

Women Empowerment through Self-Help Groups: A Micro-Credit-Based Analysis in Ramgarh Cantt.

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Abstract

Micro-credit has emerged as an effective tool to enhance financial inclusion and empower women in developing countries. It helps to alleviate poverty. The aim of the current study is to evaluate the women empowerment through micro-credit in Self-Help Group (SHG) in Ramgarh Cantt, Jharkhand. A quantitative descriptive and analytical research design was adopted using surveys conducted with 200 women SHG members through a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics and inferential techniques such as paired comparison and multiple regression analysis used to assess the impact of SHG participation on women empowerment. SHG Participation has helped the women in economic and social empowerment. After joining self-help groups (SHGs), participation in household financial decision-making has increased from 35% to 75%, decisions concerning children's education from 45% to 80%, health care decision-making from 50% to 85%, personal savings from 40% to 82%, and participation in community activities from 30% to 72%. Results from the multiple regression analysis indicated that the monthly income ($\beta = 0.42$), education ($\beta = 0.31$), participation in the community ($\beta = 0.27$) and duration of SHG membership ($\beta = 0.24$) significantly contributed to the women empowerment. The model explained 62% of the variation in empowerment ($R^2 = 0.62$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.60$; $p < 0.001$). The study concludes that micro-credit through Self Help Group (SHG) enhances women's economic independence, decision-making ability, social participation and confidence. Nevertheless, restricted loan size along with a lack of entrepreneurial training, marketing, and socio-cultural restraints continue to inhibit sustainable empowerment. Capacity building, financial literacy. Entrepreneurship development, and Institutional support can strengthen SHGs for inclusive and sustainable women's empowerment.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Micro-credit, Financial Inclusion, Women's Economic Empowerment.

1. Introduction

Women's empowerment has become a core goal of sustainable development and inclusive economic growth across the globe. It includes the processes of women gaining access to the

resources, opportunities, decision-making power and control over their own lives. Empowerment is not only economic. It also includes social, political, educational and psychological empowerment. Although notable steps have been made to bring educational and legal reform, gender inequality still constrains women's involvement in economic activity, access to funds, and reform decision-making institutions. Such challenges are especially high in the developing economy countries like India. Women face structural constraints related to their ownership of productive assets, access to formal credit, formal employment opportunities and socio-cultural practices that limit their autonomy. As a result, policymakers, researchers, and development organizations globally are keen on empowering women through sustainable livelihood interventions (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1999).

Many people believe that microfinance is the best way of empowering women as it lets financially underserved groups have access to financial services. Micro finance institutions are geared to offer small loans, savings, insurance and other financial services to the poor people, especially women, without requiring collateral and formal documentation as in the case for the traditional banking system. The idea is that financial inclusion allows women to start generating incomes, give strength to the household economy, reduce poverty, and enhance bargaining power in the family and community. Various studies proved that in addition to economic development, micro-credit access leads to improvement in education, health, nutrition and quality-of-life (Yunus, 2007; Armendáriz & Morduch, 2010). Nevertheless, to be effective, micro-credit imposes a need for complementary initiatives including skill development, entrepreneurship training, institutional support and socio-mobilization.

The Self-Help Group (SHG) movement has been one of the most successful community-based initiatives in India for delivering micro-credit to women and empowering them. Self Help Groups are voluntary associations, usually composed of ten to twenty women belonging to similar socio-economic backgrounds. These women regularly save small amounts of money, manage their savings collectively and access institutional credit from commercial banks and cooperatives. The SHG-Bank Linkage Programme of NABARD was launched in 1992. It sought to link informal women's groups to the formal banking sector. It was highly successful in the rural area. The Government of India later expanded the initiative through the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) which focuses on bringing people out of poverty through collective action, financial inclusion, enterprise development and capacity building (NABARD, 2023; Ministry of Rural Development, 2023). The SHG model has been successful to a great extent in not only enhancing the economic participation of women but also in promotion of social solidarity, leadership and community development.

The SHG's importance is not limited to providing financial assistance. As a result of being involved in SHGs, women will learn leadership skills and how to become financially literate, improve their communication skills, and become activists in local government and community development activities. Regularly conducted group meetings instill confidence within women

and further arms them socially with decision-making power, support, and knowledge. SHGs help access government welfare schemes, vocational training, health awareness programme, entrepreneurial development, and others. As a result, it is evidenced that membership in SHGs leads to multidimensional empowerment, which means that women's economic status improves while their participation in household decision making, mobility, political awareness and social recognition also grow.

