelihoods. Income and expenditure status of the family of the women respondents' has shown in the Table 2.

Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents according to their monthly household income and family expenditure. Data revealed that having Tk.12001-24000 monthly income of the respondents' spouse constitute the highest proportion (41.7%), while the lowest proportion (28.3%) earn above Tk.24000. The average monthly income of the respondents' spouse is Tk.19117. Considering the monthly income of the respondents, it was found that the highest proportion (81.7%) of the respondents' have no monthly income followed by 10% earn Tk.4001-8000, while the lowest proportion 1.7% respondents earn above Tk.8000. The average monthly income of the respondents' is Tk.966. In the context of

monthly family expenditure of the respondents' it was observed that the highest proportion (63.3%) were spent Tk.8001-16000/month while the lowest proportion (11.7%) of the respondents spent up to Tk.8000/month. The average monthly family expenditure of the respondents' is Tk.14033. The average monthly income of the respondents was not satisfactory in compared to average monthly expenditure. Nabahat (2014) stated that most of the women do not earn much money, thus they are financially and socially dependent on male members of their family in his study in women empowerment which is similar with the finding of this research. For extra earning and to boost family income microfinance could be a good option for the rural women.

Table 2. Distribution of respondents as per household income and expenditure

Selected characteristics	Categories	Percent (%)
Monthly income of the respondents' spouse	Up to Tk.12000	30.0
	Tk.12001 - 24000	41.7
	Above Tk.24000	28.3
Average monthly income of the respondents' spouse	Tk.19117	
Monthly income of the respondents'	No income	81.7
	Up to Tk.4000	6.6
	Tk.4001-8000	10.0
	Above 8000	1.7
Average monthly income of the respondents'	Tk.966	
Monthly family expenditure of respondents'	Up to Tk.8000	11.7
	Tk.8001-16000	63.3
	Above Tk.16000	25.0
Average monthly family expenditure of respondents'	Tk.14033	

Source: Field survey (2020)

Women Involvement in Agricultural Productivity: Agriculture is main source of the rural people for livelihood. Though women are engaged in agricultural activities at households, but they are mostly not engaged agricultural production process professionally. Table 3 represented that the highest percentage (58.3%) of respondents were not involved in agricultural productivity while the lowest percentage (10.0%) of respondents were involved to supplement income. However, 18.3% women were involved for producing food for consumption and 13.4% were involved for consumption with supplement income.

Table 3. Distribution of respondents as per involving in agricultural productivity

Reason of involving in agricultural productivity	Percent (%)
No involvement	58.3
For livelihood, to supplement income	10.0
To produce food for household consumption, for livelihood	18.3
To produce food for household consumption, to supplement income	13.4

Source: Field survey (2020)

Accessibility to Land Related Characteristics: For evaluate the role of microfinance on women empowerment of the respondents' female borrowers of microfinance various accessibility to land related characteristics were collected under the present study. The three selected salient features respondents' female borrowers of microfinance such as owner of the land and the way of acquiring land; size of cultivable land; and total cost of production respondent female borrowers of microfinance are presented Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of respondents as per ownership and way of acquiring land

Selected characteristics	Categories	Percent (%)
Source of ownership of the land	Not responding	58.3
	Father	1.7
	Husband	40.0
The way of the acquiring land	Not responding	58.3
	Allocated	25.0
	Inheritance	11.7
	Purchase	5.0
Size of cultivated land	Not involved with agricultural activities	61.7
	Up to 85 decimals	13.3
	86-170 decimals	18.3
	Above 170 decimals	6.7
	Average land size	106 decimals
Information about the cost of production (Tk./Annually)	Not involved with agricultural activities	58.3
	Up to Tk.150000	16.7
	Tk.150001-Tk.300000	18.3
	Above Tk.300000	6.7
	Average cost of production	Tk.193040

Source: Field survey (2020)

