

Microcredit and Women's Empowerment in Rural Bangladesh: Evidence from A Comparative Analysis

Mst. Sathy Aktar¹, A. K. M. Mahmudul Haque^{2*}

^{1,2}Department of Political Science, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh

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*Correspondence:

A. K. M. Mahmudul Haque

Email:

akmmahmudul@ru.ac.bd

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ABSTRACT

SDGs emphasize gender equality to achieve sustainable and inclusive development. 8FYP of Bangladesh is about to expire, yet most rural women are completely dependent on men socially and economically; microcredit can be a strong instrument to reduce this dependency. This study explores the impacts of microcredit on women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh by comparing microcredit borrower and non-borrower women. A mixed-method study is used with 250 respondents. Among them, 200 respondents (100 borrowers and 100 non-borrowers) participated in a questionnaire survey, while the remaining 50 respondents were interviewed face-to-face. Data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire following a stratified random sampling technique. The findings reveal that borrower women are significantly ahead in several aspects, such as household decision-making, purchasing essential items, contributing to children's education expenses, and self-confidence. Statistical analysis highlights an important relationship between microcredit participation and women's empowerment, with a significant difference between borrowers and non-borrowers ($\chi^2 = 63.02$, $p < 0.001$). The study recommends that proper utilization of microcredit, proper training, and monitoring by NGOs can contribute to the advancement of marginalized women.



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1. Introduction

Microcredit may be a powerful opportunity for women's empowerment makes the path to achieving the SDGs relatively easier in developing countries. Low-income and marginalized women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh cannot start small businesses like tailoring shops, poultry farms, and handicrafts due to a lack of capital. Microfinance helps them to start and expand their businesses and improve the economic well-being of their families (Jahan, 2021). Ensuring active participation and equal opportunities for women will lead to socio-economic development in rural Bangladesh because 90% of borrowers of Microcredit Regulatory Authority (MRA)-registered microfinance institutions are women (MRA Report, 2023).

This study differs from previous research on the subject because it compares microcredit borrowers and non-borrowers. Previous research has been conducted on the microfinance programs of an NGO or on the economic and social independence of women who receive microfinance, and even their research areas and methods are all different from this research.

In 2022, Rahman & Bhuiyan used a mixed-method approach to collect data from 80 people in two villages in Kushtia Sadar Upazila, all of whom were BRAC microloans (A. Rahman & Bhuiyan, 2022). Women who received microloans expressed increased financial stability, greater confidence in expressing their opinions, improved ability to travel independently, and increased participation in family and economic decisions (Dlamini, 2025). Uddin et al. conducted a qualitative study in three villages in Bogra district in 2018, where the freedom of movement and self-sufficiency gained after receiving microloans brought peace to the family, which the women borrowers called empowerment (Uddin et al., 2018). In another research, women in the Rangamati Municipality area of Bangladesh's hilly region have also achieved personal, social, and community empowerment through microcredit (Ali, 2021). In rural areas of Vietnam, the impact of microfinance is significant in reducing the risk of poverty (Phan et al., 2023). Microfinance also helps women in rural Pakistan to improve their livelihoods, increase their household income, and achieve independence (Khursheed, 2022).

The purpose of this study is to highlight the positive relationship between microcredit participation and women's empowerment by comparing microcredit borrowers and non-borrowers in three selected unions of Mirpur, Kushtia. It includes economic independence, decision-making process, confidence level, independence of movement, etc., as the main aspects of women's empowerment. The findings will assist policymakers, researchers, and non-governmental organizations in designing future development programs to ensure gender equality and enhance women's contribution to society.

2. Literature Review

Women's empowerment is promoting women's sense of self-worth, their ability to determine their choices, and their right to influence social change for themselves and others (World Vision Australia, 2024). Women's empowerment is a process that seeks to empower the disenfranchised to make strategic life choices, including wealth, organization, and success (Kabeer, 2001). In Bangladesh, women often feel isolated, lack confidence, and have limited awareness of their rights and powers. In terms of work, many women prefer home-based self-employment because of the stigma associated with working outside. In terms of finance, men are often in charge of financial decisions, and when women take out microloans, their husbands often control them (Jahan, 2021). In Bangladesh, women's reproductive role is the main tasks. Women's domestic and family work is essential, yet it is neglected (Nawaz, 2020). Women in urban areas of Bangladesh are more empowered than those in rural areas (Islam & Islam, 2018).

