



To what extent has micro-financing been impactful in reducing gender-related inequalities in India?

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1. Introduction

In 2019, India was ranked 123rd on the Gender Inequality Index (GII) with a score of 0.488, and it grappled with a significant gender gap in its labor force participation, amounting to 55.9% ["Gender Inequality Index" data]. Women in India encountered substantial levels of structural violence, defined as violence stemming from societal structures that perpetuate oppression [Heywood, 426]. This took various forms, including traditional constraints on education and employment opportunities, poverty, and physical, sexual, and emotional violence. These factors resulted in an unequal distribution of power, compelling women to assume subordinate roles in society and hindering their ability to achieve equal status, authority, and prosperity in the long run [Singh and Singh].

Postcolonial feminists often argue that women can play pivotal roles in development and poverty reduction initiatives, provided they are given local ownership and the opportunity to defy stereotypes portraying them as disempowered, impoverished, and under-educated [Heywood, 437]. One model that aligns with this vision is microfinance, which establishes self-help groups and offers access to loans for low-income families, enabling them to establish small businesses or enhance agricultural projects. To explore the extent of microfinance's impact in reducing gender-related inequalities in India, this report conducts a series of interviews with experts in the field.

Inequality, defined as a situation where equality among individuals or groups is not realized, is prevalent in India based on gender identity and rural/urban background ["global politics CORE CONCEPT READINGS"]. In an increasingly globalized world, urban areas have gained prominence, often leading to the neglect of rural economies and societies. Consequently, rural communities have unequal access to resources necessary for individual and communal development. These dual aspects of inequality result in the deprivation of women's access to fundamental Human Rights outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - specifically, Article 1 and Article 2, which emphasize the equal dignity and rights of all individuals regardless of their gender, age, caste, or creed [UDHR]. A significant barrier faced by women in realizing these rights is the lack of access to financial services, which hinders their financial empowerment.

The selection of this topic is rooted in my Indian heritage and a deep interest in examining the issue of inequality through a comprehensive lens that encompasses both Economics and Global Politics, aligning with my status as a student majoring in both fields. Observing instances of Gender Inequality within my extended family, exemplified by cases of child marriages and formidable barriers to accessing education and employment opportunities, has provided me with profound insights into the widespread prevalence of this issue in Indian society.

The emergence of Microfinance as a means to mitigate pervasive inequality and empower women has captured my attention as a sustainable and pragmatic solution, addressing both political and economic aspects. As a result, the profound attachment to my homeland and its inhabitants has propelled me to



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actively engage in understanding and participating in this transformative process, which holds the potential to foster equitable development.

2. Methodology

A series of interviews was conducted to investigate the selected political issue, utilizing both physical meetings and virtual interactions via platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom. To gain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of microfinance, two individuals associated with SEWA Bharat, namely Ms. Paromita Sen and an anonymous representative, as well as Ashish Chopra, a former Investment Banker at Apollo with extensive experience in microcredit initiatives in Burma and India, was engaged.

SEWA Bharat, a non-governmental organization (NGO), was chosen due to its close involvement with women in the informal sector and its overarching mission to provide economic and social security to women throughout the country. These interviews provided valuable insights into the inner workings and operations of SEWA Bharat, shedding light on the diverse entities within the microfinance industry, including government bodies and other NGOs.

Through discussions with Paromita, a nuanced understanding of the social and economic sustainability aspects of microfinance was gained, encompassing both its strengths and limitations. Additionally, conversations with both Ms. S and Paromita allowed for an exploration of SEWA Bharat's extensive outreach across the nation, where affordable credit services are offered to nearly 2 million women, empowering them to achieve self-sufficiency and independence. These SEWA Bharat workers, directly engaged with women in various microfinance spheres, provided valuable insights into the impact of both cooperative and individual credit services on women.

The choice to interview Ashish, an expert in the broader microfinance industry with experience spanning firms, institutions, and governmental agencies, stemmed from his prominent role in a leading bank. He offered valuable insights into the functioning of microfinance and provided information on the government's perspectives and approaches to microfinance. This is where microfinance, sometimes referred to as microcredit, plays a crucial role. It assists marginalized communities, including women and impoverished farmers, in accessing essential financial services required in the modern world. Ashish introduced me to the lending model designed by Mohammed Yusuf through Grameen Bank, which incorporates three fundamental principles vital for the sustainability of the development model: providing small loans with specific timelines, lending to women due to their higher likelihood of responsible financial management, and promoting group lending [Appendix C][Jha]. Globalization has facilitated the dissemination of these ideas and has enabled underserved communities in remote areas to access these services. It has also encouraged the acceptance of universal rights over cultural relativism, leading to increased support for women's participation in the workforce and a shift away from traditional gender roles they were previously confined to.

