

The role of Micro-Credit on Empowerment of Women in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of the study was to know the role of microcredit in income generating activities of rural women and its impact on their socio-economic empowerment and to explore the relationships of the women's selected characteristics with their empowerment. The study was conducted in South Surma Upazila of Sylhet district in Bangladesh. A total of 100 responses were gathered from a population of 137 and data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Empowerment was assessed on the basis of 9 factors by using 4-point rating scale. Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was computed to explore the relationship between the extents of rural women empowerment with their selected characteristics. The findings revealed that majority (50%) of the women had medium level of empowerment. Based on the results, women must be further empowered by enhancing their skills, awareness, knowledge and technology usage, thereby facilitating the overall development of a society as well as country.

Keywords: *Women, Empowerment, Micro-Credit, Bangladesh*

INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh empowerment of women is one of the indispensable requirement to alleviate the poverty and to uphold the human rights (Hasan, Hossain, Sultana, & Ghosh, 2015). The total population of Bangladesh is 164.7 million and half of them are women (Quisumbing, Kumar, & Behrman, 2018; DFID, 2000). However, women in Bangladesh are not economically, socially and politically independent (Hossain & Wadood, 2018; Huang, 2018; Islam & Jantan, 2017; Hoque, Long, Niessen, & Mamun, 2015; Sarker & Rahman, 2007). Both inside and outside the home, women in Bangladesh play an important role, but in terms of their basic needs such as food, clothes, education, health, employment and income still inequalities exist between men and women (Islam, 2018; Hoque & Itohara, 2008). Despite of these many obstacles it is strongly believed that, if they are given the opportunity, Bangladeshi women have a great ability to flourish and contribute to the society for the

development of a community (Hossain & Wadood, 2018; MIDAS, 2009; Huang, 2018). An example can be given from a recent study conducted by (Aysha et al, 2019) which evidenced that 68% rural woman of Bangladesh managed their livelihood by agricultural activities. So it has positive impact on social and economic development.

Simply women empowerment is the combination of some processes by which women can take the responsibilities to monitor and control their own lives through the progresses of their choices. The fundamental elements of women empowerment are self-esteem and self-confidence of a woman (Kabeer 2001).

However, in order to ensure the human well-being including satisfactions, living standards, the income plays a significant factor and micro-credit programme helps to create the income opportunities (Mondal *et al.*, 2009). Usually, micro-credit a little amount of money given by a bank of other institutions as a loan to the clients for conducting some entrepreneurial activities to fulfill their basic needs. The main advantage of microcredit is that the amount of money can be often offered without any security to an individual or a group through lending. Thus, microcredit has proven an active and standard measure with a view to alleviating the poverty (MicrofinanceGateway, 2008).

The participation of women's in micro-credit programmes helps them to contribute their families and societies income. In addition to the income, they can also play a vital role in different household decision-making, having greater social networks and freedom of mobility and exercising more control over their family planning (Basher, 2007; Sukontamarn, 2007; Pitt *et al.*, 2003; Webb *et al.*, 2002 and Banu *et al.*, 2001). From the findings of several earlier researches, it is found that micro-credit programme ensures to upsurge the total household income of rural women that also helps to improve the livelihoods status and consumption patterns of them (Haque and Yamao, 2008; Mondal *et al.*, 2009; Hoque and Itohara, 2009).

As for example, the small amounts of money provided as micro-credit to the poor women can significantly make the contributions to feed the family, improve housing, health and sanitation situation etc (Kuhinur and Rokonuzzaman, 2009). Another study conducted by (Ali, 2008), Grammen Bank (GB) is one of the largest MFIs working in Bangladesh and the results showed that there is a significant contribution of GB's loans in increasing member's income and their living standards of living. It is also reported that 97% of the NGO women have direct contribution in household income compared to non-NGO women.

So, to grasp the opportunity of micro-credit is one of the important issues for poor women in Bangladesh. But it has been given less attention on micro-credit's impact on women's empowerment in Bangladesh thus the impacts of micro-credit need to be examined through the research activities (Microfinance Gateway, 2008). Thus the fundamental objective of this research is to show the role of micro-credit on empowerment of women in Bangladesh.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- to know the role of microcredit in involving different income generating activities of rural women.
- to assess the impact of microcredit programme on rural women's socio-economic empowerment.
- to explore the relationships of the women's selected characteristics with their empowerment.
- to identify the main motivating factors for joining a micro-finance institution.
- to identify the problems faced by rural women in relation to their empowerment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND ITS CONCEPT

Women Empowerment in the context of women's development is a way of defining, challenging and overcoming the barriers in a woman's life and thereby increasing her ability to shape her life and environment. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UN), women represent the most disadvantaged section of society; they are the 'silent majority' of the world's poor as 70% of the world's poor are women. They face peculiar social, cultural, educational, political and allied problems. While women account for almost half of the world's population, they also constitute two thirds of the global illiterate adult population. The empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality have been recognized worldwide as key to attaining progress in all areas of human development. Together they constitute one of the eight millennium development goals that the world's leaders agreed upon at the Millennium Summit held in New York in 2000 (Bhagyalakshmi, 2004).

