

IMPACT OF MICROFINANCE ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH POVERTY ALLEVIATION: AN ASSESSMENT OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN CHENNAI CITY OF TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

The empowerment of women is one of the central issues in the process of development of countries all over the world. Poverty is one of the major reasons of women's disempowerment. Different micro and macro level strategies are being used by government agencies and NGOs for poverty alleviation of women as a way to empower them. Microfinance has become an important component of development, poverty reduction and economic regeneration strategy around the world. In India, Microfinance programme are implemented through Self Help Groups (SHGs). The SHG is an association of people belonging to similar socio-economic characteristic, residing in same locality. The SHGs are voluntary associations of people formed to attain some common goals. These are groups have similar social identity, heritage, caste or traditional occupations. The present study is analyses the role of microfinance in empowering Muslim women as well as non-Muslim women in a comparative perspective and a comparison between members of SHGs and non-members to gain better insights into the working of SHGs. The concept of microfinance is analysed by using the size of loan received, recovery of loan, and period of loan and the economic, social and knowledge empowerment is used to analyse the empowerment. The results were tabulated by using of logistic regression model. Finally, it is concluded that that microfinance brought knowledge and social empowerment than economic empowerment. Impact of micro finance is appreciable in bringing confidence, courage, skill development and empowerment.

Keywords: *women empowerment, microfinance, poverty alleviation, socio-economic assessment.*

INTRODUCTION

Socio-economic empowerment amongst people particularly women is a hallmark and a major indication of transformation. In the recent years, transformation of lives and livelihood of the underprivileged has gained highest prominence world over, especially in the developing economics. Women empowerment is a phenomenon of nineties, which means equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, with positive self-esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and actively participate in decision making. Women folk are the prime contributors to the socio-economic development of the country. In order to improve the socio-economic conditions of the people of any country, it has become indispensable to empower them, by enhancing and ensuring their role to the optimal level. Thus, women empowerment is a mantra of the new millennium, which has become a significant component in the development of a nation. About women empowerment Nehru has said, "When women move forward, the family moves, the village moves". Therefore, the need to empower women arises in the third world developing countries at global level. In the 21st century, the term economic empowerment has come to limelight in the development analysis of both developed and developing nations.

The microfinance revolution through the SHGs is expected to build up the capacity of the women for the purpose of wiping out the different dimensions of poverty, namely income poverty, basic needs poverty, capacity poverty, and knowledge and information poverty. Microfinance is an important tool for empowering

women because it provides them with credit to enhance their status in the family, community and also the society. Further, it reduces the vulnerability of the poor. It reduces the need to pledge or sell assets to meet the basic needs. With microfinance as a tool, families move out of poverty in five to six years. The link between microfinance and empowerment is through self-help groups (SHGs). Therefore, SHGs should be instrumental in assimilation and dissemination of knowledge about health, nutrition, literacy, childcare education and income generation skills.

Poverty reduction is the major concern of rural development strategies in India. Experience in the implementation of a wide range of rural development programmes in the country suggests that the incidence of poverty cannot be brought down through wage employment alone. Creation of viable and sustained self-employment through microcredit should be complementary to this strategy. Experience in different parts of India and across the globe have demonstrated that organizing the poor women into SHGs and entrusting the schemes directly to these groups is the best way to implement the poverty alleviation programmes locally. Trickle-down theory has failed in India resulting in widening the gap between have and have-nots. There is a shift in paradigm in implementing the poverty eradication programmes from individual approach to group approach, supply driven approach to demand driven approach, centralized planning to decentralized planning, and target oriented approach people oriented approach. The focus on group approach is not only for the sake of forming groups but poverty eradication through microfinance. An important factor in the success of many of these ventures has been the involvement of the poor in designing, planning, implementation and evaluation of the projects. Access to credit especially for the poor can create additional self-employment opportunities and experiences perceptible increase in income.

The role of NGOs in women empowerment programmes cannot be exaggerated. These NGOs help women through self-help formation with regard to savings and thrift which enable them to fully involve in economically productive activities through microfinance. The NGOs develop management skills at the grassroots level and help them to utilize the indigenous knowledge of management. NGOs with the help of the SHGs reach out to the rural women.

