

Empowerment through Microfinance: Where does it tilt? A Case Study of District Gilgit, Pakistan

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Abstract: *Microfinance is frequently used as an approach for women empowerment. Present study explores the degree of success of microfinance towards women empowerment by comparing new clients with the clients of successive loan cycles. Logistic regression and univariate descriptive analysis of survey data shows mixed results towards women empowerment. Impact on four out of six observed variables for financial empowerment and four out of seven for social empowerment were positive. The study shows not a significant result on women spending on personal accessories, decision related to general household expenditure, parties and social gathering, decision related to entertainment and spending for festival celebrations. Study reveals women of successive loan cycles could produce additional income and improve in various areas, but there are some financial and social sides to be addressed yet.*

Key Words: *Microfinance, Empowerment, women, Gilgit, Pakistan*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the years women have been kept away from every course of life considering inferior and even property of men in most of the societies, particularly in third world countries. Domestically, socially, politically, economically and in all the other structures of the society, there prevail gender disparities and inequalities in developing countries and undoubtedly hereof women are vulnerable. Women in most parts of the world are paid less as compared to the men for their work (Sarumathi et al, 2011 [24]; Riaz et al, 2012 [23]). Women empowerment refers to narrow the gap of gender discrepancies in all the ties of the society and microfinance. Different studies show that for the last few decades microfinance has been linked with empowerment of women to alleviate poverty which eventually leads to economic development. On the other hand some of the studies geared up microfinance with disempowerment, because a

number of new female clients spoil loan on direct expenditure and have repayment problems, hence they are directed to molestation and harassment (Ganle et al, 2015 [9]). Thus the effect of microfinance is hung between empowerment and disempowerment.

Life of women in Pakistan narrates quite a different story, where they do not only bear considerably huge burden of poverty, education and employment inequalities, but are often exposed to maltreatment and physical punishment (Riaz et al, 2012 [23]). According to UNICEF's National Report 2012, in urban areas of Pakistan 64% women are literate to that of 80% of male; whereas literacy rate of women in rural areas is 28% to that of 60% for male that shows poor situation of education for women in urban areas and worst in rural areas. Refined labour participation rate in Pakistan is 21.5% for women to that of 68.8% for male [12]. Figures in either case are unfavourable for women.

The present study has been focused on district Gilgit, one of the far flung areas located at the extreme north of Pakistan. The district has limited options of livelihood for its inhabitants. Women in these areas have even more woeful condition. Women in these areas are encouraged to acquire education, but their mobility, social gatherings and business activities are restricted considering it against the tradition and family norms. They are also kept away from jobs and participation in decision making. In order to address the worst situation of the women and the poverty of the area, Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) had launched microfinance program in these areas for the first time in early 1980s with a view to raise the living standard of the local communities and empowerment of women by implementing rural development projects and initiatives. It was the beginning of microfinance activities in Pakistan (Riaz et al, 2012 [23]). AKRSP planned loaning on compulsory saving that raised the interest of individuals particularly of women which

laid the foundation of first women organization in Gilgit (previously called Northern Areas) (Hussein, 2009 [15]).

Though women empowerment led to increase the wellbeing of the family (Swamy, 2014 [27]), but positive impact of microfinance on women empowerment is still unclear and the connection between microfinance and empowerment is to establish critically for the purpose of impact analysis (Weber and Ahmad, 2014 [29]). To our knowledge, there does not exist even a single study to see the impact of microfinance on women empowerment in district Gilgit – the area with a history in microfinance activities in Pakistan. An investigation is needed to know the degree at which the program has empowered the women and this study is the foremost attempt for that. The aim of the study is to unfold the impact of microfinance on women empowerment in district Gilgit Pakistan. Following research questions have been focused in the study:

1. Whether women in successive loan cycles are empowered to that of the women in initial loan cycle?
2. Which social and financial empowerment indicators have been affected with intermediation of microfinance?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Microfinance has the potency in renovating the poor and raising the status of women and can be adopted as the strategy of development and gender because it has straight relationship with female empowerment and eradication of poverty (Cheston & Khun, 2002 [5]). The third world countries have graded microfinance as a way of empowerment in support to the entrepreneurship (Weber & Ahmad, 2014 [29]).

Women intra household decision making and welfare under stiff social norms found to have heterogeneous effects with intermediation of microfinance (Ngo & Wahhaj, 2012 [20]; Gaiha & Kulkarni, 2013 [8]). The study finds that women were benefited if credit is invested in joint activities, but women decision making authority could not improve within household for a woman with limited skills and one who is engaged in an independent productive activity. Women decision making was raised in case of sharing household budget in public goods; however, women were ignored to join those new economic activities which lie outside the conventional domain (Ngo & Wahhaj, 2012 [20]).