The main instrument through which SHGs promote economic empowerment is micro-credit. Loans from SHGs allow women to start micro-enterprises like livestock, tailoring, handicrafts, food processing, retail trading, agriculture and other income-generating activities. Having more money at home helps you live a better life. Besides, it also gives women more power over money. And, it reduces dependence on money lenders who charge a high-interest rate. As women become economically independent, they get a better bargaining position in the family and partake more in decisions regarding the education of children, health care, the family budget, savings, investments, and purchase of assets. A number of studies have established a positive relationship between access to micro-credit and improvement in women's income, employment, independence, and enterprise (Pitt et al., 2006, Duflo, 2012).

Women's empowerment can be defined from many angles. The process has been conceived of as involving economic, social, psychological and political dimensions. Women's capacity to generate and control their own sources of income and to make independent decisions about their own use of resources. Social empowerment includes enhanced mobility, increased education, participation in community organizations as well as increased awareness of legal and social rights. According to Malhotra et al. (2002), psychological empowerment improves self-esteem, confidence, aspirations and capacity for leadership, while political empowerment includes involvement in local governance and public decision-making. The SHGs contribute at the same time on these multiple dimensions because they create an environment to help women with their experiences and challenges. Thus, the SHG movement is now an effective tool for gender equality and sustainable rural development.

Numerous studies conducted in various parts of India have confirmed that SHGs (Self Help Groups) positively influence women's socio-economic development. According to studies, SHG members have shown significant improvements in income, savings behaviour, entrepreneurial skills, financial literacy, educational attainment, health awareness and social participation compared to non-members (Hashemi et al., 1996, Garikipati, 2008). Participants of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) reported enhanced confidence in engaging with financial institutions, government departments, and local administrative authorities. Women members of SHGs are found to take up leadership roles in their community. Further, they often participate in collective activities regarding issues of sanitation, education, environment, and health. Despite that, the extent of empowerment is determined by regional differences in institutional effectiveness,

socio-cultural conditions, market access, quality of training and availability of financial resources (Brody et al., 2017).

The most important context where one can study SHGs, micro-credit and women's empowerment is Jharkhand since a significant section of the population derives its livelihood from agriculture, informal employment and small enterprises. The state has seen robust growth in the number of women Self-Help Groups under NRLM with the assistance of government departments, banks and NGOs. In Ramgarh and similar districts, SHGs are playing a key role in motivating contributory micro-saving and entrepreneurial behaviour among the economically weaker sections. With access to micro-credit, women members are taking up any economic activity such as dairy farming, poultry, vegetable cultivation, handicrafts, tailoring, food processing and retail trade. By this effort, the household income can be raised and social status as well as decision making of women will improve. Nonetheless, despite the rapid expansion of SHGs, not much evidence is available regarding the appropriateness of micro-credit in enabling sustainable empowerment of women in Ramgarh Cantt. This calls for a systematic examination.

In Ramgarh Cantt, Jharkhand, the present study aims to find out the role of Self-Help Groups in empowering women through micro-credit. The study would analyse the socio-economic background of the SHG members, the pattern of use of micro-credit, change in household income, financial independence, decision making power, social participation, and overall empowerment of the member with the help of SHG. By observing both economic and social impact of participation in SHGs, the study aims to generate evidence on the effectiveness of micro-credit for women empowerment. The findings are likely to enhance the corpus on gender, financial inclusion and rural development besides helping policymakers, institutions, and agencies geared to strengthen women-centric livelihood programmes and schemes. Also, the study is consistent with the larger Sustainable Development Goals framework as it particularly relates to SDG 1, No Poverty; SDG 5, Gender Equality; SDG 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth; and SDG 10, Reduced Inequalities. And the core global SDG agenda is essentially a community-based financial institution. Consequently, the evidence generated from this research may help in strengthening the Self-Help Groups to enhance women's access to financial services, entrepreneurship opportunities and long-term economic empowerment.