This paradigm shift aligns with the approach adopted by SEWA Bharat, which focuses on securing economic, social, and legal rights for women workers by addressing the structural constraints deeply rooted in rural Indian culture. Ms. S introduced me to SEWA's mission, from which I gained insights into how SEWA provides women with financial capital and mobilizes them to form Self-Help Groups (SHGs). These SHGs serve to bring women together and nurture community leaders within their ranks [Appendix A].



3. Results

The primary goal of microfinance schemes is to promote sustainable development by fostering collaboration among women and leveraging cultural elements within societies. In my conversation with Ms. S, I learned that the formation of collective enterprises and cooperatives is integral to SEWA's development model, centered around Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Ms. S emphasized that through pooling their resources, women can register an entity and collectively own it, enabling them to make decisions together [Appendix A]. This concept closely aligns with Ashish's perspective, as he highlights that such an approach encourages responsible financial decision-making and fosters a culture of trust among individuals, enabling cooperative decision-making and resilience during crises [Appendix C]. Thus, it serves as a prime example of how culture, as a social factor, can be harnessed to promote development.

Elements of liberal ideas are evident in the concept of collective enterprises, emphasizing cooperation for collective benefits and the attainment of universal rights by addressing "development failures stemming from cultural or religious norms that inhibit individual self-seeking" [Heywood, 364]. The utilization of these social factors and liberal principles has culminated in the development of Human Development in India, influenced by Amartya Sen's notion of 'development as freedom,' which aims to consider people's ability to realize their full potential [Heywood, 363]. This focus on Human Development diverges from the orthodox view of development, which equates economic growth with development. The orthodox perspective, rooted in modernization theory, emphasizes a single pathway to development through the virtues of the free market, where individuals can pursue self-interest to generate wealth and economic growth [Heywood, 363]. However, proponents of Microfinance, including Sen, reject this view. People have grown disillusioned with top-down, free-market growth strategies and emphasize a more humanistic view of poverty, highlighting the need for freedom, opportunity, and empowerment.

The conversations with experts shed light on how operations conducted by microfinance institutions can contribute to the creation of sustainable development and the empowerment of women. In my discussion with Paromita, I learned that SEWA Bharat has a comprehensive approach aimed at enhancing women's skills and capabilities in addition to providing financial services. Given the high illiteracy rates among women in rural areas, with only 65% being literate, these institutions play a crucial role in equipping women with the financial knowledge and skills necessary for effective money management [Rural Education].

SEWA Bharat implements various skill development programs that are mandatory for all women seeking loans from SEWA Bank and its affiliated credit cooperatives [Appendix B]. Their model includes a comprehensive process of digital financial literacy that involves extensive guidance. This empowers women with knowledge about responsible spending and financial management, enabling them to invest their resources wisely, achieve financial independence, and quickly repay their debts. Paromita noted that this model extends beyond individual households, as women often access this information together with friends, creating an ecosystem that promotes social sustainability. Social sustainability focuses on preserving social capital by investing in services that form the foundation of our society [futurelearn].

The multi-generational impact of this model is evident as "children are coming in from ages 2-3 and are learning about this stuff." This has significant societal implications, contributing to long-term human capital development in rural communities. Additionally, SEWA Bharat employs a system that relies on "training through master trainers who train people in the communities to continue this training." This self-sustaining model not only empowers women with new skills but also expands the organization's outreach and provides



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them with a source of income [Appendix B]. These practices collectively promote the upskilling of women, enabling them to break free from the cycle of poverty and enhance their living standards.

While microfinance has proven successful in the developing world, Paromita highlighted that the industry's structures have failed to align with its mission. Even though approximately 80% (recent estimates place it at nearly 98% of the 23 million impacted by it) of microfinance beneficiaries have been women, a striking 90% of those employed in the industry are men [Appendix B][Saraf]. This represents a clear power shift within decision-making roles, where microfinance institutions have transitioned from being women-led, women-owned, and women-run to entities predominantly controlled by men. Radical feminists argue that such a transition signifies the dominance of patriarchal institutions that perpetuate female subordination through societal structures [Heywood]. Consequently, this embedded inequality results in structural violence against women by failing to address their specific needs.