In Bangladesh, women constitute about half of the total population of which 80% live in rural areas (BBS, 2017). Their status has been ranked the lowest in the world on the basis of 20 indicators related to health, marriage, children, education, employment and social equitability (Hasan et al., 2015; Islam & Jantan, 2017). It is a well-established fact that in a patriarchal society such as Bangladesh, women are attributed a lower status than men; the latter have the sovereign power to control the household and society as a whole, while women are often secluded in their homes (Islam & Jantan, 2017; Yount et al., 2018). In Bangladesh, women have less power than men, less control over resources and receive lower wages for their work. They are essentially an 'invisible' workforce (Islam & Jantan, 2017; Yount et al., 2018). Inescapably, a society characterized by such constraints affects women's capacity to grow, develop, exceed and excel.

Empowerment can serve as a powerful instrument for women to achieve upward social and economic mobility as well as power and status in society. It can act as a driver of mobility and equality both at the individual level and at the societal level. Moreover, gender development constitutes an important part of development in this context (Anand 2002; Sultana et al., 2010; Harley et al., 2018). At the individual level the conception of women empowers subjective because each person has a unique definition of what it means to be empowered based on their personality, life experiences and aspirations (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2008; Adams, 2017; Garcia-Juan, Escrig-Tena, & Roca-Puig, 2018). In Bangladesh, individuals have a communal, rather than an individualistic understanding of empowerment that is focused on the family unit rather than on the individual woman or man, and encompasses the ability to work well together. Therefore, undertaking income-generating activities can empower not just the individuals but also the entire family (Becker, 2012; Roncolato & Willoughby, 2017).

There are two elements which have been identified as vital role for women empowerment. The first is social mobilization and the second one is collective agency. Poor women often lack the basic capabilities and self-confidence to counter and challenge existing disparities and barriers against them. Hence, change agents are needed to catalyze a conscious desire to achieve social mobilization. However, for social mobilization to take place, a second and complementary factor needs to be present – economic security – for, as long as the disadvantaged suffer from economic deprivation and livelihood insecurity, they will not be in a position to mobilize (Waiswa & Phelps, 2017; Govinda, 2018).

The empowerment of women has now become an accepted concept within the discourse on development (Hoque & Itohara, 2009; Hasan et al., 2015; Brush et al., 2018). It is an issue that is of interest to various agencies such as the World Bank and the UN, as well as grassroots organizations

(Mosedale, 2005), not least because it has been argued that the empowerment of women is an essential precondition for the elimination of world poverty and the upholding of human rights (DFID, 2000; Sultana et al., 2010; Becker, 2012; Waiswa, & Phelps, 2017) and at the individual level. It helps in building a base for social change.

In light of the above overview of the conceptualization of women empowerment and its benefits, a number of strategies have been developed in an attempt to empower women. In many developing countries (especially in South Asia), one strategy that has been found to be promising is participatory institution building through Self-help groups (SHGs), often coupled with savings schemes and microcredit loans. However, a closer look at the impact of the schemes on the empowerment of women reveals a mixed picture of positive outcomes and a number of limitations.

WOMEN AND MICROCREDIT IN BANGLADESH

Women, and particularly women in developing countries i.e, Bangladesh are considered to be weapons against poverty. Women are the main target of microcredit programs. In the current development debate, the significance of women's empowerment in relation to microcredit is rapidly growing (DFID, 2006). It is evidence that microcredit programs helps women to be more empowered. Microcredit helps women to increase their self-assurance and self-regard. Therefore, In this context, rational issues are found as for example of gender inequalities (Kulkarni, 2011). International development agencies argue that access to microcredit is limited by the gender disparities that hinders economic progress (UNDP, UNIFEM, 2000; World Bank, 2001). According to (Kulkarni, 2011), While discussing the relations between microcredit and women's empowerment, critics of the development perspective claim that this approach to empowerment is very instrumental. Microcredit programs have also increased women's participation in the activities of local governments in Bangladesh. Microcredit clients also play greater roles in community organizations that advocate for social change (Kabeer, 2014). In practice, microcredit NGOs concentrates only on lending money and on recovering their loans (Kabeer, 2002; Kabeer, 2002a). In addition, only allowing women to access loan program might marginalize them (UN, 2002). While for decades microcredit has focused on the development of women and the minimization of poverty, development specialists still know comparatively little about how microcredit activities limit the scope of poverty reduction and empower women (Khandker, 2005).

In reducing the vulnerability of the poor, through income, asset creation and consumption smoothing and emboldening and empowering women by giving them control over assets and increased knowledge and self-regard, Micro-credit played a valuable roles in this regard (Zaman 2001). As previously discussed, women's empowerment is related not just to material means and interventions, but also to social relationships (Goetz, Nyamu, & Musembi, 2008), choice (Kabeer, 2008) and negotiations (Johnston, D & Jonathan, 2010). Several recent assessment studies have also generally reported positive impacts (Simanowitz and Walker 2002).

Women's empowerment is indicated as a means that can produce extraordinary ends, their empowerment extolled as the solution to a host of entrenched social and economic problems (Cornwall and Edward, 2010). This perspective is well reflected in three paradigms of women's empowerment that are supported by microcredit (Kulkarni, 2011). In India, microcredit studies done on groups dealing with dairy farming have noted positive profit levels and short payback periods for loans (Lalithaand Nagarajan 2002). Loans are sometimes used for consumption smoothing, not production. In Bangladesh, women showed a good deal of empowerment in their capacity to articulate their needs and in their receptivity to new ideas (Nikkah & Redzuan, 2010). More impressive was the emergence of women's groups as a dynamic, articulate constituency (Krishnaraj and Kay 2002). These first-hand observations and in-depth interviews appear to validate the findings of other studies (Cheston and Kuhn 2002). A high proportion of the funds made available for self-help microcredit

schemes which were utilized by women, enabling them to meet the subsistence needs of their families during those difficult economic times (ESCAP 2002).