2. Materials and Methods

The study used a quantitative method backed by a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the impact of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) on the empowerment of women through micro-credit at Ramgarh Cantt., Jharkhand. Due to the high qualitative nature of empowerment and competitive global phenomenon, a quantitative design was considered appropriate to provide proof of claims of a woman's economic and social empowerment. The use of standardized indicators was made to arrive at figures and later statistical analysis. The study's descriptive component gave a clear idea about the socio-economic profile of the women members of the SHGs. The analytical component, on the other hand, looked into the relationship of micro-credit

problems utilization with different dimensions of empowerment. This descriptive-analytical design is commonly used in research conducted in the field of financial inclusion, microfinance and empowerment because it allows for systematic comparison of socio-economic variables. It also helps in establishing a statistically significant association between the participation in SHGs and empowerment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, Saunders et al., 2019).

Table:1 Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age (Years)	Below 30	38	19.0
	30–45	102	51.0
	Above 45	60	30.0
Marital Status	Married	152	76.0
	Unmarried	26	13.0
	Widow/Divorced	22	11.0
Education	Illiterate	28	14.0
	Primary	54	27.0
	Secondary	76	38.0
	Graduate & above	42	21.0
Occupation	Agriculture	46	23.0
	Small Business	52	26.0
	Wage Labour	64	32.0
	Others	38	19.0
Duration of SHG Membership	1–3 Years	48	24.0
	3–5 Years	84	42.0
	>5 Years	68	34.0
Total		200	100.0

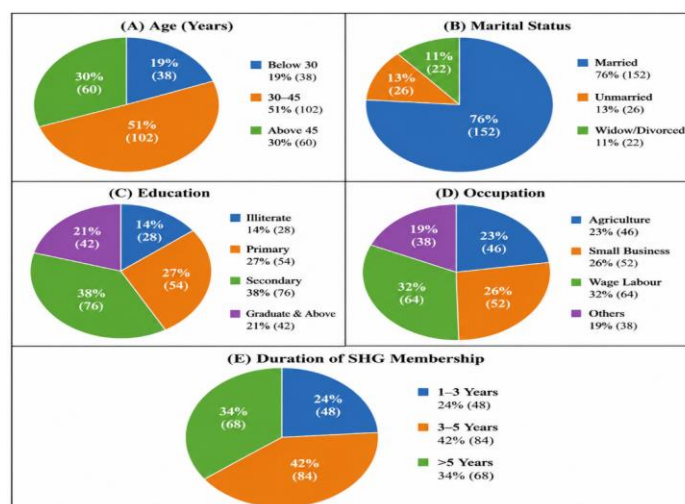


Figure:1 Socio-demographic characteristics of SHG respondents

Fig.1, The socio-demographic characteristics of the 200 respondents are presented. Most respondents (51%) were between 30 and 45 years old, followed by those above 45 years old (30%) and below 30 years old (19%). Most of the respondents were married (76%), while 13 were unmarried and 11 were either widow or divorced. In terms of education, 38% completed secondary education, 27% completed primary education, 21% graduate or above and 14% illiterate. The predominant occupation was wage labour (32%), which was followed by small business (26%), agriculture (23%) and others (19%). Moreover, 42% of the SHG members were having a membership of 3–5 years indicating their considerable involvement.

The study was carried out in Ramgarh Cantt. located in Ramgarh district in Jharkhand state of India. It is characterized by a mixed socio-economic environment comprising urban, semi-urban, and peri-urban settlements where agriculture, small businesses, mining-related activities, wage employment, and informal enterprises constitute the major sources of livelihood. In the past few years, the region has witnessed the active promotion of Self-Help Groups by the governments' sponsored livelihood missions, commercial banks, cooperative institutions and non-govt organizations to enhance financial inclusion and entrepreneurial development of women. With the rising presence of SHGs and increased access to institutional credit and livelihood programmes in Ramgarh Cantt. A suitable site for the study on effectiveness of micro-credit in women empowerment. The study area also reflects the general socio-economic conditions of most districts of eastern India; hence, the findings may be useful for policy (NABARD 2023).

The study's target population consisted of women members of Self-Help Groups functioning of Ramgarh Cantt. Eligible participants included only active SHG members who had a minimum of one year association with their group and had availed of micro credit facility. The criterion of one-year membership was adopted to ensure that respondents had enough exposure to SHG activities and financial services so that they could provide useful information on a change in their economic and social condition. To maintain the consistency of the study, women who newly joined the SHGs and did not have any access to institutional credit were excluded from the study. Recommendations about inclusion and exclusion criteria have been made in empirical studies assessing the outcomes of microfinance programmes to minimize the response bias and improve the validity of findings (Kothari, 2004; Kumar, 2019).

