

Analysis of Women's Empowerment through Microcredit: Case Study of Samurdhi Program in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Does microcredit have the potential to empower women? Many factors facilitate female empowerment through microcredit. The Department of Samurdhi Development in Sri Lanka provides microcredit programs to enhance the business environment of unemployed women. The Samurdhi microcredit program is designed with training facilities, market facilities, loan cycles, group lending, exposure to credit, and business support facilities. This study will determine the factors for women's empowerment through microcredit facilities in Samurdhi banks for self-employment activities. In this study, women's empowerment at the household level through the microcredit facility of Samurai Bank has been taken into account to analyze the problem identified in this research. This paper illustrates the most significant factors of the microcredit facility granted by the Samurdhi community-based banks for empowering women. The method used to select women beneficiaries is a simple random sampling from the lists of loan applicants in the bank based on 13 Grama Niladhari Divisions, Madame divisional secretariat, Puttalam District, Sri Lanka. 241 cross-sectional data was gathered by the questionnaire survey in the Madampe divisional secretariat, Puttalam District in Sri Lanka. The data analysis in this paper revealed that training facilities and market access are the two most significant factors, followed by group lending and exposure to credit components to facilitate women's empowerment in rural areas. Finally, this paper proposed policy recommendations for policymakers to improve their microcredit policies with several different components.

Keywords: microcredit, women, empowerment, Samurdhi program

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1. Introduction

The United Nations celebrated 2005 as the International Year of Microcredit. Moreover, the Grameen Bank and its creator Muhammad Yunus were awarded the Nobel Prize in 2006 for microfinance's critical role in eradicating poverty and empowering women. Yunus (2013) claims that access to microfinance can empower economically poor people whom the formal banking sector has ignored due to lack of collateral. Moreover, as women constitute a more significant proportion of the poor populations, microfinance institutions preferentially target women in providing loans. Proponents of microfinance argue that providing credit to women leads to a set of mutually reinforcing virtuous spirals of increasing economic empowerment, improved well-being, and social/political/legal empowerment for women (Mayoux, 1999, p. 959).

The organizations provide micro-loans, and the women repay regularly, but self-employment is questioned. As per the past researcher's observation, most women obtain loans and repay them regularly, but self-employment activities are not continuing. Dhanya and Shivakumar

(2010) revealed that microfinance did not significantly impact women beneficiaries in Kerala state, India.

Since independence, the Government of Sri Lanka has implemented various poverty alleviation and safety net programs such as food stamp schemes for the poor, Janasaviya, and Samurdhi. The main objective of those safety net programs is to alleviate the poverty of Sri Lanka. "Samurdhi" has been implemented since 1995 as the government's major poverty alleviation or social safety net program and has been conducting various programs over the last 26 years. The Samurdhi program acts as a national-level practitioner of micro-finance. Different actors use multi-purpose tools for micro-finance. In Sri Lanka, micro-finance is used as a policy tool for poverty alleviation, profit-oriented commercial activities, social or cultural development, and intervention in conflict-affected areas by different actors, including funding organizations, funder practitioners, practitioners, and facilitators (Gant et al., 2002).

This study mainly focuses on assessing the factors of microcredit facility for women empowerment in rural areas, primarily concentrating on the Department of Samurdhi (micro-credit system) for women's empowerment in Divisional Secretariat, Madampe, Puttalam District, Sri Lanka.

Data for this study were collected by structured questionnaire to assess the impact of microcredit on rural women's empowerment. The study's findings will help policymakers and policy implementers identify the most significant components of microcredit on women's empowerment. Further, this will enable us to recognize the changes in existing micro-credit programs. The thesis does not engage with the political and psychological empowerment of women. The researcher's experience working with the Samurdhi program as an assistant divisional secretary in the Madampe division, Puttalam district, has driven this research.

2. Literature Review

Recent studies have focused heavily on the implications of microcredit programs and women's empowerment. Microcredit encourages both community-based and individual entrepreneurship. 2005 was designated as the International Year of Microcredit by the United Nations.