Paromita contends that although the microfinance system has achieved some success, it still struggles to tailor its programs to the requirements of its target audience due to the disconnect between decision-makers and the on-the-ground impact [Appendix B]. Consequently, the beneficiaries of these schemes do not fully reap their benefits and are unable to realize their full potential, perpetuating societal inequality.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that despite institutional inequalities, microfinance institutions like SEWA Bharat have advanced the freedoms of the nearly 2 million women they serve, offering credit and counseling services. They have successfully dismantled numerous cultural stigmas that once legitimized forms of structural violence, representing a step in the right direction [Appendix B].

My discussions with Ms. S, Paromita, and Ashish provided valuable insights into the operations of microfinance institutions and their capacity to address the repercussions of structural violence, including gender-based inequality, poverty, and cultural stigmatization. Microfinance's strategic use of culture to foster sustainable human development and an environment that thrives on cooperation to address collective challenges has profoundly impacted the empowerment of women.

This is evident in the declining number of non-performing loans and the increasing trend of women seeking additional loans upon successfully repaying their previous ones. Paromita emphasized that such practices are encouraged, as they signify sustained growth in women's well-being and economic success [Singh, Shanu & Singh] [Appendix B]. Despite certain systemic challenges within the industry, it is evident that microfinance has effectively initiated positive changes in Indian society. It holds the potential to continue contributing to the country's overall economic and human development.

4. Discussion

The results discussed above shed light on the complex dynamics of microfinance in the context of women's empowerment and gender equality. Several key points can be analyzed from the information provided:

Gender Disparities in Microfinance: The significant gender gap within the microfinance industry is a stark contradiction to its core mission of empowering women. The fact that the majority of beneficiaries are women while decision-making positions are predominantly held by men raises concerns about the industry's commitment to its goals. This gender disparity not only hinders women's active participation in shaping the policies and strategies of microfinance institutions but also raises questions about whether the industry genuinely addresses the specific needs and challenges faced by women. It underscores the importance of gender-sensitive leadership and inclusive practices within these organizations to better align with their mission.



Structural Inequality and Patriarchy: The transformation of microfinance institutions from women-led entities to male-dominated structures reflects deeper societal issues related to power dynamics and gender roles. This shift can be seen as a manifestation of patriarchal systems that have historically favored men in decision-making positions. It highlights how deeply ingrained structural inequalities can persist even within initiatives designed to empower women. Addressing this issue requires a broader societal shift towards more inclusive and equitable gender norms, not just within microfinance but across all sectors.

Disconnect and Ineffectiveness: The disconnection between decision-makers in microfinance institutions and the women they aim to serve can result in programs and initiatives that do not effectively address the specific needs and challenges faced by women in diverse communities. This disconnect limits the potential impact of microfinance in achieving its goals of women's empowerment. It underscores the importance of bridging this gap through mechanisms such as involving beneficiaries in decision-making processes, conducting regular needs assessments, and promoting a greater understanding of the local context and cultural nuances.

Positive Impact and Potential: Despite the challenges and structural inequalities, microfinance institutions like SEWA Bharat have demonstrated the positive impact they can have on women's lives. By providing credit and counseling services, they have not only empowered women economically but have also challenged cultural stigmas and norms that previously held women back. This shows the potential for microfinance to catalyze change, not only in terms of financial inclusion but also in promoting gender equality and women's rights.

The analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of the microfinance industry's impact on women's empowerment and gender equality. It calls for a comprehensive approach that addresses not only economic empowerment but also structural inequalities, cultural norms, and the need for more inclusive and gender-sensitive practices within microfinance institutions. Ultimately, the success of microfinance in advancing gender equality will depend on its ability to navigate these complex challenges while remaining committed to its mission of empowering women.

The study also highlighted the challenges and opportunities in microfinance industry in respect to gender disparities in decision making such as:

Challenges

Male-Dominated Leadership:

Challenge: One of the most significant challenges is the prevalence of male-dominated leadership positions within microfinance institutions. This can result in decision-making processes that lack a gender-sensitive perspective.