Most of the studies targeted repayment of microfinance and came up with not a significant impact on women empowerment and women who fail to repay the loan are assaulted and harassed

(Ganle et al, 2015 [8]). Women found struggled in building agency as women enterprise design amongst conflicting positions. A few women in the study managed high ranked ventures hence avoided terrible effects of tyrannical repayment scheme while most of the participants were entrapped unbearable long hours work, jeopardy, less return and repayment (Sigalla & Carney, 2012 [25]).

Holvoet (2005) [13] studied microfinance role on power of women decision and concluded that borrowing directly from the bank failed to change the existing decision power for both men and women; however, this pattern changed for the combination of micro credit with social and financial groups, where women showed an overall change in decision making patterns. Gaiha and Nandhi in one of their studies looked women empowerment through Self Help Groups (SHG) with inclusion of microfinance and found that targeted SHGs remained disappointing in income criterion; however, other indicators like low caste, landlessness and illiteracy were appreciable and domestic violence reduced to the greater extent (Gaiha & Nandhi 2007 [7]). In another empirical analysis, Sivachithappa (2013) [26] found that intervention of microfinance by SHGs has resulted increase in the level of income and assets of rural women, but overall process of women empowerment remained poor.

Debated the empowering or weakening position of microcredit Ganle et al (2015) [9] elaborated that microcredit empowered those women who had pre-existing entrepreneurial activities. On the other hand, the women who accessed microcredit for launching new venture became weakened or disempowered. Banergee et al (2010) [4] with first randomized evaluation found that microfinance shows no important business outcomes and composition of household expenditure. There found no effect on education, health and women empowerment which nullifies microfinance to be the miracle that is sometimes claimed. Crepon et al (2011) [6] reviewed Banergee et al (2010) [4] and evaluated micro credit effects focusing Morocco's rural areas. Keeping the approach of Banergee et al unchanged; they evaluated very nominal push on normal consumption and very little effects on education, health and other indicators. They saw that individuals engaged in pre-economic activity show expansion in their business and savings, results were quite opposite in case of individuals without pre economic activity.

Weber and Ahmad (2014) [29] studied women empowerment by linking different loan cycles and empowerment stage. They found that multi loaned women had an upper stage empowerment as compared to those who took the loan for the first time. The empowerment level of treatment group

was significant both in case of social empowerment and financial empowerment as compared to control group. Probing four key indicators of women empowerment like expenditure decisions, ownership of assets, shared division of work labour and reduction in domestic conflicts, Haile et al (2012) [12] found all indicators except for shared division of work labour which increased.

According to Hunt and Kasynathan (2002) [14] women involved in any microfinance program showed an increasing economic trend by progressive increase in income creating moves. An overall upbeat effect of micro finance on female empowerment is depicted in the study of Noreen (2011) [21] but at household rank it is not as much satisfactory. Pitt and Khandker (1998) [22] carried a comparative study of the impact of men and women participants in grouped credit programs in Bangladesh and concluded that for women participants' credit program has greater effect on behaviour of poor households particularly on household's expenditure.

Microfinance empowered women socially, economically and psychologically; further it has uplift the confidence, skill development, courage for doing different tasks, social welfare activities (Sarumathi et al, 2011 [24]). Studying wellbeing effect of micro credit Nader (2007) [19] showed perception of harmony in the family has no association with microfinance, but welfare asset's ownership, income level and schooling changed positively with microfinance. Communal participation, economic decision and health seem to remain unchanged with the inclusion of microfinance (Nader, 2007 [19]; Asim, 2008 [3]; Haile et al, 2012 [12]).

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Population and Sample

The study population consisted of the female members of Village and Women Organizations (V/WOs) of AKRSP who are the clients of First Microfinance Bank (FMFB).