Micro-credit extends small-scale collateral-free loans to poor borrowers to foster income generation, poverty reduction, and women's empowerment through enhancing self-employment and creating livelihood options (United Nations, 2005).

Microcredit is widely acknowledged as a successful financial development tool in the economic credit market that targets underprivileged individuals who cannot obtain traditional credit (Gutierrez-Nieto et al., 2007). Das (2012) discovered that the Self-Help Group-bank linkage of microfinance programs had a beneficial effect on the economic status, knowledge, decision-making ability, and sense of self-worth of women participants, with a considerable improvement in income, assets/wealth, and standard of living. Involving women in numerous social welfare activities that imply good cooperation, Sarumathi and Mohan (2011) discovered that microfinance had increased the confidence, courage, skill development, and empowerment of women engaging in Self-Help Groups.

Kabeer (1999) described how to measure women's empowerment and built the theory. According to this theory, three main concepts (resources, agency, and achievements) have been introduced. Mayoux (2000) showed the theoretical framework of three paradigms for women's empowerment. Those are financial self-sustainability, poverty alleviation, and feminist empowerment paradigms.

Based on those theories and complementarities, the conceptual framework of this study is as follows.

2.1. Conceptual Framework

As shown in Figure 1, Women's Empowerment (The Independent Variable) is measured by five dimensions: Decision-Making Ability (DMA), Freedom to Mobility (FM), Level of Satisfaction (LS), Income Earning and Management (IEM), and Family Support (FS).

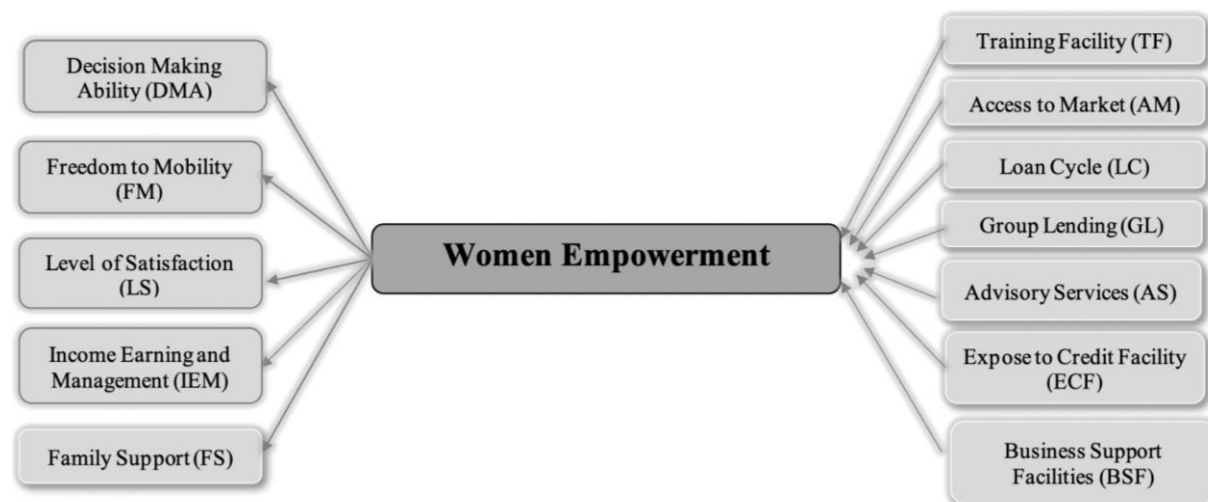


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Women's Empowerment

Source: Authors' compilation

Dependent variables are illustrated as the critical functions of the microcredit system in the Samurdhi microcredit program. Those variables are Training Facility (TF), Access to Market (AM), Loan Cycle (LC), Group Lending (GL), Advisory Services (AS), Expose to Credit Facility (ECF), and Business Support Facility (BSF).