Table 4 revealed that the highest 40.0% respondent's land were owned by her husband and only 1.7 percent land were owned by father. In considering the way of the acquiring land the highest (25%) referred that it was allocated, whereas 11.7% acquire it as inheritance and only 5% purchase the land. The size of cultivated land of the respondent female borrowers of microfinance ranged from 7 to 264 decimals. Based on the size of cultivable land, the respondents were classified into three categories. These categories were up to 85 decimals, 86-170 decimals and above 170 decimals. Table 4 indicates that 85-170 decimals of cultivated land holder constitute the highest proportion (18.3%) followed by up to 86 decimals of cultivated land holders were 13.3%, whereas the lowest 5% hold above 170 decimals of cultivated land. On the other hand, 61.7% respondent female borrowers of microfinance were not response for this question as they were not involved with agricultural activities. Considering the total cost of production, it was revealed that 58.3% respondent female borrowers of microfinance have not provide reply because they were not involved in agricultural activities. Among the respondent 18.3% replay that their total cost of production was within Tk.150001-

300000 and 16.7% seems that it was up to Tk. 150000, whereas 6.7% respondent female borrowers of microfinance reply that the cost of agricultural production was above Tk.300000. Table 5 shows that the average cost of production is Tk.193040. Microfinance is a good option which can help to arrange the necessary amount of money for agricultural production. This is one of the important reasons to take microfinance services.

Access to Credit Related Characteristics: To assess the role of microfinance on women empowerment of the respondents' female borrowers of microfinance different access to credit related characteristics were composed under the present study. As per the methodology all the respondents having experiences of credit obtaining.

Table 5. Characteristics of the respondents' female borrowers to access for credit

Selected Characteristics	Categories	Percent (%)	Selected Characteristics	Categories	Percent (%)
Last time credit obtained (Years)	1 year	86.7	Amount of loan money receive (BDT)	Up to 10000	70.0
	2 years ago	5.0		150001-300000	23.3
	3 years ago	5.0		Above 300000	6.7
	4 years ago	3.3			
Membership with MFI (Years)	Last season	8.3	Number of loans repay (Times)	1 time	18.3
	1 year	1.7		2 times	10.0
	2 years ago	8.3		3 times	13.3
	3 years ago	15.0		4 times	10.0
	4 years ago	10.0		5 times	10.0
	5 years ago	8.3		5 times more	38.3
Amount of loan money receive (BDT)	Up to 10000	70.0	Who utilize the loan money (person)	By the wife	18.3
	150001-300000	23.3		By the husband	81.7
	Above 300000	6.7			

Source: Field survey (2020)

Table 5 shows that the highest 86.7% respondents were received credit within 1 year followed by (5%) 2 and 3 years ago and only 3.3% respondents received credit from MFI in 4 years ago. The highest proportion of respondents (48.3%) were the member of MFI for 5 years more followed by 3 years long (15%) and 4 years long (10%), and 8.3% in last season, 2 years long and 5 years long, respectively, whereas only 1.7% have been involved for 1 year. Considering amount of loan money received by the respondent female borrowers of microfinance ranged from Tk.10000 to 500000 with the mean and standard deviation of 134917 and 116264, respectively. Forty-two respondents receive the loan money up to Tk.150000 where 14 respondents receive the loan money ranged within Tk.150001-Tk.300000 and the other 4 respondents receive the loan money above Tk.300000. So, highest number of respondents (70%) received the loan money up to Tk.150000 and lowest number of respondents (6.5%) received the loan money above Tk.300000. It reveals that repaying lower amount of money is easier than repaying higher amount of money as most of the respondents repay the loan money more than 5 times. Considering the number of loans repay, the highest 38.3%

respondents repay the loan 5 times more followed by 1 time (18.3%) and 3 times (13.3%), while only 10% have been able to repay 2 times; 4 times; and 5 times, respectively (Table 5). Table 5 also shows that only 11 (18.3%) respondents' the female borrowers of microfinance use the loan money by herself and the other 49 (81.7%) respondents give the loan money to their husband and the money is used by the spouse of the respondents.

Access to Extension Services Related Characteristics: According to information in Table 6 indicates that the highest (63.3%) were aware to extension service in the area, whereas the rest (36.7%) of the respondents had no awareness to extension services. Considering the extension agents organize training programs for female entrepreneur responses 100% answered no such type of training program that eventually organized by extension agents. On the other hand, responses to the attended any entrepreneur training program the highest (86.7%) never attended any training program and only the lowest (13.3%) received entrepreneur training program. Among the respondents who never received any training on entrepreneur, 55% want to receive training, whereas 31.7% have no interest for receiving any training. Considering benefits from training of the respondents' female borrowers of microfinance 13.3% want to know about technology and get input.