The impact of microcredit can be assessed from two interrelated angles: who the credit reaches and how it affects the welfare of different groups of individuals and households (Zaman, 1999). In the Rangamati hilly region, women's participation in microfinance projects increases their autonomy, access to resources, social networks, bargaining power, and mobility (Pitt et al., 2003). Microcredit provides women with opportunities for economic and commercial activities through their own small businesses, which helps them achieve a higher standard of living, contribute to the overall distribution of wealth, lead to family financial stability, child education, healthy food, and development (Ali, 2021). The impact of microcredit is twofold, with some seeing it as a "magic bullet" for women's empowerment and others rejecting its potential for development. It became clearer that access to financial services can contribute to economic productivity and social welfare (Kabeer, 2005).

Microcredit programs don't always have favorable effects; sometimes, they have repayment pressures. The NGOs should pay attention to such issues, including increasing the interest rate in line with the income, creating multi-purpose income-generating sources with the active participation of women, and saving and purchasing assets in the name of both men and women (Mayoux, 1997). Although microcredits aim to empower women, there is little investigation into whether women actually control this credit (Goetz & Gupta, 1996). Microfinance is a

brilliantly marketed and politically important concept, but an empty vessel in reality. If its main objectives are job creation, poverty empowerment, and sustainable development, then it is supportable, but if not, then it should be started afresh (Bateman, 2017). In the case of microcredit projects, both microcredit institutions and borrowers benefit. Actually, it is a "win-win" argument: microfinance institutions that conduct sound banking practices will also reduce poverty (Morduch, 2000). Microcredit will not end poverty, but it will help people to get out of poverty. Grameen Bank will help them to start (Yunus, Muhammad, 2007). The secret of the Grameen Bank's success in empowering women is its strong and central focus on the credit system and proper use of rules and regulations to implement credit programs (Hashemi et al., 1996).

To bring about a higher level of empowerment among women, microfinance must work in conjunction with other services such as financial literacy, socio-economic training, education, healthcare, social cohesion, and legal aid (Nawaz, 2019). NGOs should take effective initiatives to improve women's education, skills training, and access to information so that they can act as a catalyst for the socio-economic development of rural women and the elimination of long-standing gender inequality in Bangladesh (M. Rahman, 2024).

3. Conceptual Framework

In 2001, Naila Kabeer presented Resources, Agency, and Achievements (RAA) as a three-dimensional conceptual framework for women's empowerment. This study is based on that framework. In it, Kabeer describes women's empowerment as a process of expanding their ability to make strategic life choices. She highlights empowerment not as a single outcome but as an impactful process in which access to resources translates agency and agency into observable achievements. This framework is particularly appropriate for analyzing microfinance-based empowerment in rural Bangladesh. This study considers microcredit as an initial step towards empowering women in rural Bangladesh. Women's empowerment has been examined through ten indicators, and these indicators are analytically presented under the three dimensions of Kabeer's model:

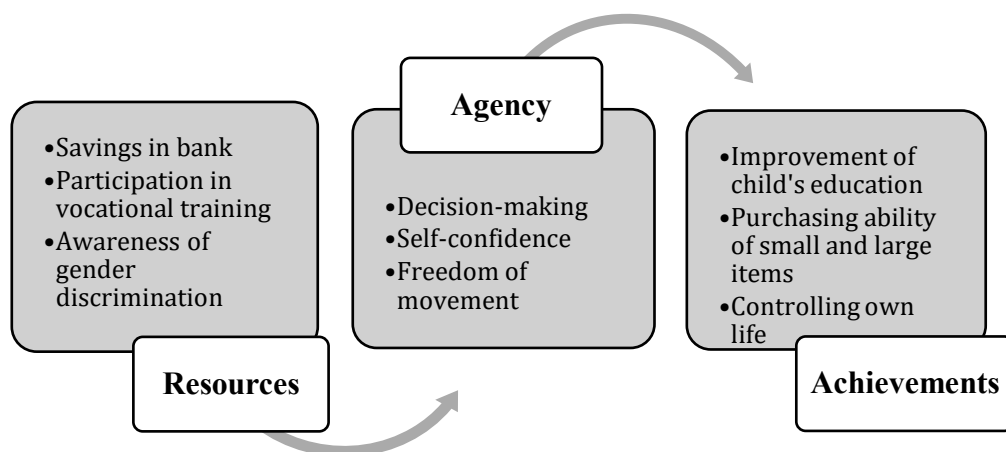


Figure 1: Women's Empowerment Model

Source: Researchers based on N. Kabeer's Empowerment Framework

Considering the general aspects of the empowerment of married women in rural Bangladesh, these ten aspects have been highlighted, which are consistent with Kabeer's Resource, Agency, and Achievement. In this study, savings, vocational training, and awareness of gender equality mainly form the basis for women's decision-making and expression of likes and dislikes, which in turn help ensure empowerment through freedom of movement, self-confidence, and decision-making. In Kabeer's framework, resources are the preconditions of women's empowerment to enhance women's capacity of own choice. Savings money, participation in vocational training, and awareness of gender discrimination are conceptualized as resource-based empowerment in this research. These indicators assist women's

empowerment in accessing financial strength, skills, and productive activities. NGOs operating in rural areas of Bangladesh not only provide loans but also emphasize savings and skill development of members, thereby strengthening the position of women in the family and society.

It is the core dimension of women's empowerment in Kabeer's model. It is actually the transformation of social constraints into empowerment. The ability to contribute to the child's education, involvement in household decision-making, self-confidence, and freedom of movement operationalize agency through indicators in this study. It represents capturing decision-making ability in one's own family and society. Microcredit helps rural women contribute to family by enhancing their psychological confidence, and as a result, it enhances agency.

Achievements are the final outcomes of practicing agency for meaningful social change. The ability to buy small and large household items, controlling the power of one's own life are reflected in this study as achievements. According to this study, microfinance contributes significantly to the multidimensional empowerment of rural Bangladesh, especially women's empowerment, and this framework provides a theoretically strong explanation for why women borrowers are significantly ahead of non-borrowers.

4. Research Method

4.1. Rationality of the Study

Microcredit and women's empowerment are burning issues in rural Bangladesh. Previous studies on this topic have mainly compared two NGOs, on members who have received loans from NGOs or in urban areas, and those studies are several years old, but this study is different because it compares NGO members and non-members. It shows the comparison between microcredit borrowers and non-borrowers by highlighting their economic, social, and family decision-making processes and personal lives. This study will be effective for policymakers and development authorities to take necessary steps for the advancement of women.

4.2. Type of the Study and Data Used

4.2.1. Type of the Study

It is a mixed-method research using descriptive quantitative and face-to-face interviews. Descriptive analysis and interviews have been used to present the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of respondents as well, and the relationships between microcredit and women's empowerment.

4.2.2. Data Used

Data have been collected from two sources: primary and secondary. Primary sources of information include research participants and field surveys, and secondary data have been collected from different sources such as books, articles, journals, etc.

4.3. Data Sources and Selection Process

4.3.1. Data Sources

Primary data have been collected from respondents through a questionnaire survey and face-to-face interviews. A total of 250 women were selected as respondents. Among them, data were collected from 200 women through a questionnaire survey, whereas 100 were microcredit borrowers and 100 were non-borrowers, while the remaining 50 informants were interviewed face-to-face to understand in-depth qualitative insights into the realities of microcredits and women's empowerment. On the other hand, secondary data have been collected from books, journals, newspaper articles, international organizations' statistics, government reports, the constitution, acts, and ordinances of the Bangladesh government.