It can never be possible to acquire data from full population mob, thus a suitable sample was chosen for analysis. Among the various areas of district Gilgit, six rural areas including Oshikhandas, Naltar, Jalalabad, Baseen, Danyore and Bagrote were selected in order to focus rural women. Out of the total 891 V/WOs of AKRSP present in district Gilgit, these have 156, 45, 84, 52, 113 and 38 V/WOs respectively [1]. 10 percent from each of the above V/WOs was taken randomly as sample. In this way 49 V/WOs were selected from where randomly five

active members were chosen. Thus this made 245 clients as total sample size for the study

3.2. Instrumental Design for Data Collection

Developing Research Instruments for data collection is a quite cumbersome task. As the study was based on primary data, so a detailed questionnaire was developed as a data collection instrument. All the questions were systematically set in order to cover every aspect that can be directly or indirectly affected by change in finance both in short run and in long run. The questionnaire was segregated in different sections keeping objectives of the study in mind. A great care was taken towards asking easily comprehending questions first; so questionnaire was started with demographical questions followed by questions on socio-economic issues, loan utilization, income, saving, health and medical services, consumption pattern, change in durable items / assets, social empowerment, living with shocks and social empowerment. For each question, fixed responses were given for the respondent to select specified option allied to her, which made the process easy and time saving.

3.3 Data Analysis and Interpretation

3.3.1. Technique for Descriptive Analysis

Quite simple and straight forward univariate technique was used for descriptive analysis. The technique includes frequency distribution, mean, percentages and standard deviation for certain variables.

3.3.2. Technique for Impact Analysis

In order to observe impact of microfinance on women empowerment, the methodology proposed by Johnson and Rogaly (1997) [17] is applied i.e. comparing control group who are in first loan cycle with sample clients for two or more cycles. We used Logit Model to see the impact, because we had a primary data with fixed set of choices. We compared control group (first loan cycle = 0) with treatment group (two or more loan cycles =1). Loan cycle refers to the period of time for which loan is provided. FMFB initially provides loan for the period of one year; if loan is pay backed successfully, further loaning is offered to the clients and the pattern continues from year to year.

The functional relation between dependent and explanatory variable can be expressed as;

$$Y = f(X_1, X_2, X_3, X_4, \dots, X_n)$$

The logit model can be written as;

$$P(y = 1) = \frac{e^z}{1 + e^z}$$

Where,

y = Binary dependent variable (y = 1 for favorable, y = 0 otherwise)

e = Base of natural log

z = Function of 'n' explanatory variables

$$z = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \dots + \beta_n X_n$$

The logit model can articulated as odds ratio. Odds ratio expresses a favorable outcome on the basis of an unfavorable outcome. We can define odds ratio as the probability of a favorable outcome based on the probability of an unfavorable outcome i.e;

$$\text{Odds} = \frac{\text{Prob (Favorable)}}{\text{Prob (Un favorable)}}$$

The logistic regression can be articulated in terms of odds as;

$$\text{Odds} = \frac{y}{1 - y}$$

For transformation of 'y' we take natural log of odds.

Hence;

$$\ln\left(\frac{y}{1-y}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \dots + \beta_n X_n$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{y}{1-y}\right) = \beta X$$

Solving the equation for binary dependent variable 'y' as;

$$y = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \dots + \beta_n X_n)}}$$

y = Binary dependant variable

β_0 = Constant Coefficient

β_i = Parameters (i = 1, 2,n)

$X_1, X_2, X_3, \dots, X_n$ are explanatory variables

The parameters explain position of a member of sample client with respect to a member of control group client. Sign of a parameter describes the situation i.e positive sign depicts that sample client has become better than control group client.

3.3 Variables Used in the Model

Table 1. Variables used for logistic regression.

Variable	Nature of Variable	Detail of Variable
Demographic		
Age	Continuous	Age of respondent in years
Gender	Binary	=1 if female, 0 otherwise
EDN	Binary	Education level of respondents =1 if have some education, 0 otherwise
MS	Binary	=1 if married, 0 otherwise
NHH	Continuous	Family Size in numbers
THHI	Continuous	Total Households Annual Income in rupees
Financial		
LS	Binary	Loan Cycle; =1 if two or more loan cycles, 0 if first loan cycle
DRBE	Binary	Decision related to business expenditure; =1 if yes, 0 if No
HHICL	Binary	Household income contribution after acquiring loan; =1 if increased, 0 otherwise
SPAL	Binary	Spending on personal accessories after acquiring loan; =1 if increased, 0 otherwise
LUZ	Binary	Loan utilization for the purpose; =1 if increased, 0 otherwise
DGHHE	Binary	Decision related general household expenditure; =1 if increased, 0 otherwise
SPH	Binary	Spending on personal accessories; =1 if increased, 0 otherwise
Social		
DRE	Binary	Decision related to entertainment; =1 if increased, 0 otherwise
DRM	Binary	Decision related to mobility; =1 if increased, 0 otherwise
PSG	Binary	Spending on parties and social gatherings;=1 if increased, 0 otherwise
SFC	Binary	Spending on festival celebrations after loan; =1 if increased, 0 otherwise
SHHF	Binary	Spending on household functions; =1 if increased, 0 otherwise
ST	Binary	Spending on traveling; =1 if increased, 0 otherwise
SCAF	Binary	Spending on community affairs; =1 if increased, 0 otherwise

Source: Generated by the author.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

We obtained responses from 245 clients for our study. On the basis of the loan cycles, 202 clients were assigned treatment group (borrowers in higher loan cycles) and 43 were entitled with control group (borrowers in first loan cycle).