SHGs are of recent origin in India. They are small, economically homogeneous, and affinity groups of rural/urban poor women. They are voluntarily formed to save and contribute to a common fund to be lent to its members as per group decision and for working together for social and economic uplift of their families and community. These groups organize poor women and motivate entrepreneurship in them by providing financial help in a small way under micro-credit scheme. Micro-credit programmes extend small loans to poor people for self-employment projects that generate income, allowing them to care for themselves and their families. In most cases, micro-credit programmes offer a combination of services and resources to their clients in addition to credit for self-employment.

The concept of SHGs models women as responsible citizens of the country achieving social and economic status. In all stages of economic and social activities, involvement of women has added significance to them. Women led SHGs in many parts of the country have achieved success in bringing the women to the mainstream of decision-making. The formation of SHG is a viable alternative to achieve the objectives of rural development and to get community participation in all rural development programmes. SHG is also a viable organized set up to disburse micro credit to the rural women and encourage them to enter into entrepreneurial activities. The success of SHGs in rural areas has led to its proliferation in urban areas in different parts of the country.

The Sachar Committee was appointed by the Government of India in 2005 to provide a detailed account of the position of Muslims in India. The Muslim forms the largest minority in India, constituting 13.4 percent of the population according to the Census. With regard to the various human development indicators, they are lagging behind. According to government reports, Muslim women are among the poorest, educationally disenfranchised, economically vulnerable, and politically marginalized group in the country. In 1983, the Gopal Singh Committee instituted by the government declared Muslims as a "backward" community in India. A central feature of this "backwardness" is their exceedingly poor socio-economic status, particularly of Muslim women. Most Muslim women remain "invisible" workers in the informal economy. The Muslim share in public employment is less than 3 per cent. Within this picture of marginalization, it is a predictable certainty that the corresponding figures for Muslim women are further skewed towards the bottom. The lack of social opportunities for Muslim women is a crucial issue needing urgent action. Muslim women at the start of twentieth century successfully emerged from the isolation of traditional roles

as self-aware individuals; determine to claim a greater role in public affairs. The social reform debate at the turn of twentieth century generated an awareness of women's issues, and a call for legal changes in the status of women. The minority Muslim community was specifically targeted as historically, they have been one of the most backward, poor and marginalized communities in India. The socio-economic conditions of the Muslims have not changed much in free India. It is observed from various reports and research studies clearly shows that the Muslims in India are economically, socially and educationally backward. One of the interventions to help the community would be to provide access to finance especially to women. Hence this study is a made an attempt to analyse the impact of providing microfinance in empowering Muslim women through poverty alleviation in Chennai city of Tamil Nadu.