2.1.1. Conceptualizing the Dependent Variable

Hashemi et al.(1996) used an empowerment index with eight empowerment indicators to identify women's empowerment. Those are mobility, economic security, the ability to make small and large purchases, relative freedom from family domination, involvement in major decisions, participation in public protests and political campaigning, and political and legal awareness. This study found that women's contribution to a household's income is a significant factor in women's empowerment.

Banu et al. (2001) found that women's empowerment can recognize women's capacity to reduce their vulnerability and dependency on males, involve and control household decisions, economic activities, and resources, offer money for household expenditure, and increase self-confidence and awareness of social issues.

Pitt et al.(2003) explored how micro-credit program participation affects women's empowerment. In this study, they have proven that women have a significant role in household decision-making, have good entrance to financial and economic resources, have a more excellent social network, have greater bargaining power vis-à-vis their husbands, and have greater freedom of mobility.

According to the above literature, women's empowerment can be measured by decision-making ability, freedom to mobility, level of satisfaction, income earning and management,

and family support. The dependent variable of this study, which is women empowerment, can evaluate the above dimensions.

2.1.2. Conceptualizing the Independent Variables

- **Training Facility (TF)**

Cheston and Kuhn (2002) said that microfinance positively impacts women's empowerment, and empowerment is a complex process of change. In that study, they argued that a microcredit facility with a training program is worth it for women in developing countries. The training should increase the existing skills of women and address women's needs. Otero (1999) suggested that through training, microfinance creates access to human capital. It is positively effective for women's empowerment.

- **Access to Market (AM)**

Ackerly (1995) found that women's capacity to access the market is the primary step for their empowerment. Ackerly analyzed that women who provide labor to loan-assisted enterprises, sell their products, or keep their accounts are likely Empowered. Waheed (2009, p 34) suggested that Villages close to urban centers may benefit from the connectivity with urban markets and get better returns from using credit, consequently enhancing income. As mentioned, literature regarding access to the market has a good proportion for women empowerment.

- **Loan Cycle (LC)**

Weber & Ahmad (2014) initiated the loan cycle, and women empowerment have positive relationships, and women who are in higher loan cycles are more empowered than the first loan cycle. This study examined the impact of microloans on the empowerment of female borrowers.

- **Group Lending (GL)**

Cheston and Kuhn (2002) investigated that women often value the non-economic benefits of a group lending program as much more or more than the credit. Al-Mamun et al.(2014) explored that the issuing of collateral-free credit to poor women members as a group-based method in Peninsular Malaysia significantly affected the women's empowerment and borrowers' responsibility and mandatory participation of groups weekly can perceive the empowered AIM's urban low-income female members.

- **Advisory Services (AS)**

Hunt and Kasynathan (2001) suggest that to ensure female borrowers' empowerment, Microfinance institutes should give attention to gender issues and women's rights. They argued that to gain the empowerment of women, microfinance institutes should be monitored constantly.

- **Expose to Credit Facility (ECF)**

The women of developing countries face many obstacles to accessing loans. However, microfinance can mitigate those obstacles and thus make them more innovative for new ventures (Cowden & Tang, 2017). Amin et al. (1998) revealed that membership in NGO credit programs was positively associated with women's empowerment based on the Qualitative data of Bangladesh NGO credit programs.

- **Business Support Facilities (BSF)**

Papilaya et al. (2015) found a significant and positive impact on the facilities supporting efforts towards empowering small and medium enterprises in Ambon City, Indonesia. They pointed

out some facilities as examples. Those are giving fishing boats to fishermen, machine shop services for craft entrepreneurs, identifying the specific area or road to street vendors, and giving tents for night shift culinary merchants.

3. Methodology

This study is a quantitative study for in-depth analysis and understanding of the factors of the microcredit system of the Samurdhi program for women's empowerment. This paper analyzes the 241 cross-sectional data of women beneficiaries of the Samurdhi program who benefited from the micro-credit facility of the Samurdhi program in Madampe division, Puttalam district, Sri Lanka.

This study used the simple random sampling method. The target population is women beneficiaries who benefit from the microcredit system in Samurdhi Banks in the Samurdhi program in Madampe division, Puttalam district, Sri Lanka.

