

Chapter 4

Microfinance as a Weapon to Gain Empowerment: A Study on Rural Women in Nabagram Block in Murshidabad of West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The aim of development policies of any country around the world is to include the marginalised people into development process. Women generally belong to this marginalised group who are struggling over the period of time for their basic sustenance. Microfinance is among one such development strategies to alleviate poverty. However, success of such initiatives depends on the interaction among the several social processes within multi-dimensional society. Aim of this chapter is to evaluate the contribution of microfinance as a weapon to gain empowerment of women on a case study in Nabagram Block of West Bengal, India. It is observed from the study that 73% of respondents have reported that they have utilised their loan on such income generating activities which are different from the prime occupation of the family. Also, the study reveals that members of SHGs seek for greater assistance from facilitators as well as funding authority regarding information, skill development training, raw material supply and process of marketization of their products.

INTRODUCTION

The success of noble idea of Prof. Mahammad Yunus in 1983 in Bangladesh encouraged social innovators and organisers all over the world to commence several micro-finance delivery methods to fetch financial services with ambit of poor. Women, being an integral part of the socio-economic system needs more equitable distribution of income that will lead a greater space in the critical decision-making processes at home as well as in their public sphere. Freedom to lead decent life depends on person's capability set. Promoting microfinance through self-help groups (SHG) has been recognised internationally as the modern means to combat poverty, rural unemployment and womenfolk. Women who are treated as

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marginalised group are suffering from access to credit which is prerequisite for their gaining opportunity to take part in decision making process. However, women as target group for credit scheme of formal banking system were almost negligible before 1990s. After that the concept of women credit emerged due to references made by several women-oriented studies that analysed the discrimination against women in getting credit facilities from formal banking system. But still there exist a gap between need and availability of financial resources by poor women due to misperception about women that they were not at all bankable. Studies of HGs established womens' managerial capacities in handling credit and finance. So, extending the availability of microfinance through SHGs makes an empower woman who has made her life better by having access of resources.

The present work is organized in different sections as follows. In section 1, an attempt has been made to understand analytically empowerment of women. Section 2 dwells on this issue significance of microfinance to empower women. Chapter 3 deals with the process of methodology that we have followed in this work. This section is followed by section 4 where we have illustrated the major findings of our primary survey. The concluding section 5 summarizes the major findings of the study as far as microfinance as a weapon to gain women empowerment is concerned.

CONCEPT OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

'Empowerment' seems to be a modern idea that was not recognized even two centuries ago (Bhadra, 2001). In the twentieth century we observed many examples of political empowerment (Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, etc.) in different countries over the world. The perspective of such movement was to expand the base of power of low-power groups (Mondal, 2012). Empowerment refers to the process by which power is gained, developed, seized, facilitated or gained. The World Bank (2012) defines the term empowerment as — “the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes.” Therefore, the term empowerment refers to a multi-dimensional social process and it helps people gain control/ autonomy over their own lives. Throughout the world women as the other sex are marginalized. one can say that women empowerment indicates a situation where women gain autonomy over their own lives to improve their personal, social, economic, political and legal conditions so as to achieve greater respect in family, society and market. The extent of autonomy that women enjoy varies in terms of differences in their economic-social and regional and cultural groupings.

It was John Stuart Mill, a British Member of Parliament, whose essay “The Subjection of Women” written with his wife Harriet Taylor Mill, made the first attempt in favour of an establishing equality between males and females. Further Mary Wollstonecraft in —Vindication of the right of Women|| (1792) wrote on the struggle for women equality (as cited in Mazumdar, 2005). For achieving complete equality in the society, it is necessary to eliminate domination, oppression, exploitation and discrimination against fair sex by their stronger counterpart. From the sociological point of view, women empowerment can be defined as —equal status to women opportunity and freedom to develop herself (Kapur, 2001). Now Economists believe that without economic self-sufficiency, other rights and scopes remain meaningless to women. SEWA (Self Employed Women Association) has emphasized on the economic empowerment of women. It holds that raising voice and visibility is not possible unless there is access to the ownership of economic resources by the poor women.

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