The available literatures have been describing the significant role played by the microfinance in alleviation of poverty. Mayoux (2000) has unravelled the three paradigms on microfinance and gender (namely, financial self-sufficiency, poverty alleviation, and feminist empowerment) and defined the empowerment in terms of economic empowerment, increased well-being, social and political empowerment. The economic empowerment implies that the access to savings and credit by women which gives them a greater role in decision making, which in turn will optimize their own as well as the house hold welfare. Social and political empowerment would be achieved through a combination of women's increased economic activity and control over income resulting from access to microfinance with women's improved skills, mobility, and access to knowledge and support networks. Copestake *et al.* (2002) have studied the microfinance impact assessment by analysing the process of methodological innovation in development practice used by NGOs and aid organisations. Hafez (2003) contended that Islamic women in Egypt are empowered as they willingly submit to attaining self-perfection as a tool of attaining proximity to God. In their quest for achieving this goal, the enhancement of fellow women takes place by organising training sessions, projects, and imparting skills to women so as to empower themselves. Cheston and Kuhn (2004) concluded that micro-finance programmes have been very successful in reaching women. Kabeer (2005) has empirically evaluated the impact of microfinance with regard to poverty reduction and empowerment of women by studying the four organisations in India SHARE (Society for Helping Awakening Rural poor through Education) Andhra Pradesh, PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) Jharkand, CYSD (Credit centre for Youth and Social Development) Orissa and BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) in Bangladesh. Economic and social well-being improves due to access to finance but it does not result in empowerment spontaneously. A more holistic understanding of the nature and an all-embracing approach to tackle poverty is needed. Swain and Wallentin (2007) have elegantly discussed the impact of SHGs on empowerment of women. According to them empowerment takes place when women challenge the existing social norms and culture to improve their status. As women achieve financial betterment their self-confidence and bargaining power in the household vis-a-vis other member's increases leading to their empowerment. Armendariz and Roome (2008) have provided an overview of microfinance and its relation to gender, health and education in Bangladesh. Further anecdotal evidence from Bangladesh, Africa and Mexico has been presented. The new initiative in Mexico where women borrowers can invite their spouses to be part of the SHGs whereby frictions at the household level can be reduced has been highlighted. Nair (2009) has provided an insight into the complex nature of urban poverty which is a combination of economic deprivation with a deficit in social and human development. She has analysed the various central government schemes and their impact on urban poverty. Sriram (2010) has highlighted the transformation of microfinance from a fairy tale to a nightmare for many of the less privileged who had borrowed from different microfinance institutions. These institutions do not consider the borrowers as individual entities but more as data points. The growth of the microfinance sector and the SHG model was promoted as an alternative to the options which were available for financial intermediation. Behera (2011) has summarized the issues and challenges faced by the Microfinance sector.

Microfinance has gained momentum over the last decade as a means of ameliorating the problem of poverty. The provision of microfinance through these institutions has enabled the women beneficiaries to achieve self-esteem and confidence apart from economic upliftment. A positive impact on empowerment of women has been witnessed by asset creation, provision of emergency assistance thereby reducing the vulnerability of poor women. Hence, this present study is different from the studies which have been reviewed. The empirical studies which have been surveyed have considered women as a homogenous group and have studied the impact of microfinance on empowerment. The studies conducted in Bangladesh or Egypt or any other country where Muslims are a majority the sample studies comprised of Muslims and maybe a few non

-Muslim women. Whereas the studies conducted in a secular country like India, the samples studied comprised of women belonging to all religious groups. The present study is different as it analyses the role of microfinance in empowering Muslim women as well as non-Muslim women in a comparative perspective and a comparison between members of SHGs and non-members to gain better insights into the working of SHGs. The objectives of this study focused the impact of microfinance on women empowerment through poverty alleviation. The prime objective of the research was to compare the members and non-members of SHGs with the economic, social, and knowledge status.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study was conducted in Chennai city, the capital of Tamil Nadu, where the SHG movement has made rapid progress. The respondents were selected from different parts of the city where the two non-governmental have helped in the formation of SHGs through whom microfinance has been provided to the women. The respondents are the Muslim and non-Muslim women who have availed of microfinance to empower themselves. The control group comprises of respondents who are not members of the SHG but are residents of the same area or locality as the SHG members. The aim is to find out whether becoming a member of SHG has made any difference in the lives of these women. It is noteworthy to mention here that the SHGs in Chennai City are promoted by NGOs as well as government sponsored agencies. Due to time constraint, the study has been restricted to those SHGs which were promoted by a particular Non-Governmental Organisations. Primary data was collected by means of schedules/questionnaire from 800 respondents adopting purposive random sampling. The data collected from the respondents regarding the structure and profile of SHG members, savings and loans of SHGs, economic and social benefits derived by SHG members, etc. have been processed separately. Secondary data gathered from the records maintained by the SHGs, NGOs and government offices were supplemented by the primary data collected from the group. A wide range of information such as composition of membership, savings mobilisation, loan disbursement, interest rates, recovery procedures, assets created, external assistance received etc. were ascertained from the records maintained by the individual SHGs.