Table 6. Salient features of the selected access to extension services related characteristics of the respondents' female borrowers of microfinance (In Percent)

Selected characteristics	Yes	No
Awareness to extension service in the area	63.3	36.7
Organizing training programs for female entrepreneurs	0	100
Attending any entrepreneur training program	13.3	86.7
Want to receive training program	55	45
Benefits receive from training	13.3	86.7

Source: Field survey (2020)

Decision-Making Related Characteristics: To assess the role of microfinance on women empowerment of the female borrowers different decision-making related characteristics were considered under the present study and presented in Table 7. Considering the empowerment to take decision about different issues within the household, the highest 98.3% replied yes, whereas the lowest 1.7% answered no. In the issue of taking decision to work for earning income, the highest (76.7%) answered no, while the lowest (23.3%) answered yes. Considering the issue to take decisions on saving, borrowing and investment the highest (80%) replied yes and the lowest (20%) answered no. In response to take decision about the construction of house, the highest (73.3%) answered yes, whereas the lowest (26.7%) replied no. In the context of empowered to take decision about children's education, the highest (88.3%) answered yes but 11.7% answered no. Considering empowered to take decision about buying necessary good from market for family without husband's permission the highest (51.7%) replied yes and the lowest (48.3%) answered no. In response to empowered to take decision about family planning,

the highest (90%) answered yes but the lowest (10%) replay no. In the context of empowered to take decision about the treatment of family members, the highest (70%) answered yes and the lowest (30%) replied no. Considering the issue to take decision about visiting relatives and father's house without husband's permission, the highest (83.3%) answered no but the lowest (16.7%) answered yes. In response of empowered to take decision about family affairs, the highest (83.3%) replied yes, on the other hand 16.3% answered no.

Table 7. Salient features of the selected decision-making characteristics of the female respondents' borrowers of microfinance

Selected characteristics	Percent (%)	
	Yes	No
Take decisions about different issues within the household	98.3	1.7
Takes decision to work for earning income	23.3	76.7
Take decisions on saving, borrowing and investment	80.0	20.0
Take decisions about the construction of house	73.3	26.7
Takes decision about children's education	88.3	11.7
Take decisions about buying necessary good from market without husband's permission	51.7	48.3
Take decisions about family planning	90.0	10.0
Take decisions about the treatment of family members	70.0	30.0
Takes decision to visit relatives and father's house without husband's permission	16.7	83.3
Take decisions about family affairs	83.3	16.7

Source: Field Survey (2020)

To find out respondent's empowerment condition through the decision-making questions answered by '1' standing for a 'Yes' answer and '0' standing for a 'No' answer, and every 'Yes' answer indicate that the decision taken by women herself, while every 'No' answer indicates the women have no rights to take the decision by whom herself but was taken by husband or male counterpart. Using the method to measure empowerment index, the average empowerment index is 0.50. The empowerment index of empowered women is found to be 0.68 in other hand the not empowered women's empowerment index is measured by 0.32.

Table 8. Women empowerment index through decision making

Group	Average Empowerment
Empowered	0.68
Not Empowered	0.32
Average	0.50

Source: Field Survey (2020)

Table 8 revealed the result by following weighted average method, here women respondents who are more empowered and this empowerment level (0.68) is greater than the average level of empowerment which was 0.50, while the not empowerment level (0.32) of remain below the average level of empowerment (0.50).

Women Empowerment Related Characteristics: Table 9 shows that to take part in the family income 3.3% respondents were highly empowered, 15% respondents were moderately empowered, 43% were low empowered, and 19% said they were not empowered. In case of purchasing capacity of necessary good for family 13.3% respondents were highly empowered, 45% respondents were moderately empowered, 40% were low empowered, and 1.7% said they were not empowered. In case of enterprise running capacity, no respondents were highly empowered, 23% respondents were moderately empowered, 16% were low empowered, and 60% said they were not empowered. In case of freedom of mobility 5% respondents were highly empowered, 33.3% respondents were moderately empowered, and 61.7% were low empowered. In case of freedom in expenditure 15% respondents were highly empowered, 40% respondents were moderately empowered, 43.3% were low empowered, and 1.7% said they were not empowered. In case of ability of get respect by the family members 16.7% respondents were highly empowered, 53.3% respondents were moderately empowered, 30% were low empowered. In case of ability of social value achievement 31.7% respondents were highly empowered, 41.7% respondents were moderately empowered, 26.7% were low empowered. In case of ownership of wealth, no respondents were highly empowered, 21% respondents were moderately empowered, 25% were low empowered, and 53% said they were not empowered.