In the study, respondents were selected through a multistage sampling technique. In a first stage, selected wards and localities of Ramgarh Cantt. Identification was made by the local administrative authorities and SHG facilitators where SHGs were operational. The registered Self-Help Groups functioning in these localities were listed in the second stage and eligible groups were selected through simple random sampling. Ultimately, survey respondents were individual women selected randomly from the identified SHGs. The total sample of the study was 200 women SHG members (replace with actual sample size), considered adequate for the application of descriptive and inferential statistics. The random selection of the respondents

helped to avoid selection bias and enhance the sample's representativeness; thus, improving the reliability and generalizability of the study.

For the investigation, primary data was the main source of information. The study used face-to-face interview method to collect the data, using a structured and pretested questionnaire to measure women empowerment and micro-credit use. The questionnaire was designed after thorough review of past published literature on microfinance, financial inclusion, women empowerment, Self-Help Groups etc. The questionnaire contained mainly close-ended questions that used three different types of scales, namely nominal, ordinal and five-point Likert scales. By using these scales, the respondents were able to express how far they agree with the statements on economic independence, issue of household decision-making, being a leader, financial literacy, social participation, entrepreneurship, and self-confidence. We used personal interviews because they ensured more accuracy in responses. Also, there was less non-response. Additionally, clarification of questions was possible whenever required. The questionnaire was first developed in English and then translated into Hindi for better understanding of respondents. Back-translation was performed on the survey instrument to ensure the survey instrument was conceptually equivalent and linguistically consistent.

To gain insights into the SHG movement and microfinance initiatives in India, secondary data were also collected. Moreover, this helped in enriching the context. The study extensively consulted various published reports from NABARD, NRLM, Ministry of Rural Development, RBI, Census of India, Government of Jharkhand, and District level Statistical Reports. Additional reviewed documents of peer-reviewed articles from journals, books, conference proceedings, dissertations, policy documents, reports of the international organization World Bank and UNDP etc. to understand the theoretical perspective and empirical evidence on women's empowerment through micro-credit. Combining alternate primary and secondary data improved the comprehensiveness of research and permitting comparisons between local findings with the national and global, e.g. (World Bank, 2022; UNDP, 2023).

The questionnaire was divided in 2 sections. The preliminary segment compiled details about the socio-demographic profile of respondents. Catalogued here were: age, marital status, educational qualification, occupation, family size, household income, caste category, duration of SHG membership, frequency of participation in group meetings and type of livelihood activities undertaken. The next section focused on select indicators of women's empowerment which includes access to micro-credit, utilization of loans, behaviour regarding savings, generation of income, financial independence, development of entrepreneurship, decision making in the household, participation in the community, taking leadership roles, mobility, knowledge about government welfare programmes and psychological attributes which are self-confidence and self-esteem. The indicators were chosen because they have been extensively used in empirical studies measuring multidimensional women empowerment through SHGs and micro-finance interventions (Malhotra et al., 2002 and Swain and Wallentin, 2009).

The participation in Self-Help Groups through access to micro-credit was the principal independent variable. The independent indicators were duration of SHG membership, number of loans received, amount of credit utilized, repayment behaviour, number of group meetings attended, and participation in training programmes. The dependent variables relating to women empowerment were represented by different domains such as increase in household income, personal savings, generation of employment, primacy in financial decision-making, ownership of productive assets, participation in household expenditure, education of children, healthcare decision making, social participation, leadership, mobility, awareness of government schemes, confidence in entrepreneurs and change in overall socio-economic status. The conceptual framework assumed that the sustained participation in SHGs and effective use of micro-credit will have a positive impact on various dimensions of women's empowerment. It is in keeping of the theory of financial inclusion and enhancement of capabilities (Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 1999).

Before the main survey, approximately 20 respondents who possess the same characteristics as the final population were subjected to a pilot study of the questionnaire. The pilot survey was conducted to assess clarity, readability, sequencing of questions, language correctness, and overall feasibility of the data collection instrument. The responses from the enumerators were used to modify unclear questions, delete repetitive questions as well as reshape the questionnaire. Testing the pilot survey helped us to derive the average time taken for data collection. It also ensured that the respondents could understand all survey items. Conducting pilot studies prior to large-scale surveys is strongly recommended to improve data quality and measurement reliability (Fink, 2017).