The data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis was done using SPSS version 17.0. The Chi square test was performed to study the association between the variables like income, savings, investment and membership of SHGs religion wise. The Student's t-test has been used to find whether membership of SHGs has benefited the respondents. The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) consists of classifying and cross classifying statistical results and testing whether the means of a specified classification differs significantly. The ANOVA was performed to compare different facets of empowerment among the Muslim vis-a-vis Non-Muslim respondents.

To study the empowerment, logistic regression analysis using a logit model was used to determine the factors affecting women empowerment on all the SHG members, the Muslim and the non-Muslim respondents.

The logit model was written in terms of the log as:

$$\text{logit}(\theta) = \ln\{\theta/(1-\theta)\} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_k X_k$$

where θ is the probability of microfinance has resulted in the women empowerment, β 's are the regression coefficients and the X's are the explanatory variables in the model. The explanatory variables are economic empowerment, social empowerment and knowledge empowerment. To obtain economic empowerment the following variables were considered namely, age, literacy, employment, savings, income, loans and so on. Similarly other variables like size of the family, type of family, participation in meetings and other activities have been considered for obtaining social empowerment. The knowledge empowerment component includes the awareness regarding politics, religion, age of voting, other women centric issues like dowry, girl child's education and other related variables. Several tests were used to assess the significance of an individual explanatory variable most notably the likelihood ratio test and the Wald test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of respondents

The total sample of 800 women respondents who were selected from different parts of Chennai city where the 2 NGOs are providing microfinance, of whom 600 are receiving microfinance and the remaining 200 are the control group. Of the 600 respondents, 300 are Muslims and the other 300 are Non-Muslims. In the control group of the 200 respondents, 100 are Muslims and 100 are Non-Muslims. The 2 NGOs have been active in forming SHGs in areas where Muslims reside in large numbers. In these areas there is dualistic composition namely there are independent bungalows, high rise buildings and dingy by-lanes which have houses with asbestos sheets and even slums where people dwell in huts. Some of the respondents who were living in huts earlier are now living in the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board apartments which have minimum facilities. Some of the respondents are living in concrete houses but there is space constraint and living conditions are abysmally low. Some of the other respondents are fortunate to live in comfortable houses with all the facilities. Thus the researcher was able to observe wide difference in the living standards of the respondents. In such areas there is an urgent need to help people, rise above the poverty line and empower themselves. This daunting task has been accomplished by the two NGOs to a certain extent.

Variations in economic, social and knowledge empowerment among respondents

The arithmetic means for economic and social empowerment of non-Muslims have been found to be higher than for Muslim members except in the case of knowledge and awareness empowerment. From the Table 1, The standard deviation is higher for Muslim as compared to non-Muslim members highlighting the variation among the Muslims. This reinforces the findings of the Sachar Committee that the disparity between Muslims and other communities is sharp and among the Muslims there is extreme variation.

The Student's 't' test (Table 2) also has highlighted the fact that economic and knowledge empowerment are statistically significant among the Muslim and non-Muslim members. There is a significant difference between the Economic and Knowledge empowerment between the two groups (Muslim and non-Muslim). Null Hypothesis: there is no significant difference between Muslim and non-Muslim SHGs members with respect to economics, social and knowledge empowerment. The analysis of variance (Table 3) has brought of light the fact that there is a difference between Muslim and non-Muslim respondents in terms of economic, social and knowledge empowerment.

Table 1. Simple statistics indicating the religion wise characteristics of the respondents

	Economic Empowerment		Social Empowerment		Knowledge Empowerment	
	Muslim	Non-Muslim	Muslim	Non-Muslim	Muslim	Non-Muslim
Mean	33.4950	35.0000	6.7100	6.7200	17.1650	14.9200
Std. Deviation	3.75442	3.71657	1.29633	1.08148	1.60675	1.53175
Std. Error Mean	.25618	.24209	.07874	.07540	.11263	.10900

Source: primary data

Table 2. Independent samples test indicating the religion wise difference in economic, social and knowledge empowerment

Variables	t	d.f	Sig. (2-tailed)	95% Confidence interval of the difference	
				Lower	Upper
Economic Empowerment	-4.038	598	.000	-2.24540	-.77160
Social Empowerment	.631	598	.512	-.15344	.33544
Knowledge Empowerment	13.642	598	.000	1.82542	2.45457