According to the internal record of the Samurdhi Bank Society in the Madampe division, the total number of women borrowers is 2940. Among those borrowers, the researcher used the sample size calculator to choose the sample size. According to that tool, the researcher put the population size as 2940 women borrowers. The sample confidence level is 95%. It means that the percentage that indicates how positive the researcher is that the people will choose an answer inside a given range. Furthermore, the author entered the 6% as the margin of error. This percentage indicates how closely these survey results should represent the views of the general population. Finally, the sample size calculator gave the sample size as 245 observations. But, the researcher decided to distribute 300 questionnaires to collect the data. Online software is used to select randomly 300 samples.

Three hundred questionnaires were distributed to the Medagam Samurdhi division in Madampe divisional secretariat from December 2022 to January 2023. The distributed questionnaires consisted of three sections. The first section (A) collected the data on demographic factors, business, and loan-related information. Section B gathered data on women's empowerment indicators. Data on women's empowerment through the micro-credit system is accumulated in section C. 300 questionnaires were issued for collecting data, and 241 questionnaires were received.

Table 1 shows the definition of independent variables and one dependent variable of the OLS multiple linear regression model. A five-point Likert scale with responses was used to collect the data: from strongly agree (1) to disagree (5) (Table 1) strongly. The dependent variable is women empowerment (Y_i | WE). Five dimensions measure this dependent variable: Decision-Making Ability, Freedom to Mobility, Level of Satisfaction, Income Earning & Management, and Family Support. This survey has seven Independent variables. The first one is the Training Facility (T_i | TF) which distributes a Likert scale of 1 to 5, respectively, strongly agree to strongly disagree. The second one is Access to Market (M_i | AM), which measures the market facility of women entrepreneurs by the Likert scale: strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). The Loan Cycle (L_i | LC) is the third independent variable which arranges the data with a Likert scale to measure the effectiveness of the loan cycle in the micro-credit system in the Samurdhi program. The fourth independent variable, Group Lending (G_i | GL), identifies its impact on women's empowerment. Advisory Services (S_i | AS) is the fifth independent variable in this study. Expose to Credit Facility (C_i | ECF) is the sixth independent variable distributed in one to five Likert scale format, subsequently strongly agree to strongly disagree. The last independent variable is Business Support Facilities (B_i | BSF).

$$Y_i = \hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 T_i + \hat{\beta}_2 M_i + \hat{\beta}_3 L_i + \hat{\beta}_4 G_i + \hat{\beta}_5 S_i + \hat{\beta}_6 C_i + \hat{\beta}_7 B_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Table 1.

Definitions of Dependent and Independent Variable

Variable	Abbreviation of Variables	Description	Variable Type
Y _i	WE	Women's Empowerment	Quantitative - Continuous
T _i	TF	Training Facility	Ordinal Variable
M _i	AM	Access to Market	Ordinal Variable
L _i	LC	Loan Cycle	Ordinal Variable
G _i	GL	Group Lending	Ordinal Variable
S _i	AS	Advisory Services	Ordinal Variable
C _i	ECF	Expose to Credit Facility	Ordinal Variable
B _i	BSF	Business Support Facilities	Ordinal Variable

Source : Authors' compilation

The following table represents the summary statistics of the dependent variable and independent variables of the OLS multiple regression model.

Table 2.

Summary Statistics of the OLS Multiple Linear Regression Model

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Women Empowerment	241	1.86	1.14	1	5
Training Facility (TF)	241	2.27	1.14	1	5
Access to Market (AM)	241	2.31	1.30	1	5
Loan Cycle (LC)	241	2.63	1.08	1	5
Group Lending (GL)	241	2.60	1.19	1	5
Advisory Services (AS)	241	2.68	1.25	1	5
Expose to Credit Facility (ECF)	241	2.70	1.09	1	5
Business Support Facility (BSF)	241	2.85	0.92	1	5

Source : Authors' compilation by using R studio, 2023

According to the above summary, The total sample size is 241. The mean value of Women's Empowerment (WE), the dependent variable, is 1.86. The mean value describes the center point or typical value of the dataset. Based on the above summary of statistics, all mean values of variables are close to the value of 2. The standard deviation shows its value from 0.92 to 1.25. It means the spread of data is much closer to the mean values.