Therefore, in order to avoid these conflicts, Mayoux (2006) very clearly argues why microcredit institutions should adopt empowerment approaches. Mayoux explains that microfinance practices do not automatically produce the benefits of empowerment for women. Therefore, empowerment must be planned for it to result from microcredit. Next, empowerment approaches must help microcredit institutions to understand their abilities in order to contribute to the critical issues of women's empowerment. Last, in many cases, the idea of empowerment can be adjusted with other microcredit methods, such as financial sustainability. On this account, empowerment can essentially boost the intentions of the other methods (Kulkarni, 2011).

IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH MICROCREDIT

Without the contribution of women, the entire development of a country is like a dream. Women empowerment is a process that reflects the gender equity which is one of the precursors to move the country forward (Nago & Wahhaj, 2011). In addition, in order to the sustainable development of a country, women empowerment plays a vital role. The effect of woman empowerment is multiphase; psychological, economic, social and political (Aysha A. et al, 2020). Now, gender equality is considered a slogan which helps to motivate the women to work with men and to demonstrate their worth in performance. The story of micro-financed enterprise of Grameen Bank developed by Professor Yunus of Bangladesh shows that the business organizations run by a women often are related to the best credit risks and more likely to funnel earnings into their children's education and the formal training is not always a precondition to successful business development.

However, with the help of micro-credit, the women are contributing in every spheres of the society such as agriculture, education and even in politics (Armendariz de Aghion & Morduch, 2005; Cheston & Khun, 2002; Kabeer, 2003; Khandker, 2003; Pitt et al., 2006; Mayoux, 2000). For example, the success story of Grameen bank's is based on lending only to women. The economics independence of women can change the long tradition of suppression and denial of opportunities. When asked with Muhammad Yunus, managing director of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, as to why loaned primarily to women, he replied, that "It has to do with the decision to have a separate bank for the poor people. In the initial stage, on two grounds, I had a complaint in relation to the banking system. The primary one is that the current banking system is reluctant to provide the financial services to the poor people as it has set up some certain rules and the second one is that it is not treating women fairly (Yunus, 2001).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in four villages of South Surma upazila under Sylhet district of Bangladesh. A total of 100 women's were selected through proportionate random sampling from four sample villages i.e. Konarchar, Kandiarchar, Osmanpur and Naukhai. South Surma upazila is not very far from Sylhet headquarters but the upazila has all the features of rural Bangladesh.

The selection of the study area was purposive as there were many micro-finance institutions working on the provision of loan services for rural women to assist their income-generating activities. Keeping in the objectives and variables under study, A well-structured pretested interview schedule was developed.

The independent variables of the study were age, education, marital status, family size, annual family income, family land holding, occupation, communication exposure, credit received, training received,

problems faced by the women in participating income generating activities and Problem faced by the women during loan taking. The dependent variable was the empowerment of rural women.

Initially, a rapport was established with the respondents through informal discussions regarding the objectives of the study. Then the respondents were contacted personally for data collection during February 2019 to August 2019.

Keeping the objectives of the study in mind the collected data were coded into numerical, compiled, tabulated and analyzed. In order to categorize and explain the data, various statistical measures such as range, mean, percentage, standard deviation and rank were used in describing the selected variables wherever applicable. To find out the relationships, Pearson's Product moment correlation co-efficient was used. Five percent (0.05) level of probability was used as the basis of rejecting any null hypothesis throughout the study. Tables were also used in presenting data and to clarify of understanding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RURAL WOMEN

Data obtained regarding the characteristics of the rural women show that (68%) of the respondents were medium aged rural women, as compared to 15% old and 17% of the respondents were young-aged (Table 1). Among the respondent rural women, (65%) primary compared to 20% secondary and only 15% above secondary level of education. Marital status of the respondents indicated that majority (75%) of them was married, 10 per cent were separated, and 8 percent of the respondents were unmarried and 7 percent of the women were widows. The highest proportion (53%) of the respondents had a medium family size, while 27% of the respondents had a small and 20% had a large family size. A majority (88%) of the respondent's rural women family had a low to medium annual income compared to 12%, with high income. The highest proportion (69%) had small, 18% had medium and rest of the 13% had large farm size. Data presented in the Table 1 indicate that highest proportion (64%) of the respondent women were mainly housewives, 24% involved in services, and the remaining 12% of the respondents were basically student. Most of the respondents had medium (60%) communication exposure followed by low (15%) and high (25%) communication, respectively. In the study area, most of the respondents (52%) had medium access to credit due to repayment risk for unfavorable terms and conditions of the credit-providing organizations. Data contained in Table 1 indicates that the highest portion of (55%) of the women received inadequate short duration training, 23% received moderate duration training, only 19% received long duration training and 3% had no training at all. Data furnished in Table 1 also reveal that the highest portion of (37%) of the respondents termed their faced constraints in involving income earning activities as medium problems, 40% low problem, 10% experienced these as severe problem and only 13% had no problem in participating IGAs. Most of the respondents had medium (62%) problem confrontation followed by low 20% and high 18% problem faced by the women during the loan taking.