Source: primary data

Table 3. Analysis of variance for economic, social and knowledge empowerment

	Group	Sum of squares	d.f	Mean square	F	P
Economic Empowerment	Between groups	982.758	3	328.1910	26.371	.0000
	Within groups	4687.740	596	12.19		
	Total	5680.497	599			
Social Empowerment	Between groups	58.070	3	18.89	12.182	.0000
	Within groups	574.890	596	1.526		
	Total	610.960	599			
Knowledge Empowerment	Between groups	70.610	3	23.810	6.96	.0000
	Within groups	1365.385	596	3.573		
	Total	1546.991	599			

Source: primary data

The present study on the impact of microfinance as the tool of empowerment of women has brought to light the crucial role played by SHGs. The majority of Muslim women in the sample who were homemakers are today successful entrepreneurs. They prefer to do home based production as it helps in taking care of their homes and also brings them income. The marketing of certain products like perishables are pursued more by the non-Muslim respondents. The younger respondents of both communities are taking up new ventures like DTP centres, beauticians and acu-pressure centre. With regard to income the study shows the Muslim SHG sample population is concentrated at the lower and higher end, whereas among the non-Muslims and among the control group the concentration is more in the middle range. Similarly differences are found between Muslim and non-Muslim respondents who are members of the SHG with regard to savings, purchase of assets and decision making. Though there are differences, the statistical analysis confirms it. The mean and standard deviation for economic, social and knowledge empowerment highlight the difference but they are not very significant and the difference is minimal. The ANOVA also confirms the differences. The qualitative analysis and the observations made by the researcher show membership in SHG and availing of microfinance have made an immense difference in their lives. It has not only brought material gains but tremendous confidence, self-esteem, respectability and improvement in communication skills. It has fostered friendship and the ability to stand up for their rights as well as help others. All these have been achieved at a cost namely heavier workloads, stress and fatigue. But the benefits far exceed the costs and the women are happy to bear the costs.

In the present study, majority Muslim respondents expressed their satisfaction on joining the SHGs, though responsibilities have increased, yet at the same time their confidence, self-worth, agency and participation in decision making have increased. The access to credit has equipped them to build their livelihood on more secure basis. It has prepared them to deal with financial and other vulnerabilities. Further, dependence on money lenders has reduced. The respondents revealed that joining SHGs has helped in stabilization of their income and livelihoods.

Inferential analysis (Table 4) has been attempted using cross tabulation of variable to ascertain whether there is an association or a relationship between the variables studied and membership religion wise and also to study the difference between mean values of the variables affecting empowerment. The P value was found to be less than 0.010 hence the null hypothesis was rejected at 1% level of significance. Hence, it has been observed that there is a significant difference between Muslim and non-Muslim respondents in terms of the variables mentioned which could be due to multifarious factors affecting the communities in terms of socio economic, religious and cultural inhibitions.

Table 4. Cross tabulation to indicate the relationship between the variables studied and membership religion wise

Variables	χ^2	d.f	P. Value
Literacy (Education)	12.729	3	0.005
Educational Status	34.492	12	0.001
Earning members of the family	32.224	6	0.000
Monthly income of the family	94.401	9	0.000
Savings	54.765	6	0.000
Decision taken	40.310	3	0.000
Borrowings	89.909	1	0.000
Number of times loan taken	152.378	4	0.000
Total amount of loan taken	106.745	4	0.000
Repayment of loan	27.885	1	0.000
Amount of savings	260.083	42	0.000
Income per month of respondent	192.421	57	0.000
Initial Investment	221.648	78	0.000
Problems faced	19.437	3	0.000
Improvement in status on account of joining SHG	51.953	1	0.000
Visit to bank	135.679	3	0.000
Monthly expenses	70.217	3	0.000