3.1. Empirical Methodology

There are one hypotheses in this study.

3.1.1. Hypothesis 1

Null-Hypothesis (H₀): There is no significant relationship between Training Facilities, Access to the Market, Loan Cycle, Group Lending, Advisory Services, Expose to Credit Facilities, Business Support Facilities and Women's empowerment.

Hypothesis 1 (H₁): Training Facilities, Access to the Market, Loan Cycle, Group Lending, Advisory Services, Expose to Credit Facilities, and Business Support Facilities have a significant positive influence on women's empowerment.

If hypothesis 1 (H₁) is correct, the parameter estimate will be positive and statistically significantly different from zero.

$$H_0: \hat{\beta} < 0 \quad (p > 0.05)$$

$$H_a: \hat{\beta} > 0 (p < 0.05)$$

To test Hypothesis 1(H₁), a regression model (Equation 01) is analyzed using the Multiple Linear Regression method with the R statistical program.

4. Empirical Analysis and Results

Table 3 presents the empirical findings derived from the regression model.

Table 3.

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Multiple Regression Results

	Estimate	Std.Error	t value	P-value	Sig
Intercept	-0.92266	0.16740	-5.512	9.4e-08	***
TF (Training Facility)	0.39211	0.04429	8.852	< 2e-16	***
AM (Access to Market)	0.35081	0.03767	9.312	< 2e-16	***
LC (Loan Cycle)	0.06553	0.04427	1.480	0.14021	
GL (Group Lending)	0.11128	0.03759	2.961	0.00339	**
AS (Advisory Services)	0.04164	0.03586	1.161	0.24683	
ECF (Expose to Credit Facility)	0.09228	0.03945	2.339	0.02018	*
BSF (Business Support Facility)	0.09132	0.04766	1.916	0.05660	.

Significant Codes					
(0,0.001)	(0.001,0.01)	(0.01,0.05)	(0.05,0.)	(0.1,1)	
“***”	“**”	“*”	“.”	“ ”	

Residual Standard Error : 0.6109 on 233 degrees of freedom Multiple R squared: 0.721.
P-value: < 2.2e-16 Adjusted R squared: 0.7127
F statistic: 86.04 on 7 and 233 DF

Source : Authors' compilation by using R studio, 2023

According to Table 3, the adjusted R squared value is 0.7127, demonstrating that the independent variables in the model explain 71% of the variance in the dependent variable. The F-statistic, 86.04, presents the overall significance of the model, and its p-value is 2.2×10^{-16} . It suggests that the regression model is significant and that the independent variables, training facility, access to market, loan cycle, group lending, advisory services, expose to credit and business support facilities, help predict the dependent variable, women empowerment.

The regression model's findings demonstrate that four of the independent variables, i.e., Training Facility (TF), Access to Market (AM), Group Lending (GL), and Expose to Credit Facility (ECF), significantly impact women's empowerment. Among them, TF and AM are the two most important factors. The p-values of the intercept (9.4×10^{-8}), TF (2×10^{-16}), AM (2×10^{-16}), GL(0.00339), ECF(0.02018) are significant at 99.9%, 99.9%, 99.9%, 99%, and 95% confidence levels respectively. If all other independent variables are constant, according to the value of 0.392 for the training facility, women's empowerment will rise by 0.392 for every 1 unit increase in the training facility. Access to the Market (AM) is the other highly significant independent variable. It has 35% confidence to empower women through microcredit facilities if all other variables are constant. Women's empowerment is changed by 11% by the group lending process in the micro-credit system in the Samurdhi program in Sri Lanka when all other independent variables are constant. Exposing to the credit facility has a 9% effect on women beneficiaries in the Samurdhi program, assuming all other variables are stable.