Table 1. Salient features of the women's selected characteristics

Selected characteristics	Way of measurement	Observed range	Categories according to their Selected characteristics	Respondents Percentage N=100	Mean	Standard deviation
Age	Years	20-45	Young (up to 30)	17.0	35.14	7.51
			Middle (31-44)	68.0		
			Old (45 and above)	15.0		
Education	Score	1-10	Illiterate (0)	0	2.43	2.63
			Primary (1-5)	65.0		
			Secondary (6-10)	20.0		
			Above Secondary education (>10 and above)	15.0		
Marital status	Score	0-4	Unmarried	8.0	0.97	0.54
			Married	75.0		
			Widow	7.0		
			Separated	10.0		
Family size	Number	4-10	Small (up to 4)	27.0	5.80	1.55
			Medium (5-6)	53.0		
			Large (7 and above)	20.0		
Annual Family income	'000 Taka'	19-69	Low (up to 30)	30.0	36.76	11.35
			Medium (30-40)	58.0		
			High (41 to 8)	12.0		
Family land holding	Hectare	0.012-0.960	Small (0.01-0.300)	69.0	0.182	0.195
			Medium (0.301-0.700)	18.0		
			Large (0.701 and above)	13.0		
Occupation	Score	1-3	Housewife	64.0	1.60	0.853
			Student	12.0		
			Service	24.0		
Communication exposure	Score	5-29	Low	15.0	12.8	6.08
			Medium	60.0		
			High	25.0		
Credit received	'000' Taka	0-19	Low (<5)	10.0	10.2	6.09
			Medium(6-13)	52.0		
			High(>13)	38.0		
Training received	Days	1-14	No (0)	3.0	4.02	3.04
			Less(1-3)	55.0		
			medium(4-6)	23.0		
Problem faced by the women in participating Income generating activities	Score	18-35	High(>6)	19.0	28.08	5.61
			No	13.0		
			Low (up to 17)	40.0		
			Medium (18-21)	37.5		
Problem faced by the women during loan taking	Score	12-32	High (22 and above)	10.0	19.16	2.58
			Low (up to 15)	20		
			Medium (16-20)	62		
			High (20 and above)	18		

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

For a clear understanding of the overall empowerment, a summary of findings in this regard has been presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Categorization of the respondents depending upon their empowerment in different aspect.

Empowerment factors	Categories (score)	Respondents		Range		Mean	Standard deviation
		Number	Percentage	Minimum	Maximum		
Participation in decision making	Low	22	22	5	16	10.49	2.4308
	Medium	11	77				
	High	1	1				
Mobility	Low	30	30	1	12	7.81	3.1447
	Medium	70	70				
	High	0	0				
Participation in social and political activities	Low	10	10	3	13	9.41	2.2567
	Medium	87	87				
	High	3	3				
Access to financial organization	No access	2	2.0	0	9	6.29	2.07
	Low access	14	14.0				
	Medium access	67	67.0				
	High access	16	16.0				
Control over economic activity	No control	4	4.0	0	9	6.04	1.92
	Low control	10	10.0				
	Medium control	61	61.0				
	High control	25	25.0				
Control over interpersonal activity	No control	3	3.0	0	7	4.45	1.38
	Low control	24	24.0				
	Medium control	51	51.0				
	High control	22	22.0				
Ownership of asset	No asset	45	45.0	0	2	0.56	0.49
	Joint ownership asset	25	25.0				
	Sole ownership asset	30	30.0				
Saving	No saving	47	47	0	1	.53	0.50
	Up to 25% saving	53	53				
	Up to 50% saving	0	0				

Participation in income generating activities	Low participation	10	10.0	3	13	13.96	3.936
	Medium participation	82	82.0				
	High participation	8	8.0				

MOTIVATING FACTORS FOR JOINING THE MICRO-FINANCE INSTITUTION

Keeping the objectives in mind, to identify the main motivating factors for joining a micro-finance institution, respondents were asked some relevant questions in the research area. Peer influence was reported by the largest proportion of the respondents (40.2%); whereas 34.6% of the respondents mentioned self-motivation, 13.1%, and 12.1% had family influence and social capital respectively as the main motivating factor for joining micro-finance institution (See Table 3).

Table 3. Respondents' Perception on Motivating Factors for Joining Micro-Finance

Institution	Motivating factors for joining	Frequency	Percent
	Self-motivation	30	34.6
	Family influence	20	13.1
	Peer influence	35	40.2
	Social capital	15	12.1
	Total	100	100.00

CONSTRAINTS ON THE MICRO-CREDIT (LOAN) PROCESS

A larger proportion of the respondents (38.6 %) mentioned mistrust between the group members as the major constraint on the loan repayment process in their area; 18.9%, 12.6%, 9.00%, 8.9%, 7.0%, and 5.0% of respondents mentioned using loans for other purposes, a lack of training, no constraints, a lack of follow-up, the failure of the business and an unwillingness to pay back the loan, respectively, when asked to mention the main constraints on loan repayment in the study area (see Table 4).

Table 4. Respondents' Perception on Constraints on the Loan Repayment Process

Constraints on loan repayment	Frequency	Percent
Lack of training	20	12.6
Lack of follow-up	14	8.9
Failure of the business	8	7.0
Unwillingness to pay back the loan	12	5.0
Using the loan for other purpose	16	18.9
Mistrust between the group members	18	38.6
No constraint	12	9.0
Total	100	100.0

OVERALL EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN

The overall empowerment score of each respondent was obtained by summing up the scores for the nine dimensions of empowerment. On the basis of their empowerment score the women were classified into four categories, as shown in Table 5. From the table, the majority (50%) of the

respondents had a medium level of empowerment, while 43% had low empowerment, only 5% had very low empowerment and 2% had a high level of empowerment.