Source: primary data

Factors affecting women empowerment

The final models of the logistic regression analyses for all members (Model 1), Muslim members (Model 2), and non-Muslim members (Model 3) are as follow:

$$\text{Model 1: } \text{logit}(q) = -9.400 + 0.267 \text{ ECO_TOT} + 0.579 \text{ SOC_TOT} - 0.110 \text{ KNOW_TOT}$$

$$\text{Model 2: } \text{logit}(q) = -15.038 + 0.123 \text{ ECO_TOT} + 0.263 \text{ SOC_TOT} + 0.539 \text{ KNOW_TOT}$$

$$\text{Model 3: } \text{logit}(q) = -17.524 + 0.582 \text{ ECO_TOT} + 0.963 \text{ SOC_TOT} - 0.350 \text{ KNOW_TOT}$$

Wald test at $p = 0.05$ level revealed that ECO_TOT and SOC_TOT were significant, whereas KNOW_TOT was not significant in Model 1; ECO_TOT and KNOW_TOT were significant, whereas SOC_TOT was not significant in Model 2; and, ECO_TOT, SOC_TOT, and KNOW_TOT were significant in Model 3. Collectively, ECO_TOT is significant in all the three models. However all the three explanatory variables were significant in Model 3. SOC_TOT was significant in Model 1 but not in Model 2 whereas KNOW_TOT has a reversal effect in this regard. The comparison between Muslim and non-Muslim members has revealed that the coefficients for economic and social empowerment are higher in case of non-Muslims as compared to Muslim members except in the case of knowledge empowerment where Muslim members seem to have benefitted more by joining SHG.

The predictive accuracy of the logistic regression models were evaluated using classification table method (Table 5). Each individual in the sample was predicted as 'improved' if the fitted probability of empowerment is greater than the cut-off value equal to 0.505, otherwise the individual was predicted as 'not improved'. Based on percentage of correct prediction, Model 1, Model 2, and Model 3 resulted in considerable prediction accuracies, i.e. 76 %, 74 %, and 89 %, respectively. Similarly, Nagelkerke's R^2 indicated that the model explained about 25.3 %, 26.2 %, and 47.1 % of the variation in the data, respectively, which can be categorized as adequate.

Table 5. Results of logistic regression analysis to indicate factors affecting women empowerment among the SHG members through microfinance

		Model		
		All members	Muslim	Non-Muslim
Coefficients	Constant	-9.400	-15.038	-16.521
	ECO_TOT	.267	.123	.582
	SOC_TOT	.579	.263	.963
	KNOW_TOT	-.110	.539	-.350
Wald Test	Constant	.000	.000	.000
	ECO_TOT	.000	.017	.000
	SOC_TOT	.000	.071	.001
	KNOW_TOT	.124	.000	.021
Classification Table		76.2%	74.1%	89.2%
Nagelkerke R Square		.253	.262	.471
Hosmer-Lemeshow Goodness-of-Fit Test		.141	.721	.534

Source: primary data

ECO_TOT = economic empowerment, SOC_TOT = social empowerment, KNOW_TOT = knowledge and awareness empowerment.

CONCLUSION

Microfinance is one of the ways of building the capacities of the poor and developing them to self-employment. From Field observation the researcher personally comes to the conclusion that the level of empowerment varies between and among the participants of SHGs depending on their individual perception / attitude / intelligence / level of understanding / ability to mingle with others and above all capability and willingness to achieve. The financial assistance provided to SHGs for the development of socio-economic status reached preferably having member from socially backward and economically marginalized. The study concludes that microfinance brought knowledge and social empowerment than economic empowerment. Impact of micro finance is appreciable in bringing confidence, courage, skill development and empowerment. This study may help future researchers to explore the challenges and scope of such interventions in the upliftment of downtrodden women. The assessment reveals that microfinance programmes that target women brings them into leadership position and adoption of pro-woman rules do play a vital role in reducing feminization of poverty. However, microfinance programmes should be combined with efforts to consciously monitor distribution of food, healthcare, education within households. Further strategies to sensitise men on gender-specific basic needs of women are important. Otherwise there is a danger that increase in income through microfinance will lead only to improvement in access to generic needs and not gender-specific ones.

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