The loans provided were based on establishing a new venture and the expansion of an existing venture. The average loan given to the clients in control group was about Rs. 20,081 (roughly \$193) and Rs. 159,730 (roughly \$1535) for the clients in sample group.

The average age of the participants was 35.7 years with 194 married, 37 unmarried and 14 widowed. More than eighty percent clients were literate, out of which 2.4 percent participants went to madarsa, 30.6 percent have got primary education, 4.5 percent have attended middle school, 18.4 percent have got education up to matriculation and 44 percent have got intermediate or above education.

Our study groups the member in control and sample groups as per their loan cycles. Control groups found all the members in first loan cycle to that of the treatment group where minimum loan cycle was 2 and the maximum was 12. Figure 1 shows the frequency of the loan for each borrower. Treatment group has average loan cycles equal to 4 with a median of 3 (sd= 2.518, kurtosis = 2.037, skewness 1.612).

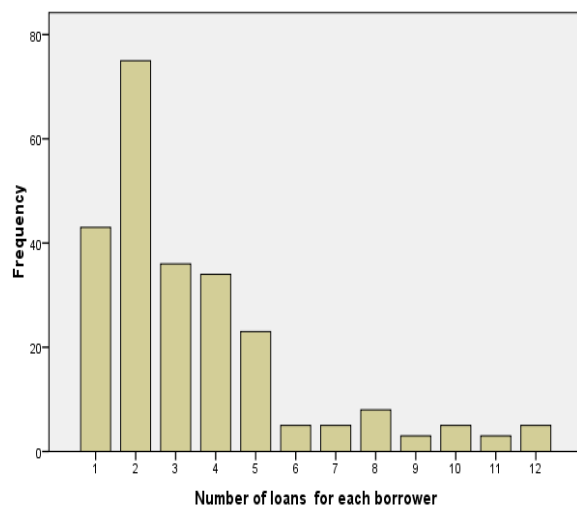


Figure 1. Frequency of the number of loans granted to each borrower.

There found a vast difference regarding loan utilization. More than seventy three percent members of treatment group could use the loan for the purpose

it was acquired to that of just thirty percent for control group members. This shows that successive loan cycles enabled women to learn best use of loan. There found not a big difference in case of household size which is 7.7 with median of 8 and standard deviation equal to 2.40 for control group and 7.9 with median of 7 and standard deviation equal to 2.804.

4.2. Impact Analysis

Decision making is one of the main components of one's life and is coined with empowerment. In our society, particularly in rural areas men make almost every decision of life and women role in decision making is usually nullified (Mumtaz & Aysha 1982 [18]). In many rural areas, women are considered as a component family servant, so have nothing to do in deciding social and economical affairs of the family. They are usually encapsulated in the house and are not allowed to move out. For smooth family operations, women should be given equal status to that of men (Jan & Akhtar, 2008 [16]). We have analyzed women decision making in financial and social sector (indicators of financial and social empowerment of women) in order to explore women empowerment with inclusion of microfinance.

4.2.1. Financial Empowerment

Binary logistic regression was applied for impact analysis of microfinance on women financial empowerment. The estimation of financial empowerment of women has been analyzed by taking financial empowerment indicators like decision related to business expansion (DRBE), contribution to income creation (HHICL), spending on personal accessories (SPAL), loan utilization (LUZ), decision related to general household expenditure (DGHHE) and spending on housing (SPH) as dependent variables. Binary logistic regression was run for these indicators taking age, marital status (MS), education (EDN), household size (NHH), household annual income (THHI) and loan cycle (LS =0 for control group, =1 for sample group) as independent variables.

Table 2 indicates that four out of six analyzed financial empowerment factors found to be significant. The results portray that influence of the women in making decision related to business expansion, loan utilization and spending on houses has been raised over the loan cycles. Decision related to business expansion was significant at 0.007 and odds for decision related issues is 2.96 times higher for multiple loan cycles than the first cycle. Household income contribution and spending on housing was significant at 0.000 and 0.001 with the odds of 6.75 and 3.82 respectively. Role of women in

household income creation has also been raised with increase in loan cycles (significant at 0.000) and they become economically effective showing 4.39 times stronger than borrower in the single loan cycle.