Table 5. Categorization of women according to their overall empowerment

Category of empowerment	Number of women	Percentage of women	Range		Mean	Standard deviation
			Maximum	Minimum		
Very low	5	5.0	48	15	32.56	7.79
Low	43	43.0				
Medium	50	50.0				
High	2	2.0				
Total	100	100				

In the past time most of the rural women in Bangladesh has low level of empowerment. Their condition was very miserable; they had little freedom to express their own opinion, to perform their own choice, to go outside from home, to participate in social activities, social functions and to access to asset and resources. But the situation is changing. With the efforts of various GOs (An organization which is managed by government initiatives and also financed by govt. is Government Organization) and NGOs (An organization developed and managed by private initiatives being foreign and financed is a non-Government Organization). It works independently with and are mandated to collaborate with others unless there is any felt need.

The women are being conscious day-by-day. They are being educated; they are involving in IGAs and achieving emotional freedom and being more and more empowered. Distribution of women according to their overall empowerment score has been visually presented in Figure 1.

Sarker (2005), in her study found that 41.3 percent women were very low empowered, 48.10 percent were low empowered and only 10.6 percent were medium empowered.

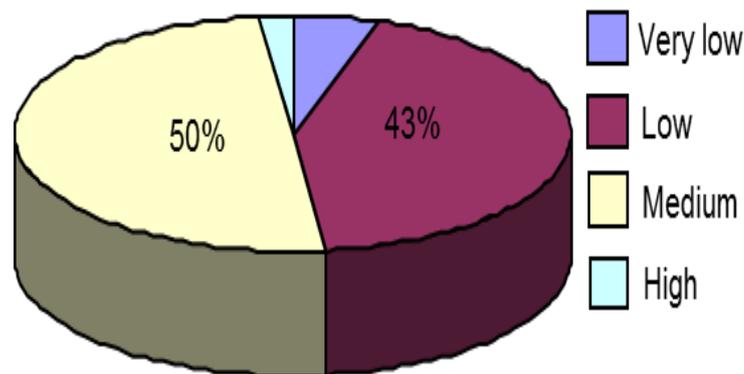


Figure 1. Distribution of women according to their empowerment

The generally low levels of empowerment reported in previous studies, and the current situation, might be because microcredit programmes cannot reach a large proportion of women, or the women might have received minimal training on how to undertake entrepreneurial activities. Or perhaps, they might not have enough power within the household to use their loans or to control their own income. Indeed, it is likely that many rural women mostly depend on their husbands or male members of the family for various purposes because microcredit programmes are unable to eliminate the socio cultural constraints on women's physical access to markets (Parvin et al., 2004).

However, as indicated by the results in Parveen and Leonhaeuser (2008), who found that the economic empowerment of farmwomen was in the low to medium range, and the results of the present study, which are broadly similar, it seems that the situation has started to change. Through the efforts of various governmental and non-governmental organizations, women in Bangladesh are becoming more conscious of their own potential. They are being educated; they are becoming involved in IGAs and are achieving emotional freedom, which is leading to increased empowerment. Nevertheless, there is still a need to boost rural women's empowerment to a higher level through an integrated approach that takes the identified constraints into account.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WOMEN AND THEIR EMPOWERMENT

In order to show the relationships between the selected characteristics of the women and the extent of empowerment their empowerment through income generating activities the Pearson's product Moment Co-efficient of Correlation (r) was adopted and the values have presented in the Table 6.

Table 6. Relationships between the selected characteristics of the women and their empowerment.

Dependent variable	Independent variable	r-valueswith 98 df	Tabulated value of 'r'	
			0.05 level	0.01 level
Empowerment of women	Age	0.396**	0.197	0.257
	Education	0.288**		
	Marital status	0.185		
	Family size	0.120		
	Annual family income	0.166		
	Family land holding	0.195		
	Occupation of the respondent	0.297**		
	Communication media exposure	0.302**		
	Credit received	0.636**		
	Training received	0.411**		
	Problem faced by the women in Income generating activities	-0.203*		
	Problem faced by the women during loan taking	-0.201*		

* Significant at 0.05 level of probability, and ** Significant at 0.01 level of probability

The relationship between age and empowerment through IGAs was significant and followed a positive trend. In the society, the young women live with her in-laws and with others. She has to stay under various pressures. She cannot go to many places, cannot do many things if she wish so. A middle-aged woman is freer in the society. Thus, it could be said that, at least for the present study, age of the women play a significant role in their empowerment.

The relationship between family's education of the women and their empowerment was significant and it followed a positive trend which means if the level of family's education of women is higher the possibility of empowerment will be also higher. Because, it enhances the empowerment through increasing the new knowledge and information which help women to understand their proper rights. This finding is also consistent with Malhotra and Schuler (2002) who also found that there was positive relationship between family education and empowerment of women.