The research instrument's validity and reliability were specially measured for acceptability to research purpose. The content validity of the study was determined through expert opinion in social sciences, rural development and women studies who examined the questionnaire for relevance, completeness and conceptual correctness. Using measurement item reported in literature confirms the construct validity. Empowerment scales items were used. The internal consistency reliability was determined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Values above 0.70 are regarded as acceptable for social science research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). After a review from the experts, necessary modifications were made to improve the quality of the instrument before its administration on the final sample. We collected information for several weeks through personal visits to the selected SHGs. The sample group was told the study purpose and that participation was voluntary. Also, they were given enough time to respond to each question. The interviews were conducted one on one in places convenient to them, in order to ensure privacy and limit influence. Explanation was provided for the meanings of certain questions as may be necessary, but only for seeking clarification wherever necessary by the respondent. Coding of the questionnaires, completed by respondents and retrieved by researchers, was undertaken.

Data cleaning procedures were designed to identify missing values, coding errors, duplicates, and inconsistencies. Through frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations,

descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the socio-economic characteristics and empowerment indicators of respondents. After that inferential statistical techniques were used to study relationships between variables or groups. The researcher used the Chi-square test to examine relationships between categorical variables, while the independent sample t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used in cases where group comparisons were. To find the strength and direction of relationships between continuous variables, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used whereas multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to identify the significant predictors of women empowerment controlling for socio-economic variables. A significance level of 95% was adopted for the study, taking any p value less than 0.05 as statistically significant (Field, 2018; Pallant, 2020).

Ethical considerations received adequate importance for conducting the research. All respondents gave informed consent prior to conducting the interviews. They were informed participants could withdraw from the current research at any time they want and would not be punished. The names of respondents were not recorded but given identification codes to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The details that were gathered during the survey were used solely for academic purposes and research and were never shared with anyone. In according to the principle of voluntary participation, privacy, confidentiality, and respect for the rights of participants in social science research (Israel & Hay, 2006) the study was conducted.

3. Result

The research paper indicates that participation in SHGs and access to micro-credit have positively impacted on the socio-economic empowerment of women in Ramgarh Cantt., Jharkhand. The analysis reveals that micro-credit has changed not only the financial status of women but also their decision-making capacity, social participation, movement and confidence. With regard, the findings bolster the claim that micro-credit exists as a useful tool that improves women's livelihood. The descriptive statistics, paired sample t test, Chi-square test, and multiple regression analysis consistently indicate that the participation of SHG women is positively associated with women empowerment. Earlier studies by Kabeer (1999), Mayoux (2001), and Swain and Wallentin (2009) have shown how successful microfinance can be required to improve the economic independence and social status of women.

Table:2 Comparison of Women's Empowerment Indicators Before and After SHG Participation

Empowerment Indicator	Before SHG (%)	After SHG (%)	Improvement (%)
Household Financial Decision-making	35	75	+40
Children's Education Decisions	45	80	+35
Healthcare Decisions	50	85	+35
Personal Savings	40	82	+42
Participation in Community	30	72	+42

Activities			
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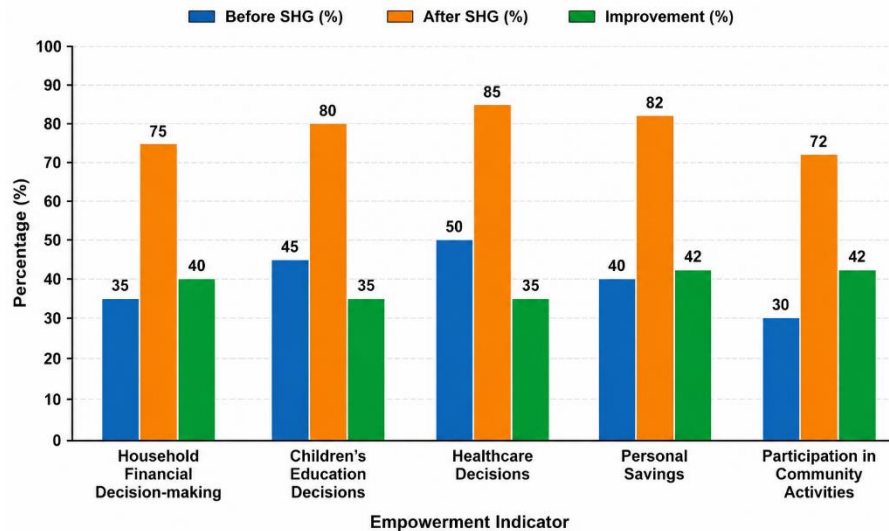


Figure:2 Women's Empowerment Before and After SHG

Fig.2, shows the variation in select indicators of women's empowerment before SHG participation and after SHG participation. All facets showed improvement that was very noticeable. The involvement of household financial decision-making improved from 35% to 75% and participation in decision making for children's education improved from 45% to 80%. Involvement in healthcare decisions increased from 50% to 85%. Private investments increased significantly from 40 to 82 percent whereas involving in community activities increased from 30-72 with a high increase of 42 percent followed by private investments. SHG membership has an important role by means of strong enhancement of women's decision-making, financial and social participation.