Though microfinance intermediation has uplifted women of the study area in various aspects of financial empowerment, but women decision making in general household expenditure and spending on personal accessories could not increased with increase in loan cycles. Women empowerment is not only associated with microfinance but it is highly affected by customs and values of the area where study is carried. The researcher’s focus of study was women empowerment in district Gilgit for which data was selected from rural areas of the district. In these general household expenditures are made by male counterparts. During the survey the general perception of the women in the area was inquired. Majority of the women in these areas prefer to give most of their earning to their husbands instead of making expenditures by their own. This custom has kept women away from making expenditures on personal accessories and decision on general house expenditures.

Table 2. Logistic regressions for financial empowerment indicators as dependent variables by taking membership in first loan cycle as control group and two or more as sample group

Empowerment Indicators (Financial)	B	S.E	Wald	df	Sig.	Ex(B)
DRBE	1.085	0.399	7.385	1	0.007	2.961
HHICL	1.910	0.445	18.440	1	0.000	6.750
SPAL	-0.26	0.389	0.005	1	0.946	0.974
LUZ	1.480	0.398	13.831	1	0.000	4.395
DGHHE	0.458	0.372	1.517	1	0.218	1.581
SPH	1.341	0.390	11.832	1	0.001	3.824

Source: Developed by the author from survey data

4.2.2. Social Empowerment

Decision related to entertainment (DRE), decision related to mobility (DRM), parties and social gathering (PSG), spending for celebration (SFC), spending on household function (SHHF), spending on travelling (ST) and spending on community

affairs (SCAF) are the indicators of women social empowerment. These indicators were made as logistic regression indicators and regression was run for membership in first loan cycle (control group) or two or more loan cycles (sample group) as independent variable along with age, marital status (MS), education (EDN), household size (NHH), household annual income (THHI).

Table 3 shows that among the seven analyzed indicators of social empowerment four were significant. Women decision related to mobility was significant at 0.010. Spending on household functions, spending on travelling and spending on community affairs & political parties were significant at 0.036, 0.011 and 0.005 respectively.

Table 3. Logistic regressions for social empowerment indicators as dependent variables by taking membership in first loan cycle as control group and two or more as sample group

Empowerment Indicators (Social)	B	S.E	Wald	df	Sig.	Ex(B)
DRE	0.693	0.383	3.276	1	0.070	2.000
DRM	0.986	0.380	6.717	1	0.010	2.680
PSG	0.835	0.440	3.606	1	0.058	2.304
SFC	0.629	0.525	1.434	1	0.231	1.876
SHHF	0.810	0.386	4.388	1	0.036	2.247
ST	0.944	0.370	6.494	1	0.011	2.570

Source: Developed by the author from survey data

The microfinance interference in rural women has enabled them to enhance some of the aspects of their social life. With increase in loan cycles decision making and spending on social aspects like mobility, spending on household functions, household functions, travelling and community affairs enhanced. There seems no association of microfinance in some social empowerment indicators, because women in targeted area are strictly exposed to cultural and traditional norms. The inquiry of selected areas of the study site explored that in these areas participation of women in entertainment activities, parties and social gatherings and participation in festivals is discouraged in the society. Though women in these areas have managed to improve in various social

empowerment factors but could not bring themselves out from strict traditional and cultural domain

5. CONCLUSION

The focus of this study was to seek the impact of AKAM's microfinance program on women empowerment in district Gilgit. Data was collected from 245 samples of the clients of First Microfinance Bank through household survey of six rural areas of district Gilgit. Analysis of the study was made using control group (for first loan cycle) and treatment group (for higher loan cycles).

The study compared respondents of control group to that of treatment group to analyze impact of AKAM's microfinance on poverty and empowerment of women. Data was analyzed both with simple univariate technique and binary logistic regression. Mixed results were observed in women decision making agency both at financial and social side. Results of the model showed decision related to business, role of household in income generation, loan utilization and spending on housing were significant, which helped us to conclude a positive impact of AKAM's microfinance program on these empowerment indicators. However, women spending on personal accessories and decision on general household items were not significant. Thus the program could not impact women positively on these factors of empowerment.

Social empowerment indicators like women decision related to mobility, spending on household function, spending on travelling and spending on traveling were significant; hence showed strong positive impact on social empowerment for these variables. However, decision related to entertainment, parties and social gathering and spending on festival celebrations had significant could not bring any change with launching of microfinance program

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