The relationship between occupation of the women and empowerment was significant and followed a positive trend. A middle aged woman and old women are freer in the society. They can move anywhere for income generating activities if they don't face any kind of problem from a family or a society. Thus, it could be said that, at least for the present study, occupation of the women play a significant role in their empowerment. A positive significant relationship was found to exist between the communication media exposure and empowerment. Through communication and media exposure, women get necessary knowledge about agriculture, health, sanitation and rural areas that strengthened their earning ability, position in family and society, decision making ability etc. Through communication and media exposure she can know how to solve her problems, which enhance the empowerment of women. The finding indicates that the empowerment of the women increased with the increase of credit availability. This seems to be logical, because high amount of credit leads to high amount of investment and subsequently high profit high empowerment. Loan or credit reception empowers women by giving them greater economic value to their families. So it could be concluded that the more the loan, the women had more empowerment. Thus finding was also supported by Sarker (2005), Hashemi, Schuler, & Riley, 1996) and Kabeer (1999) also found that loan reception is empowering women in Bangladesh.

A positive significant relationship was found to exist between the training received by the women and their empowerment. Training makes women skillful in different income generating activities and increases their capacity. Moreover through training, women can acquire knowledge about different technologies which help them to uplift their livelihood and refresh their existing knowledge. Naoroze (2004) found that there was no significant relationship between the training received and the empowerment of women whereas Sarker (2005) found a significant positive role of training of women empowerment.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: MAJOR CHALLENGES

The results of this study reveal that in spite of many national (both public and private) and global initiatives, several problems still impede the progress of women's empowerment in Bangladesh. These challenges to women's empowerment are:

- ◆ poverty and weak economic conditions,
- ◆ a lack of proper education,
- ◆ traditional social norms and values,
- ◆ a lack of social awareness,
- ◆ early marriage,
- ◆ a lack of social security,
- ◆ misinterpretations of religious norms and values,
- ◆ and a lack of proper law enforcement.

The evidence indicates that the majority of respondents articulate the main four factors as the major challenges to women's empowerment.

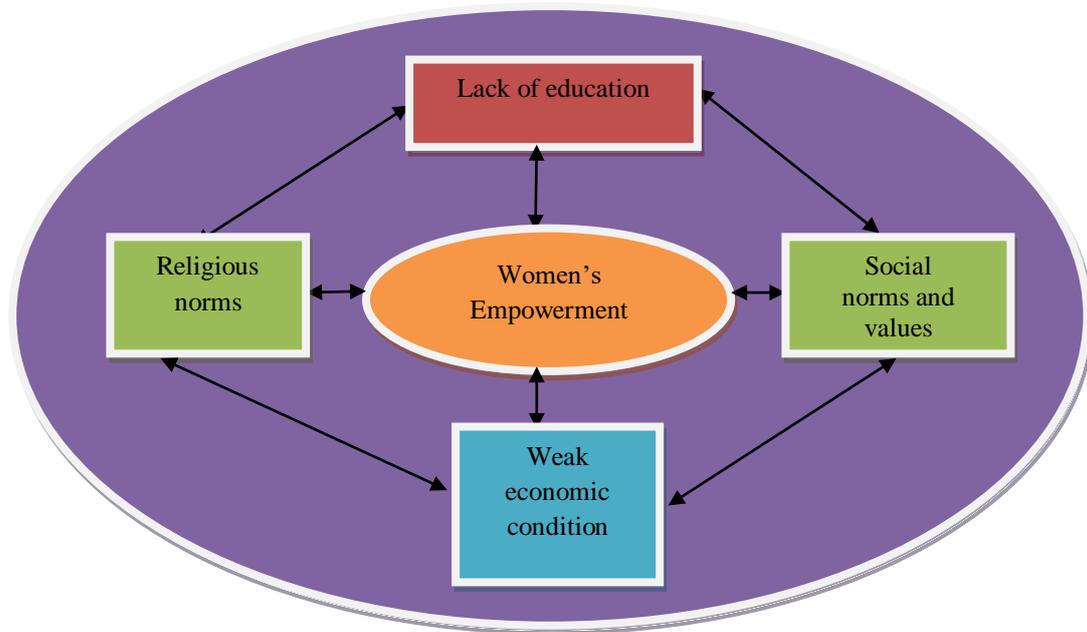


Figure 2. Major Challenges of Women's Empowerment

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Women Empowerment is a censorious and multidimensional social process. The Progress of women is confined by various issues. Therefore, they cannot be overcome overnight. The challenges to empowering rural women are deeply rooted in the social, political, economic, and cultural history of each society.

- ◆ The national and international communities prioritized women's empowerment and have undertaken enormous action during the last three decades.
- ◆ Likewise, Bangladeshi NGOs invented microcredit programs as a significant tool to encourage women's empowerment.

From the perspective of microcredit borrowers, this research identified the factors that help to overcome the challenges to empowering women.