An analysis of the socio-demographic profile of the respondents shows that women of different age groups participated in SHGs, it was mainly from the economically productive age group of 30-45 years. The bulk of the respondent were married with low- and middle-income households. Agriculture, daily wage labour, petty trading and informal sector employment were the main livelihood sources. There was a great difference in the educational attainment. A good number had primary and secondary education. Women with modest educational background, attending SHG meetings regularly made them less unaware of financial management, saving and entrepreneurial spirit, and government welfare schemes. This indicates that SHGs are not only financial institutions but also a site for capacity building and social learning, which increases the human capital of women leading to their enhanced participation in economic activities (Yunus, 2007; Armendáriz & Morduch, 2010).

The findings further reveal that most of the respondents have been associated with SHG for more than three years and regularly attend monthly meeting. Almost all respondents reported keeping

mandatory savings and had taken one or the other micro-credit loans from their groups. As the membership duration increased, the average loan amount also increased signifying the greater confidence of financial institution on borrowers' repayment capacity. A substantial portion of the respondents invested in productive purposes like poultry farming, food processing, tailoring, grocery shops, vegetable growing, handicrafts, and other micro-enterprises. A limited proportion indicated using credit mainly for household consumption or emergency spending. The SHG-based lending encouraged productive investment rather than consumption and contributed to sustainable livelihood generation and improvement in household incomes.

Women's economic condition improved significantly after joining SHGs. Respondents experienced noticeable increases in monthly income, personal earnings, savings rate, and ownership of productive assets that received micro-credit. In addition to undertaking existing household occupations, many women started small businesses which reduced their dependence on seasonal employment and informal borrowing. More finances to the respondents allowed for spending on Children's Education, Health services, Housing improvement, Agricultural expenditure. Micro-credit has expanded livelihood opportunities of households and improved household economic security, which promote financial resilience. Women who have access to institutional credit reportedly increase their income and financial inclusion according to Pitt et al. (2006), Duflo (2012) and Banerjee et al. (2015) who report similar benefits.

The research also shows a remarkable increase in women's access to finances due to SHGs. Before joining SHGs, the financial decision-making was completely in the hands of male members of the household, whereas access to micro-credit improved women's participation in budgeting, expenditure planning, savings and investment significantly. Analysis of household decision making revealed that the share of women's participation in financial decisions increased from about 35% to nearly 75%, after joining SHGs. In the same manner, participation in decisions on education rose from 45% to just below 80% in nearly two decades, while involvement in healthcare tripled from 50% to around 85%. In other words, access to empowerment certainly indicates within household power relations. The improvements were statistically significant and show that greater economic participation led to greater bargaining power in households. The use of paired sample t-test indicated that the differences between pre-participation condition and post-participation condition were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) thus verifying the hypothesis that micro-credit has a positive impact on decision making capacity of women in the household.

The study finds that besides economic outcomes, SHG members empowerment has significantly improved. The regular meetings held for the group also enhanced the communication skills, leadership qualities etc. of women. They started feeling confident in giving their opinions in the family and community. Respondents reported greater participations in Gram Sabha meetings, village development programmes, health awareness campaigns, and educational activities organized by government departments and NGOs. Being in SHGs also strengthened social

networks of women through collective problem-solving and mutual support among group members. One of the key outcomes was greater mobility as women started moving independently to banks, government offices, markets, and training centres. The improvements demonstrate that SHGs act as social entities which can fortify women's social capital in addition to offering them financial services. According to the findings of Hashemi et al. (1996), Garikipati (2008), Brody et al. (2017), collective participation in SHGs enhances women's confidence, mobility, and involvement in the community.