All other variables have a positive value, but those independent variables do not significantly affect women's empowerment.

4.1.1. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 (H_1): Training Facilities, Access to the Market, Loan Cycle, Group Lending, Advisory Services, Expose to Credit Facilities, and Business Support Facilities have a significant positive influence on women's empowerment.

$$H_0: \hat{\beta} < 0 \quad (p > 0.05)$$

$$H_a: \hat{\beta} > 0 \quad (p < 0.05)$$

There is no evidence to support the null hypothesis that the coefficient of variation of the Training Facility, Access to Market, Group Lending, and Expose to credit facility variables equal zero in a 95% confidence interval. Except for Loan cycle, Advisory Services, and Business support facilities, the OLS multiple regression analysis shows that the Training facilities, Access to the Market, Group Lending, Expose to credit facilities have a statistically significant positive influence on women's empowerment.

5. Discussion

5.1. Similarities of the Results and Literature

This study's results (Table 2) revealed a highly positive impact on women's empowerment through Training facilities and Access to the Market. Furthermore, Group Lending and Expose to credit facilities in the Samurdhi credit program in Sri Lanka significantly influence empowering women. These results are consistent with empirical literature suggesting that microcredit components positively influence women's empowerment.

Cheston & Kuhn (2002) and Blattman et al. (2013), Karlan and Valdivia (2011) discovered results in line with this study's results that there is a positive relationship between training facilities and women's empowerment. This research highlighted that access to the market positively affects women's empowerment, in line with the Waheed (2009, p 34) findings.

According to empirical research (Robinson, 2001; Morduch, 1998; Burgess and Pande, 2004, Dineen & Le (2015)); Cheston & Kuhn (2002), Hashemi et al. (1996) ; Hunt & Kasynathan (2001);Hasnat (2019) have proven the results of this paper's findings: Group Lending and Expose to credit facilities positively affect women's empowerment.

6. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

Most countries have recognized that microcredit is a powerful and effective tool for empowering women. Because women's contribution to the economy is a vital factor for the sustainable development of the country, as a developing country, Sri Lanka should give remarkable attention to women's active participation as entrepreneurs. According to world scenarios, microcredit facilities are doing this major task.

Microcredit has been identified as an effective financial tool to manipulate women's empowerment: especially those who live in rural areas without access to formal financial institutes for lending and starting a home-based small business. Micro financial institutions issue collateral-free loans, and their continuous guidance and supervision are essential for sustaining small businesses. The Samurdhi program in Sri Lanka addresses this issue as a main poverty eradication scheme. The government of Sri Lanka allocated budgetary provisions to exterminate poverty successfully. This study focused on the microcredit component of the Samurdhi program, and the findings give guidance and rethink some aspects of the microcredit program.

In this study, women's empowerment was identified as the dependent variable. This variable is measured by five dimensions: decision-making ability, freedom to mobility, level of satisfaction, income earning and management, and family support. The author ran a regression model to analyze the data. The model is focused on the factors of microcredit elements in the Samurdhi program. The empirical analysis of the model showed that training facilities and access to the market have a higher significant effect on women's empowerment and group lending and exposure to credit facilities have an impact on women's empowerment through the microcredit system in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, the advisory services function of microcredit facilities has little effect on women's empowerment. Business support facilities and loan cycles contribute less to rural women's empowerment.

The above findings will give excellent guidance to shape the component of microcredit in the Samurdhi program in Sri Lanka. In addition, these empirical results provide a unique path for the Sri Lankan Government to rethink economic policies regarding Samurdhi activities, mainly on the micro-credit system.

This study was narrowed to rural areas, especially in the Puttalam district, a countryside with low resources. Therefore, Future research could investigate the effect of microcredit programs in rural and urban areas representing the whole country. This paper investigated women credit borrowers only. Future research may compare clients of microcredit who have received it with those who have not to discover very beneficial results. Such research could contribute to a more accurate estimate of the relationship between microcredit facilities and female empowerment in Sri Lanka.

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