



Research Paper

Women Empowerment Through Self-Help Group Model: A Survey Based Study On South 24 Parganas Region, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT: Microfinance through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) acting as the financial intermediary has not only provided low-cost group loans but has also facilitated strong group cohesion thereby empowering women group members from various dimensions. Women Empowerment being a multi-layered, multi-dimensional, and multi-faceted concept is quite difficult to comprehend from any one particular aspect. Moreover, the concept of empowerment is very much subjective and hence, it is necessary to understand the perspective of the SHG women members on the impact of SHGs on different components of women empowerment. This paper is based on a field survey conducted on 368 SHG women members randomly selected from South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal through a structured questionnaire. Garrett Ranking Method has been applied to compare different components of empowerment to understand which of these components have been empowered more after joining SHGs. It is observed that the respondents ranked economic empowerment indicator higher over the social and personal growth indicators as they believe that the availability of cheap credit and its' efficient utilization have empowered them more economically than socially. The results of the study showed that economic factors are found to be more effective than non-economic factors in empowering women.

KEYWORDS: Self-Help Groups, Microfinance, Women Empowerment

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I. INTRODUCTION

Microfinance is worldwide accepted as a proven strategy for empowering women as it provides access to financial services, financial literacy, and financial credit at low cost, allowing women an opportunity to use that credit for income generation and poverty eradication. In India, the idea of empowering women through a microfinance model was conceived in 1994, when National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) introduced the Self-Help Group Bank Linkage Programme (SHG-BLP) all across the nation and tried to reach out to the marginalized vulnerable rural poor women. The idea of this programme was to form a Self-Help Group (SHG) with 10-15 women folk from homogeneous socio-economic backgrounds and inculcate the habit of depositing monthly savings and lending group loans among the members. As per NABARD Status of Microfinance in India Report 2023-24, 1.44 crore SHGs are linked with banks benefitting more than 17.8 crore households all over India. SHGs, acting as financial intermediaries, brought unbanked poor women under the formal financial system and let them avail the benefits of low-cost formal credit and reap the advantages of socialization through strong group dynamics and cohesion. Hence, it can be said that the concept of using SHG as a group lending mechanism has indeed brought a revolution in the movement of women empowerment at the grassroots level.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers across various fields of academia have tried to comprehend the impact of SHGs from various angles. Thangumani & Muthuselvi (2013) in their study on SHGs of Tamil Nadu have found that the majority of the group members are pleased with their economic development and better self-confidence. This is justified because according to the respondents, "Self-Employment" and "Earning Money" were the two major reasons for joining SHGs. Bariya et al. (2022) made a comparative study between the SHG and the non-SHG

members of Gujarat and observed a presence of significant difference between the SHG members and non-SHG members in terms of all aspects of women empowerment which were considered in their study. In the context of West Bengal, several researchers have agreed that microfinance through SHGs had a profound influence in enhancing women's empowerment. For instance, Kundu (2019) surveyed SHGs of North 24 Pargana and found that the availability of micro-credit and its productive utilization has resulted in increasing the knowledge, the power to make decisions, the self-worthiness and economic status of women. Ghosh & Paul (2021) also found similar results in their survey on SHG women members in Alipurduar District. In their study, they mentioned that among the important impacts of joining SHGs, indicators of economic empowerment like an increase in income, self-employment, economic dependency, and easy access to financial institutions got more weightage than non-economic indicators of empowerment.

Garai et al. (2012) made a comparison between SHG members and non-SHG members to understand the nature of women empowerment in the Nadia district. They tried to assess women's empowerment from four indices - personal autonomy index, family decision-making index, domestic consultation index, and political index. They found that in all four aspects, SHG members are more empowered than their non-SHG counterparts. However, they remarked that the Self-Help Group approach is not a panacea to eradicate poverty from rural areas, but may be the strongest social weapon for the socio-economic transformation of millions of rural masses throughout the world. Das et al. (2015) conducted a study on SHG women members of Nadia, North 24 Pargana, and Bankura to find the impact of SHGs on income generation, increase in savings, and rural-based entrepreneurship. They realized that Group-wise differences in terms of income, savings, expenditure, and debt reduction have been found although from the point of equity, SHGs failed to serve the society in equal proportion. They concluded that even though there are some promising women entrepreneurs, in general, SHGs have failed to boost the trend of micro-entrepreneurship among rural women in West Bengal. Hence, from various studies, the success of SHGs in empowering women from various aspects was very much manifested and validated.

III. RESEARCH GAP

From the available literature it is confirmed that after joining SHGs, the majority of the women members have been empowered substantially. However, it is important to make a comparison between different dimensions of empowerment and find out which aspects have mostly been empowered. Moreover, the concept of empowerment is very much subjective and the opinion regarding it varies from person to person. So, it is necessary to understand the perspective of the SHG women members on the impact of SHGs on different components of women empowerment.

IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

From the above research gap, the research objective which has been formulated is as follows:

- To compare the different components of empowerment and rank them as per their level of improvement in the lives of women SHG members.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A total of 368 SHG members were randomly selected from the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. All the respondents were interviewed by the researchers themselves between January 2024 to February 2024 and all the responses were collected through a structured questionnaire. After data accumulation, the Garrett Ranking Method has been adopted to rank the different components of empowerment to understand the level of impact and degree of betterment of different aspects of empowerment on the lives of beneficiaries

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women Empowerment being a multi-layered, multi-dimensional, and multi-faceted concept is quite difficult to comprehend from any one particular aspect. The earlier studies on empowerment have tried to apprehend women's empowerment from multiple aspects. From previous research works, the most common forms of empowerment are selected and considered in this study to grasp the overall impact of SHGs on women's empowerment. 7 components of empowerment which are considered in this study are as follows:

- Economic Conditions
- Social Status
- Financial Literacy
- Skills Development
- Awareness and Availing of Government schemes, subsidies, and policies.
- Self-Decision Making Ability

- Protest Against Injustice

In the field survey, all the respondents were individually asked to rank the components from 1 to 7 as per the level of improvement after joining SHGs. Rank 1 was assigned to the most empowered component, whereas Rank 7 was given to the comparatively least empowered component. After accumulating all the responses, the Garrett Ranking Method was applied where the Garrett Mean score of each component is calculated followed by the ranking of these components as per the score in descending order. Each component of empowerment with its corresponding Garrett Score and Ranking are given in the following table:

Table 1: Garrett Mean Score and Ranking

Components of Empowerment	Garrett Mean Score	Ranking
Economic Conditions	61.80163	1
Social Status	52.25272	2
Financial Literacy	51.69293	3
Skills Development	50.4375	4
Self-Decision Making Ability	48.04348	5
Awareness and Availing of Government schemes, subsidies, and policies	44.42391	6
Protest Against Injustice	40.34783	7

Source: Researchers' own calculation

From the results, it is evident that after joining SHGs, among all the empowerment components, the "Economic Conditions" of the households of the group members have shown substantial empowerment. This outcome is very much expected because a majority of the SHG members have bettered their income by utilizing the group credit for any income-generating purposes. Increases in earnings, savings, and assets are grouped under the category "Economic Conditions" to understand the financial impact of SHGs on women members and their households. It is true that economic empowerment leads to social empowerment as well. SHG women have felt that their importance in the family decision making and their roles in the society as facilitator of development have increased manifold. Due to collective bargaining and strong group cohesion, women have found their own voices and strongly advocate for their own rights as and when required. Hence, after "Economic Condition", respondents have ranked "Social Status" as the second most form of empowerment. After joining SHGs, group members were given training on Book-keeping, Short Term Credit Management, and Financial Literacy and hence it is justified why respondents feel that they are more financially literate. Women members especially group leaders are indeed more knowledgeable about the maintenance of different books, loan disbursement, interest calculation, advantages of timely loan repayment. Hence, "Financial Literacy" is ranked 3rd among the different forms of empowerment. One of the basic elements of SHG model is to arrange training programs for the women to enhance their earning skills and livelihood creation. SHG women members are provided with adequate guidance and proper training so that they can use the micro-credit for self-employment or micro-entrepreneurship. Moreover, strong group dynamics and regular interactions among the members and outsiders have boosted the self-confidence of the members, which helps them to make decisions on their own. With refined self-confidence and different skill development training from SHGs, women members have sharpened skills through which they can earn income and also promote self-employment wherever possible. Therefore, "Skills Development" and "Self-Decision Making Ability" are ranked 4th and 5th respectively. Furthermore, SHG women have more awareness about the availability of different Government schemes and the various benefits that can be availed from the Government through group lending schemes like Revolving Fund, MAS (*Mohila Apto Sohayok*), etc. Constant monitoring by intermediaries like Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), *Sanghas* also helps them to get updated with changes in norms and regulations of various social welfare schemes launched by the Government. Hence, "Awareness and Availing of Government schemes, subsidies, and policies" is ranked 6th in the list of empowerment components. However, respondents feel that after being a part of SHG, their ability to protest against any form of injustice have been improved like never before but not to the extent of other components of empowerment. In their responses, members have mentioned that their ability to protest against injustices like domestic violence, corruption, misuse of rules by concerned

authorities have been less empowered in comparison to other forms of empowerment and hence, “Protest against Injustice” is 7th to occupy the bottommost place among the list of empowerment indicators. Among the different aspects of empowerment, economic empowerment of women has been more evident which is believed to lead to other forms of empowerment through various levels. From the experiences shared by the respondents, it is apparent that joining SHGs has not only empowered them financially in terms of earnings, savings, literacy, subsidies, etc. but has also helped in personality development through improved self-confidence, skills upgradation and socially through better societal recognition and acceptance.

VII. CONCLUSION

It would be wrong to limit the power of Microfinance as a mere tool to provide access to cheap credit. Microfinance through SHGs acting as a financial intermediary not only provided low-cost group loans but also facilitated strong group cohesion which empowered group members economically, socially, and personally. In this study, it is observed that group members are economically more empowered followed by social empowerment, Financial Literacy, Personal Growth indicators like “Self-Decision Making Ability” and “Skills Development” and Social indicators like “Awareness and Availing of Government schemes, subsidies, and policies” and “Protest against Injustice”. The results of the study are in accord with the results of Swain & Wallentin (2012) and Ghosh & Paul (2021) where economic factors are found to be more effective than non-economic factors in empowering women. It is evident that this micro-credit through group lending mechanism possesses huge potential to cast a positive impact on the lives of rural poor women and their households. Concerned authorities like Government, Banks, Municipalities, Panchayats, NGOs, and Sanghas must work in the best interest of the poor people and establish strong co-ordination among them so that more women from low-income households can avail the benefits of low-cost group credit and build up strong social capital.

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