4.3.2. Sampling Method

This study used a stratified random sampling technique to divide women into two groups: borrowers and non-borrowers, to assess the impact of microfinance on women's social,

economic, and personal empowerment. Respondents are randomly selected after dividing the borrower and the recipient into two categories. The respondents are over 18 years of age, and all are married. Five Wards from three Unions of Mirpur of Kushtia District were selected for the research area. Mentionable, Union is one of the Rural Local-self Government body & Upazila is another Rural Local Government body. From each Ward, 20 borrowers and 20 non-borrowers were selected for the questionnaire survey, and 50 informants were selected from two Unions, Amla and Fulbaria, for face-to-face interviews. Selected Wards:

- 2 and 9 Wards of Amla Union (Amla & Anjangachi)
- 2 and 3 Wards of Sadarpur Union (Katlamari & Nouda Azampur)
- Ward 4 of Fulbaria Union (Tilkandra)

4.4. Data Collection Techniques

A semi-structured questionnaire has been used to collect quantitative data, and face-to-face interviews have been used to collect qualitative data. The questionnaire was prepared in Bangla, the local language, to ensure full understanding and contained closed-ended questions and Likert-scale items.

4.5. Data Analysis Procedures

To avoid inconsistency and error, the processed quantitative data have been analyzed using MS Excel, and qualitative data have been analyzed using thematic analysis manually, coding, and important statements are mentioned; references have been written using Zotero (APA 7th Edition). In addition, a graphical presentation has been provided to interpret the data in a more meaningful way and to communicate it more easily to the readers.

4.6. Limitations of the Study

The design of this research is cross-sectional; data have been collected in selected wards of a single upazila at a single time. The findings reflect common rural characteristics of microcredit programs and women's empowerment in Bangladesh, but regional variations in socio-economic conditions and microcredit implementation practices may lead to a little difference. If longitudinal and multi-regional studies are conducted in the future, then they may yield more fruitful results. Despite these limitations, the study highlights the main aspects of microfinance at the root level, its activities, and women's empowerment.

4.7. Measurement of Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment was measured using a composite index constructed from ten indicators reflecting economic, social, and personal agency dimensions. The indicators included: savings money, ability to buy small household items, ability to buy large items, decision-making regarding children's education, participation in vocational training, self-confidence, involvement in household decision-making, freedom of movement, controlling power within the household, and knowledge of gender discrimination.

Each indicator was coded as a binary variable (Yes = 1, No = 0). An individual empowerment score was calculated by summing the scores across all indicators.

$$\text{Empowerment Score}_i = \sum_{j=1}^{10} \frac{\text{indicator}_{ij}}{10}$$

Here,

i = Respondents

j = 10 for each indicator

indicator_{ij} = indicator's total score of i

Based on the composite score, respondents are classified into three categories:

- Low empowerment (0.00–0.33)
- Medium empowerment (0.34–0.66)
- High empowerment (0.67–1.00)

Empowerment scores were calculated at the individual level and presented in aggregated form for comparative analysis between borrowers and non-borrowers.

Table 1. Observed Frequencies

Status	Low	Medium	High	Total
Borrower	6	24	70	100
Non-borrower	50	30	20	100
Total	56	54	90	200

After finding the observed frequency, the expected frequency obtained by multiplying the row total and column total and dividing by the grand total is given below.

The expected frequency for each cell was calculated using the standard chi-square formula:

$$\text{Expected Frequency, } E_{ij} = \frac{(\text{Row Total}_i \times \text{Column Total}_j)}{\text{Grand Total}}$$

Table 2. Expected Frequencies

Status	Low	Medium	High
Borrower	28	27	45
Non-borrower	28	27	45

The values and degrees of freedom obtained from the observed frequency and expected frequency according to the chi-square formula are presented below.

$$\text{Chi-Square, } \chi^2 = \frac{\sum (O-E)^2}{E}$$

Table 3. Level of Empowerment

Status	Low	Medium	High
Borrower	17.29	0.33	13.89
Non-borrower	17.29	0.33	13.89

$$\text{Chi-Square, } \chi^2 = 63.02$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Degrees of Freedom, df} &= (r-1) (c-1) \\ &= (2-1) (3-1) \\ &= 2 \end{aligned}$$

The calculated chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 63.02$) is higher than the critical value at the 5% and 1% significance levels. In addition, its p-value is less than 0.001. That is, there is a statistically significant relationship between participation in microcredit and women's empowerment, and it is unlikely that this is just a coincidence.