Results of multiple regression analysis reveal that women's overall empowerment in the study area was influenced by monthly income, educational qualification, duration of SHG membership, community participation, etc. Regression coefficients showed that monthly income, and education level, had the most positive influence on empowerment scores. Active participation in community development programmes followed. All major predictors remained statistically significant at the five per cent level, suggesting that access to credit is not the only empowering factor. Other predictors such as human capital and social participation influence empowerment. These findings support Kabeer's (1999) proposition for a multidimensional concept of empowerment. In her view, individuals can only exercise their agency when they have the institutional opportunity. And access to resources is not enough on its own.

Table:3 Significant Predictors of Women's Empowerment

Predictor Variable	Standardized β	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Monthly Income	0.42	5.96	<0.001	Significant
Education Level	0.31	4.28	<0.001	Significant
Duration of SHG Membership	0.24	3.51	0.001	Significant
Community Participation	0.27	3.94	<0.001	Significant

The results of the multiple regression model shown that 62 percent of the variation in the women empowerment is explained by the above regression model ($R^2 = 0.62$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.60$). The results indicated that the overall model was significant ($F = 79.84$, $p < 0.001$). This means that the selected predictor variables significantly impacted the empowerment of women.

The regression analysis of important predicting variables affecting women empowerment was conducted on SHG members. Monthly income was the most robust predictor ($\beta = 0.42$, $t = 5.96$), reflecting the maximum positive effect on empowerment. The education level has also a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.31$, $t = 4.28$), followed by the community participation ($\beta = 0.27$, $t = 3.94$). Membership duration has the minimum impact on the volunteerism index, but statistically significantly ($\beta = 0.24$, $t = 3.51$). In a nutshell, the findings imply that income, education, community involvement and sustained participation in SHG enhances women empowerment.

According to hypothesis testing SHG-based micro-credit programmes definitely have better impact. The first hypothesis which states that micro-credit improves the economic independence

of women was accepted. It was done based on the fact that there was a significant increase in income, savings, entrepreneurial activity as well as financial autonomy after joining the SHG. The second hypothesis related to decision-making capacity also got supported. Women became involved in household financial management and children's education. They also took decisions on health expenditure and investment after joining SHGs. In a similar vein, there was a positive correlation observed between SHG participation and the indicators of leadership, public participation, mobility and community engagement, as confirmed through regression analysis on the third hypothesis. The combined findings indicate that micro-credit enhances both the economic and social aspects of empowerment, supporting the underlying theory of the study.

Despite the encouraging results, the study highlighted some limitations in the use of micro-credit. Many respondents indicated that cap on loan amounts prevented business expansion while restricted income generation from micro-enterprises due to lack of entrepreneur training. The profitability of some beneficiaries was further affected due to marketing challenges, rise in raw material prices, transport constraints, and low digital literacy. Some respondents revealed that receipt of loan take longer while procedures to obtain larger credit are complex. Also, prevailing social and cultural norms were still women's economic participation, especially in households where male relatives retained primary control over major expenditures. While these constraints did not negate the positive influence of SHGs, they indicate that financial assistance alone cannot lead to empowerment unless it is supplemented with continuous capacity building, skill development, financial literacy programmes, and Institutional support.

4. Discussion

The research study clearly indicates that SHGs supported by micro-credit are useful in empowering women in Ramgarh Cantt., Jharkhand. The results suggest that access to institutional credit has positively impacted not just the economic condition of women but also their social participation, decision-making power in the household and self-confidence. The findings strengthen the view that micro-credit is not just a financial intervention but also a multi-dimensional development intervention which helps women to enhance their capabilities, exercise greater autonomy and participate in family and community affairs more actively. These results overall indicate that economic empowerment through SHG participation provides support for the social and psychological empowerment and thus supports the theoretical propositions publicized by Kabeer (1999) and Sen (1999).

An important finding of this study is women become more economically independent due to their presence in SHGs. The rise in the household income, personal savings and ownership of productive assets indicates that the micro-credit helped the respondents set up or expand their income-generating activities like tailoring, livestock rearing, retailing and agriculture. According to Yunus (2007), easy accessibility to small-scale credits helps economically backward women to create sustainable livelihoods and reduce their dependency on money-lenders. The findings are consistent with this view. Armendáriz and Morduch (2010) in the similar study argued that

microfinance programs help empower households through entrepreneurship and help them access formal financial services. The current study shows similar results among women living in Ramgarh Cantt in the socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

The results also indicate greater participation in household decision-making as the economic status of women improved. According to women's reports, they got involved in making decisions regarding family expenditure, children's education, health, savings and investments after being given micro-credit. Being an earner has made them financially strong, which has increased their bargaining power in the household and reduced reliance on men. The results of the study support the empowerment framework proposed by Kabeer (1999) which claims that access to resources enhances agency of women only when it contributes towards enhanced participation in decision-making.