Impact: Decision-makers may not fully understand or consider the unique challenges faced by female beneficiaries. This can lead to programs and policies that do not effectively address women's needs.

Disconnect with Beneficiaries:

Challenge: The disconnection between decision-makers and beneficiaries, who are predominantly women, poses a challenge. Decision-makers may be distant from the realities and struggles faced by female clients.

Impact: This gap can lead to a lack of empathy and understanding, resulting in programs that do not align with the lived experiences of women. It can limit the effectiveness of microfinance in promoting gender equality.

Cultural Norms and Biases:



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Challenge: Deep-seated cultural norms and biases can influence decision-making processes. Gender biases may affect resource allocation, access to credit, and opportunities for women.

Impact: Cultural biases can perpetuate inequalities by favoring men over women, thereby limiting women's access to financial services and opportunities for economic advancement.

Opportunities:

Gender-Responsive Leadership:

Opportunity: Microfinance institutions can actively promote gender-responsive leadership. This involves appointing more women to decision-making roles and creating a leadership structure that better represents the beneficiary base.

Impact: Gender-responsive leadership can lead to decisions that consider women's specific needs, resulting in more effective and equitable programs.

Beneficiary Involvement:

Opportunity: Microfinance institutions can involve beneficiaries, especially women, in decision-making processes. This can be done through regular feedback mechanisms, surveys, and advisory groups.

Impact: Involving beneficiaries ensures that their voices are heard and their perspectives are considered. It can lead to program designs that better address the realities of women's lives.

Gender-Sensitive Training:

Opportunity: Microfinance institutions can provide gender-sensitive training and capacity-building programs for decision-makers. This training can enhance their understanding of gender issues and their impact on financial inclusion.

Impact: Decision-makers who are more knowledgeable about gender dynamics are better equipped to make informed decisions that promote gender equality.

Promoting Women's Leadership:

Opportunity: Microfinance institutions can actively promote women's leadership within their organizations. This includes mentoring and grooming women employees for leadership roles.

Impact: A more gender-diverse leadership team can provide different perspectives and approaches to decision-making, fostering a more inclusive culture.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

Opportunity: Implementing robust monitoring and evaluation systems that assess the impact of microfinance programs on gender equality is essential.

Impact: Regular assessments can identify challenges and opportunities, informing decision-makers about areas that require improvement and helping track progress toward gender equality.

Addressing gender disparities in decision-making within the microfinance industry requires a concerted effort to promote gender-responsive leadership, involve beneficiaries, provide gender-sensitive training, promote women's leadership, and establish effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. By doing so, microfinance institutions can work toward more equitable outcomes and greater empowerment for women, ultimately contributing to gender equality and sustainable development.

The potential areas for improvement in microfinance programs to better align them with their goals of women's empowerment and gender equality:

Gender-Sensitive Product Design:



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Opportunity: Microfinance institutions can develop financial products that are tailored to the specific needs and preferences of women. These products may include flexible repayment schedules, smaller loan sizes, and savings options.

Impact: Gender-sensitive product design ensures that women can access financial services that meet their unique requirements, enhancing their financial inclusion and empowerment.

Financial Education and Literacy:

Opportunity: Microfinance programs can incorporate financial education and literacy components. This includes training sessions on budgeting, saving, and investing, which can empower women to make informed financial decisions.

Impact: Improved financial literacy equips women with the skills to manage their finances effectively, increasing their confidence and economic independence.

Women-Centric Marketing and Outreach:

Opportunity: Microfinance institutions can employ women-centric marketing and outreach strategies. This involves hiring female staff and agents and creating awareness campaigns targeting women.

Impact: Women-centric marketing and outreach can help overcome cultural barriers and build trust, encouraging more women to engage with microfinance services.

Partnerships with Women's Organizations:

Opportunity: Microfinance institutions can establish partnerships with women's organizations and NGOs. These collaborations can provide access to a network of support services and resources for female clients.

Impact: Such partnerships can expand the scope of microfinance programs, offering women not only financial services but also opportunities for skills development, healthcare, and advocacy.

Measuring Impact on Gender Equality:

Opportunity: Microfinance programs can prioritize the measurement of their impact on gender equality. This involves conducting gender-disaggregated data collection and rigorous impact assessments.