The analysis of the chi-square test shows that women who receive microcredit are relatively more in the high empowerment category, while those who receive microcredit are relatively more in the low empowerment category.

The results indicate that there is a significant difference in the level of empowerment between borrower and non-borrower women. However, there is an important point here: this study is cross-sectional, meaning that data have been collected at a specific point in time. Therefore, although it is not possible to draw a causal conclusion from these results that microcredit alone has directly created empowerment, it can undoubtedly be said that microcredit has a significant contribution to creating this empowerment.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Why Microcredits Matter for Empowering Women

A relatively large number of women are now getting employment opportunities in rural areas, which allows them to contribute significantly to the country's economic growth. The interest of women in becoming wage earners is increasing day by day. The participation rate of rural women in the workforce is 50.89%, and the rate in urban areas is only 22.59% (Hasan,

2025). But rural women lag behind urban women in many opportunities, including economic independence, decision-making process, and social status, etc. To become economically independent in this country, women have to earn money while doing household chores. According to the BBS Economic Census, in 2024, the share of economic units in rural areas was 70.27 percent, while it was only 29.73 percent in urban areas (Prothom Alo, 2025). However, the majority of rural entrepreneurs do not receive adequate funding and training compared to urban entrepreneurs.

In developing countries like Bangladesh, NGOs provide microfinance to women to help them become economically self-reliant and reduce poverty. Due to the lack of adequate formal education and vocational training in rural areas, women often cannot properly spend the microfinance money. To ensure that microfinance money is effectively spent on unemployment and poverty reduction, NGOs provide multi-faceted training to borrowers under various projects. As of March 2025, Grameen Bank had disbursed 3316.37 billion taka and 40.22 billion US dollars in loans to 1.69 million borrower members, of which 97% were women members, and 94% were rural women (*Grameen Bank – Bank for the Poor*, 2024). In addition, BRAC, ActionAid, Tarango, We Can Bangladesh (Amra Pari), Bangladesh Nari Pragati Sangha, and several other NGOs are working as implementing partners of the Bangladesh government to achieve the SDGs to improve the position of rural women.

According to this study (Figure-01), 72% of the borrowers, i.e., the majority of women, spend their microfinance money on agriculture, usually starting from raising poultry, cattle, and goats, cultivating vegetables in the house premises, and also cultivating crops in the field with laborers. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) Labor Force Survey-2022 shows that in 1996, women's employment in agriculture was only 8%, but it increased to 58% in 2022 (T. Report, 2023). In addition, 18% of the women borrowers have taken up small business initiatives, 2% of women have purchased sewing machines and are working as tailors, and the rest are trying to improve their economic condition by capitalizing on this microfinance money by doing various types of activities. The respondents believe that if all women at the grassroots level are provided with adequate funds and training, employment will be created in the country, and the per capita income of the people will increase.

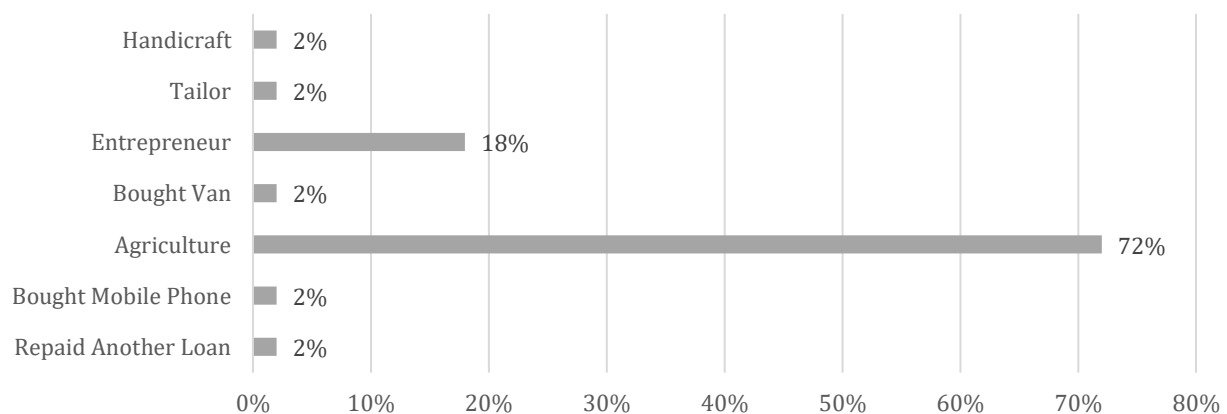


Figure 2: The sectors in which the borrowers use the microcredit
Source: Processed Primary Data (2025)