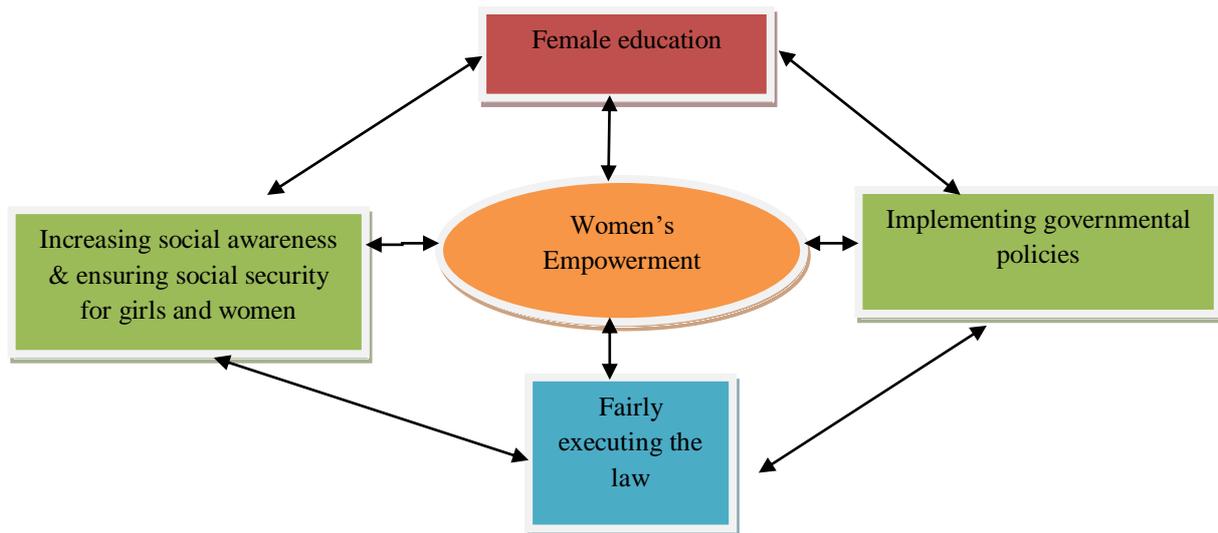


Figure 3. Overcoming the Challenges of Women's Empowerment

CHALLENGES FACED BY MICROCREDIT INSTITUTIONS

Microcredit institutions, or NGOs, are the key executor for implementing the microcredit programs. There are some fundamental issues that impede the process of empowerment, such as unhealthy competition of occupying markets among the NGOs. NGOs are responsible for ensuring the best use of credit by their borrowers so that the borrowers can benefit monetarily and socially. Although, NGOs have already demonstrated their proficiencies and earned international fame for implementing and managing microcredit program but, it is not perfect. Some also place less emphasis on training, education, capacity building, monitoring, and legal assistance service for the borrowers. And, fiscally, it is problematic that low interest rates are used for savings and high interest rates are used for credit.

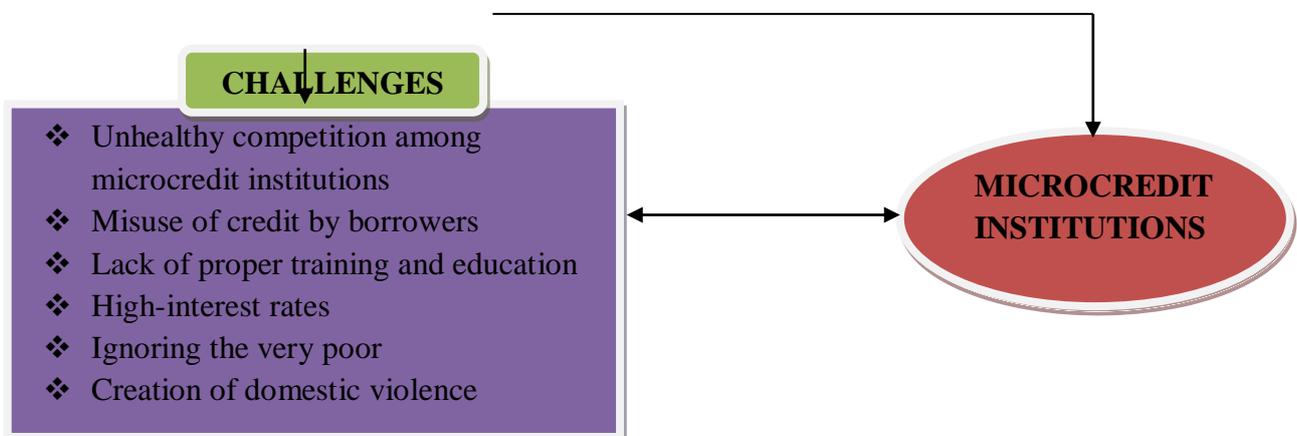


Figure 4. Challenges faced by Micro-credit Institutions

THE ROLE OF MICROCREDIT IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

To creating access to credit for ultra-poor women enhance their bargaining position within their household, and women are more likely than men to spend resources in ways that benefit the entire household (Armendariz de Aghion & Morduch, 2005; Cheston & Khun, 2002; Kabeer, 2003; Khandker, 2003; Pitt et al., 2006; Mayoux, 2000). During the last three decades, development practitioners, policymakers, and donor agencies have precipitate towards the view that targeting women in microcredit programs is the most effectual way to bring wider social benefits (Nago & Wahhaj, 2011). Cheston and Khan (2002) highlight microcredit as one of the most popular forms of economic empowerment for women, since it provides credit for poor women who are usually eliminate from formal credit institutions. As an including development strategy, microfinance programs emphasize women's economic contributions as a way to increase overall financial efficiency within national economies (Nikkah & Redzuan, 2010).

Microcredit programs contribute to empowering women by increasing their self-assurance and self-respect. Thus, their participation in decision-making increased, particularly in the areas of family planning, decision on sending their children to school, the marriage children, and, in some cases, buying and selling of properties.