Table 9. Salient features of women empowerment through microfinance

Selected characteristics	Empowerment level (%)			
	High	Medium	Low	No
Take part to the family income (monthly)	3.3	15.0	71.7	19.0
Purchasing capacity of necessary good for family	13.3	45.0	40.0	1.7
Enterprise running capacity	00	23.3	16.7	60.0
Freedom of mobility	5.0	33.3	61.7	00
Freedom in expenditure	15.0	40.0	43.3	1.7
Ability of participating in socio-cultural activities	6.7	48.3	45.0	00
Understanding with husband	40.0	45.0	15.0	00
Get respect by the family members	16.7	53.3	30.0	00
Social value achievement	31.7	41.7	26.7	00
Ownership of wealth	00	21.7	25.0	53.3

Source: Field Survey (2020)

Table 10. Extent of women empowerment

Group	Empowerment
High Empowerment	79 (13.16%)
Medium Empowerment	220 (36.66%)
Low Empowerment	225 (37.50%)
No Empowerment	76 (12.66%)

Source: Field Survey (2020)

Table 10 indicates that the highest 37.50 percent respondents mentioned that they have low empowerment whereas only 13.16 percent respondents said they are highly empowered. On the other hand, 36.66 percent respondents were empowered at medium level and 12.66 percent were totally not empowered.

Women Empowerment Index through Microfinance: To ascertain the best empowerment issues, Women Empowerment Index (WEI) was computed by using average and frequency distribution method. Ten different issues were identified of women empowerment through microfinance. The microfinance receivers empowered different extent of empowerment strategies against different empowerment issues through microfinance. The selected issues are presented below in rank order. A Women Empowerment Index (WEI) was computed for each issues of empowerment through microfinance by using the following formula:

$$\text{Women Empowerment Index (WEI)} = E_N \times 0 + E_L \times 1 + E_M \times 2 + E_H \times 3$$

Where, E_N = No Empowerment; E_L = Low Empowerment; E_M = Medium Empowerment; E_H = High Empowerment

In Women Empowerment Index (WEI) through microfinance each different empowerment issues could range from 0 to 180, where 0 indicating lowest women empowerment and 180 indicating highest women empowerment through microfinance. However, observed Women Empowerment Index (WEI) ranged from 38 to 135.

Table 11. Rank order as per score of women empowerment issues through microfinance

Issues of women empowerment through Microfinance	WEI	Rank
Understanding with husband	135	1 st
Social value achievement	123	2 nd
Get respect by the family members	112	3 rd
Purchasing capacity of necessary good for family	102	4 th
Freedom in expenditure	101	5 th
Ability of participating in social and cultural activities	97	6 th
Freedom of mobility	86	7 th
Ownership of wealth	67	8 th
Take part to the family income (monthly)	41	9 th
Enterprise running capacity	38	10 th

WEI=Women Empowerment Index; Source: Field Survey (2020)

Table 11 represents rank order of the adoption of ten issues of women empowerment through microfinance. As per Women Empowerment Index (WEI) understanding with husband positioned the 1st, social value achievement in 2nd, get respect by the family members in 3rd, purchasing capacity of necessary good for family in 4th, freedom in expenditure in 5th, ability of participating in social and cultural activities in 6th, freedom of mobility in 7th, ownership of wealth in 8th, take part to the family income (monthly) in 9th and enterprise running capacity positioned in 10th.

4. Conclusion

It can be concluded that microfinance services help to bring decision-making ability of the women in household level as it enables the female borrowers to help their husband and family economically. However, other women empowerment issues including time, wellbeing and leadership are not improved for involving in microfinance services. The main purpose of this study was to identify the empirical association between microfinance and women empowerment. For the proper execution of the microfinance program policy recommendation is important for both the government and non-government organization of microfinance. In the study area 100 percent respondents said that the MFIs do not offer them any kind of training program. It is one of the main reasons that the women can't develop their skill to run a business or doing something productive. Thus, both the GOs and NGOs should give emphasize to take a policy for conducting training programs and monitoring the borrowers.

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