If women are not economically independent, the concept of women's empowerment will not exist in reality. Rural women are economically dependent on men, and effective use of microfinance must be made to reduce this dependence. If women are economically independent, they will be able to help with the education costs of their children, which will increase the literacy rate.

5.2. Comparative Analysis Between Borrowers and Non-borrowers Women

Microfinance has a significant impact on the socio-economic development of low-income and lower-middle-income families, especially in rural areas. Generally, women who earn money are given importance in the family and are also respected by the people in society. At the rural level, when women want to start any work to earn money at home, the male members of the family do not trust them to give them the initial money, so they try to take responsibility for themselves by taking out a microloan.

Table 4. The Comparison between Borrowers and Non-borrowers

	Matters of Comparison	Borrowers	Non-borrowers
Academic Profile	No Formal education	28%	40%
	Primary School Passed	48%	28%
	High School Passed	24%	26%
	Higher Education	0%	6%
Monthly Household Income	Below 5,000 tk	2%	4%
	5,000-10,000 tk	8%	6%
	10,000-20,000 tk	58%	36%
	Above 20,000 tk	32%	54%
Current Occupation	Housewife	64%	84%
	Agriculture	26%	10%
	Tailor	8%	4%
	Entrepreneur	2%	2%

Source: Processed Primary Data (2025)

Academic Profile of Informants

Education is one of the main aspects of achieving women's empowerment in ensuring sustainable development. 28% of the informants who received microfinance were illiterate, 48% had passed primary school, and 24% had passed high school. Among those who were not microfinance members, 40% were illiterate, 28% had passed primary school, and 26% had passed high school. What is striking here is that among those who didn't receive microfinance, 6% were highly educated women, but none of the borrowers were highly educated. This survey shows that most of the microfinance non-borrowers were primary school passed, and highly educated individuals received very few microfinance loans.

Among the microfinance borrowers, 7 have no formal education, 12 have primary education, and 6 have secondary school education. On the other hand, 3 non-borrowers are highly educated, 8 have passed secondary school, 5 have completed primary education, and 9 have not received any formal education.

The combined findings highlight that the lack of formal education is more noticeable among the beneficiaries than among the microfinance recipients, and the beneficiaries have higher levels of education. If the literacy rate among recipients cannot be increased, they will not be able to utilize the microfinance funds properly, and the debt will become a burden for them. N. Kabeer stated that microfinance does not automatically empower women, but education and other related issues can be a catalyst for a radical structural transformation for real empowerment (Kabeer, 2005).

Monthly Household Income

A family's monthly household income is a reflection of all the activities of that family. In this research, most of the microfinance borrowers have the highest family income between 10,000 and 20,000 taka, which is about 58%. Besides, 32% of the microfinance non-borrowers have a family income above 20 thousand taka. According to microfinance borrowers, 96% of them reported an increase in their monthly household income after taking out a loan. On the other hand, most of the non-borrowers have a family income above 20,000 taka, which is about 54%.

Out of 25 microfinance borrowers of qualitative insights, 16 respondents have a monthly family income between 10 and 20 thousand taka, 4 have a monthly family income above 20

thousand taka, and 5 have a monthly family income below 10 thousand taka. On the other hand, out of 25 microfinance non-borrowers, 18 have a monthly family income above 20 thousand taka, and 7 have a monthly family income between 10 and 20 thousand taka.