Impact: By quantifying the impact on gender equality, microfinance institutions can identify areas of success and areas that need improvement, leading to more effective program designs.

Addressing Cultural Norms and Biases:

Area for Improvement: Microfinance programs should actively address and challenge cultural norms and biases that hinder women's participation. This may require targeted awareness campaigns and community engagement.

Impact: Overcoming cultural barriers can create a more supportive environment for women's economic empowerment and financial inclusion.

Access to Leadership Roles:

Area for Improvement: Microfinance institutions can implement policies that promote women's access to leadership roles within the organization. This includes ensuring equal opportunities for career growth.

Impact: A more gender-diverse leadership team can bring diverse perspectives and foster a culture of gender equality within the institution.

Inclusive Decision-Making:

Area for Improvement: Microfinance institutions can involve female clients in decision-making processes related to program design and policies. This ensures that programs are responsive to their needs.



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Impact: Inclusive decision-making leads to more client-centric programs that better address the challenges faced by women.

Mitigating Gender-Based Violence:

Area for Improvement: Microfinance programs can integrate strategies to mitigate gender-based violence, which often affects women who seek financial independence.

Impact: Creating a safe environment for women to access financial services enhances their confidence and security.

Support Beyond Financial Services:

Area for Improvement: Microfinance institutions can expand their offerings beyond financial services to include training and support for women's entrepreneurship, health, and legal rights.

Impact: A holistic approach addresses the multifaceted challenges women face and promotes comprehensive empowerment.

There are significant opportunities for microfinance programs to enhance their impact on women's empowerment and gender equality. By adopting gender-sensitive approaches, fostering financial literacy, and addressing cultural norms and biases, microfinance institutions can better align their programs with these goals. Additionally, partnerships with women's organizations, measuring impact, and involving women in decision-making processes are essential steps in ensuring that microfinance truly empowers women and promotes gender equality.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of microfinance programs in the context of women's empowerment and gender equality in India provides valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges and opportunities within this industry. The findings reveal a landscape where progress is being made, yet significant disparities and structural issues persist.

One of the key findings is the persistent gender disparities in leadership positions within microfinance institutions. Despite the majority of beneficiaries being women, decision-making roles are predominantly held by men. This disparity highlights a significant challenge in the industry's ability to address women's unique needs effectively. Gender-responsive leadership and a more inclusive representation at the top levels of microfinance institutions are essential opportunities for improvement.

Moreover, the study illuminates the power of cultural factors within microfinance programs. These initiatives have successfully harnessed cultural elements to create an environment that promotes cooperation and collective decision-making. This approach has positively impacted women's economic and social empowerment, challenging cultural stigmatization and promoting women's freedoms. It serves as a model for how culture can be leveraged to promote development.

However, a notable challenge identified is the disconnect between decision-makers and beneficiaries, coupled with cultural biases. This disconnect can result in programs that do not fully align with the realities of women's lives. To overcome this challenge, microfinance institutions should actively involve female beneficiaries in decision-making processes, ensuring that programs are responsive to their specific needs. Structural violence and gender-based inequality persist in Indian society, reflecting systemic issues that microfinance alone cannot fully address. Nevertheless, the study underscores the significant strides microfinance has made in challenging cultural stigmatization and promoting women's freedoms. It stands as a crucial step in the right direction.



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In light of these findings, several considerations and opportunities emerge. Microfinance institutions have the opportunity to adopt gender-sensitive approaches, tailor financial products to women's needs, and incorporate financial education components. These initiatives can enhance women's financial inclusion and economic empowerment. Moreover, promoting gender-responsive leadership, establishing partnerships with women's organizations, and conducting regular monitoring and evaluation of programs can contribute to better outcomes.

Addressing cultural norms and biases requires comprehensive awareness campaigns and community engagement efforts. Microfinance institutions can play a pivotal role in advocating for cultural shifts that support gender equality. Additionally, expanding programs to offer holistic support beyond financial services, such as training in entrepreneurship, health, and legal rights, can address the multifaceted challenges women face.

In summary, while challenges persist in the microfinance industry's quest to empower women and promote gender equality in India, there are substantial opportunities for improvement. By embracing gender-sensitive practices, involving beneficiaries, promoting gender-responsive leadership, and addressing cultural biases, microfinance institutions can better align their programs with their overarching goals. Ultimately, these efforts contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society where women can realize their full potential.

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