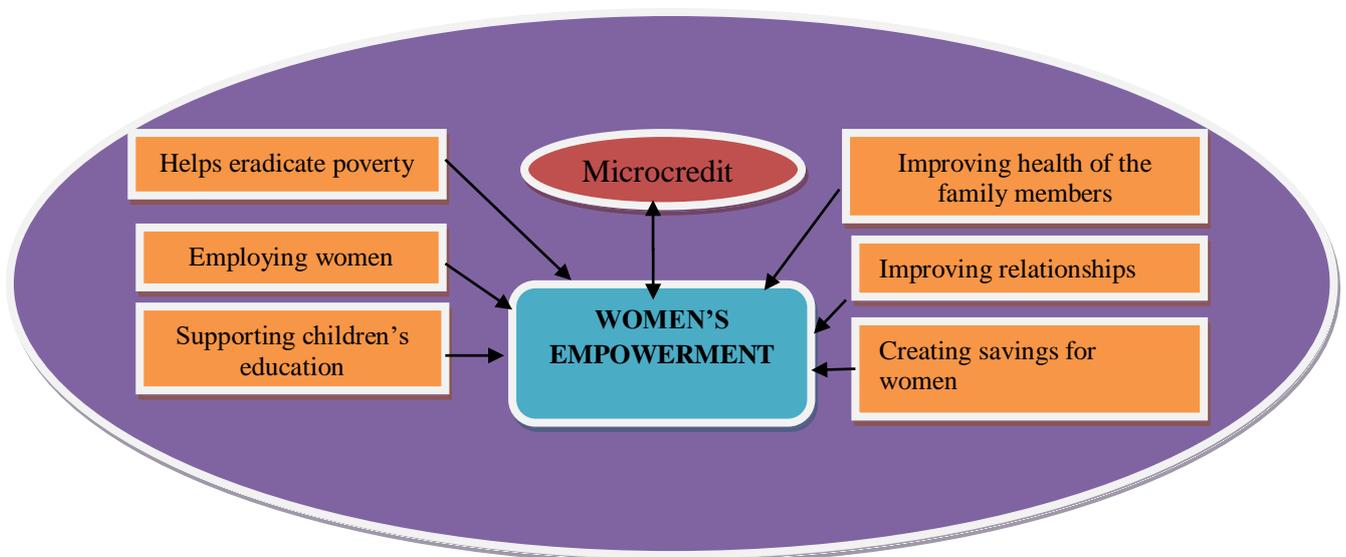


Figure 5. Role of Microcredit in Women's Empowerment

CONCLUSION

Women Empowerment is a multifaceted conception and it cannot be attained by a single partner. In order to encourage the process of empowerment, from all of the sectors collective efforts are essential particularly for poor women who are living in developing countries. As a result, many national and international organizations have been working tirelessly to make easier the process of women's empowerment. The study concede that the rural women participate more in decision-making and social and political activities but their position is still low in 'mobility' and 'access to financial organization' and other dimension of women empowerment. Thus it may be concluded that economic and political empowerment are a must to achieve a good level of empowerment.

From the findings of this study it has found that, to generate the sources of income of rural women micro-credit programs plays a notable role. Micro-credit-assisted, income-generating activities are seen to be quite useful for opening economic opportunities of rural women who may not be able to afford to be employed outside their home for many socio-cultural reasons. An involvement with

Micro-credit organization i.e, BRAC, ASA, PROSHIKHA etc also seem to act as a change agent in reducing women's economic dependence on their husbands and as well as other male kin of the family. However, the major obstacles that most of the rural women in the study area faced in participating in micro-finance-assisted are lack of training, lack of awareness, insufficient loan, lack of collateral, lack of marketing channels, failure of the business and low cooperation from the family. Necessary steps should be taken by the government so that the women have access to assets and resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To reduce the level of poverty, Micro credits are prescribed as a key part of an economic growth strategy, which may lead to rural women's empowerment towards the country. To address the above mentioned major obstacles and to improve further rural women's empowerment through micro-credit, the following vital recommendations are proposed by the researchers.

- A better understanding of women's rights and gender issues, and a responsibility to equitability for women.
- Control over credit and other aspects of women empowerment, which can be accomplished when more NGOs closely monitor how borrowers use their loans.
- The government should have a frame of policy, which may inspire Grameen Bank, non-local donor agencies and local NGOs (i.e., BRAC, ASA, PROSIKHA and KARITHAS etc) to conduct microfinance activities freely and fairly.
- To invite new NGOs to launch microfinance programmes in Bangladesh.
- Legislation should pass to remove gender distinction.
- To provide equal employment opportunities and access to microfinance institutions for women.
- Effectual initiatives should be execute to eliminate all types of internal and external violence against all women and girls.
- Regarding gender issues in microfinance and women's empowerment through income-generating activities , the awareness of stakeholders should be raised.
- Women's knowledge and update status should be promoted by providing regular skills acquisition training.
- Microfinance institutions should enable and strengthen rural women's participation in designing, planning, monitoring, and evaluating of those institutions.
- To provide a full range of services microfinance institutions should expand their branches at the local level.
- Women should be given technical training for manage and use the loan properly which focuses on increasing the efficiency of a women.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESARCH

This investigation had limitations on time, data collection, and resources *etc.*, which evidently lead to the purposive selection of the locale of the study. The study is based on the expressed opinions of the respondents, which may not be free from their individual perception and bias in spite of the researcher's efforts to get them as objectively as possible. The major weakness of the study is its representativeness, small sample size. Hence, the results reported are based on the responses of a limited number of participants, which is perhaps the major limitation of the study. Future research could be conducted on a bigger sample in one district or in a number of districts in Bangladesh to gain better picture of the overall scenario and to ensure that the findings are robust and can be generalized to the wider population.

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