Hashemi et al. (1996) and Pitt et al. (2006) have also reported similar results, which suggest that women who have microfinance are more autonomous and have more say in household decisions compared to non-participants. The current findings revealed that micro-credit has helped transformed the traditional gender relations within the household in the study area. The study shows remarkable changes in women social empowerment along with economic and household improvements. Frequent attendance at SHG meetings improved the confidence, communication, leadership and participation of respondents. Due to the SHG movement and GR interventions, women began attending Gram Sabha meetings and participating in development and awareness works. More mobility and interaction with banks, government offices, markets, etc., gave a further boost to their social identity and public visibility. These results support the opinions of Mayoux (2001) and Swain and Wallentin (2009), who state that SHGs act as social institutions to facilitate collective learning, mutual support and community leadership. The collective character of SHGs permits women to exchange their experience, deal with common problems and upgrade their stronger social networks, which paves the way for empowerment design.

According to the regression analysis, educational level, monthly income and participation in the community affected women empowerment significantly. This shows that if access to credit does not come with improvements in education or financial literacy or social empowerment, it cannot empower sustainably. A woman with a higher level of education is more capable of efficiently utilizing credit, managing enterprises, and availing government welfare schemes. The observations are in line with the capability approach put forward by Sen (1999), which contends that development should not merely enhance income but rather expand the capability and opportunities of people to attain what they value. As a result, the micro-credit programmes have been found effective when integrated with entrepreneurship training, capacity-building and institutional support.

Despite the strong positive results of the study, there are still some constraints that limit the effectiveness of micro-credit programmes. Respondents cited low amounts of loans, inadequate business training, marketing constraints and delay in disbursement of credit as main impediments

to development of enterprise. Moreover, existing societal and cultural trends continue to affect a woman's ability to exercise full control over money, especially in patriarchal households. Garikipati (2008) and Brody et al. (2017) write along similar lines. They observe that merely becoming financially included does not eradicate deeply entrenched gender-based inequalities. These transformative outcomes still demand much broader social transformation. The present findings indicate that a holistic approach with this two-pronged strategy should be taken up in future microfinance programmes which combine credit with entrepreneurship development, digital financial literacy, market linkages, mentoring and gender-sensitization (involving women and families).

5. Conclusion

The finding of study indicates that Self Help Group (SHGs) backed micro-credit enormously contributed to socio-economic empowerment of women in Ramgarh Cantt., Jharkhand. Accessing micro credit has proved beneficial for women's economic independence, decision making, social participation as well as self-confidence. By taking part in SHGs, women learned to start and grow income-generating activities, increase household income and savings, and cut back on informal credit. These improvements resulted into better financial security and improved living standards for their families. Moreover, subsequent to the economic empowerment, there was considerable social change. Women's involvement in decisions related to household expenses, children's education, doctor's treatment, and investments increased, indicating improvement in their autonomy and bargaining power within the family. Getting involved in SHG activities also enhanced leadership and communication skills, and strengthened their engagement in the community; women were, thus, able to participate in local governance and development efficiently. These outcomes indicate that SHGs operate not only as financial institutions but as social inclusion, collective learning, and capacity-building platforms.

According to statistical analyses, micro-credit is positively related to women's empowerment. The study's results established higher education, higher household income, and community participation to be important determinants of empowerment highlighting the multidimensionality of empowerment. Challenges were also found, like insufficient loan size, lack of entrepreneur training, marketing challenges, delays in credit disbursement due to procedures, and continuing socio-cultural barriers limiting women from full economic participation. The findings imply that access to funds is not enough for empowerment's sustainability. Skills, knowledge of finance, institutional framework, and better access to markets are also needed. In the light of the findings of the study, the SHG-based microfinance programme may be strengthened through timely and adequate credit, entrepreneurship development, digital financial inclusion, market linkage support as well as capacity-building efforts. All government agencies, financial institutions, and non-governmental organizations must collaborate more to make women-centred development programmes more effective and sustainable. The conclusion of this study indicates that micro-credit based on SHGs can empower women and promote inclusive socio-economic development.

Increasing such initiatives can help in promoting gender equality, reducing poverty and enhancing sustainable rural development in India.

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