In this suspense, one of the informants stated,

"The monthly family income of most of the borrowers like us is 10-15 thousand. If we suddenly want to do some urgent work, then we do not have the necessary money, so we want to save some money by using the microfinance money, so that we can use it for any need later. Those who have a good monthly income and multiple sources of income do not need to take a loan; no one takes a loan if they have a way to live well." (Face-to-face interview with borrower, 2025)

Combining quantitative and qualitative data, it can be seen that most of those who have not taken microfinance have a monthly family income above 20 thousand taka, and most of those who have taken microfinance have an income between 10 and 20 thousand taka. That is, in rural Bangladesh, the financial condition of families with a monthly income above 20 thousand taka is quite good, and those whose monthly family income is between 10 thousand and 20 thousand are in financial difficulty. Morduch argues that in order to prioritize social impact and economic growth, the limitations of microfinance's win-win offers must be recognized and used. If microfinance is not used properly, the economic situation of the borrowers will not improve, but will deteriorate (Morduch, 2000).

Current Occupation

Improved economic status support to enhance one's position in the family and society to a level of respect that gives her the freedom to take control over important aspects of her own life as well, and her decisions are important in the family decision-making process. 26% of the borrowers respondents of this study are involved in agriculture, and 10% of the non-borrowers. This data indicates that the self-condition of the borrowers is much better than that of the non-borrowers. Only 2% of the borrowers have decided to become micro-entrepreneurs, and they do not have any formal training. Borrowers are comparatively ahead in tailoring, 8% borrowers and 4% non-borrowers; most of the borrower tailors are the main source of income for the family.

Out of 25 microfinance borrowers of the qualitative approach, 14 are engaged in household chores, raising ducks, chickens, cows, goats, and growing vegetables near their homes. Many also lease land in the field with the money from microfinance and cultivate it through laborers. 2 are tailors, and 9 only do household chores; they have no income. On the other hand, out of 25 who did not take microfinance, 18 are unable to earn, only 7 manage their household and earn money from agricultural activities at home.

In this context, one of the informants expressed concern,

".....It is almost impossible for women to become entrepreneurs in our village because entrepreneurship requires capital and training in that field, and there is a risk of loss in this case. Even if they do not have their own capital, they often get money through microloans, but due to the lack of detailed training in that field, no one usually takes the risk of becoming an entrepreneur for fear of loss, and even their families do not support it. The number of women tailors in this region is increasing day by day, because tailoring can be done at home along with household chores, there is no fear of loss, and there is not much cost to themselves." (Face-to-face interview with non-borrower, 2025)

Womenomics is a development policy that emphasizes the economic empowerment of women to increase the world's GDP to \$12 trillion by 2025 (Dhar, 2024). Data analysis using both qualitative and quantitative methods shows that borrowers are more capable of earning, and almost all of their income is based on microfinance.

Table 5. The Comparison of Empowerment between Borrowers and Non-borrowers

Ability	Borrowers	Non-borrowers
Savings in Bank	20%	30%
Buy Small Things	100%	72%
Buy Large Things	22%	16%
Educate Child	88%	62%
Received Vocational Training	14%	0%
Level of Confidence	64%	36%
Participate in Family Decision-Making Process	90%	80%
Freedom of Movement	78%	36%
Controlling one's own life	72%	28%
Awareness of Gender Equality & Self-protection	68%	16%

Source: Processed Primary Data (2025)

Savings in Bank

Savings enhance a person's confidence and motivation, which helps them establish themselves as valuable to their family and society. 20 percent of the informants were female borrowers, and 30 percent of the non-borrowers had a functioning bank account for saving money. According to the data, 10 percent more non-borrowers have bank accounts than borrowers.

7 out of 25 microloan borrowers save through bank accounts, and 13 out of 25 non-borrowers, according to the interviews. Most of the microloan borrowers opened bank accounts and saved in the accounts after receiving microloans.

According to Kabeer's model, savings are a resource that forms the basis of empowerment. From the data of the questionnaire survey and interviews, it is seen that the savings rate in the bank accounts of the non-borrowers is higher than that of the microfinance borrowers, and most of the women among the borrowers who deposit money in the bank have opened accounts after taking the loan. Therefore, we can say that the financial condition of many of those who have not taken the loan is quite sound, and if the NGOs show their multifaceted productive methods and keep regular follow-up in addition to distributing microfinance, microfinance will be more effective. Mayoux urged NGOs to focus on creating multifaceted, productive income-generating sources through asset accumulation, purchase, and active participation by women as well as men (Mayoux, 1997).

Ability to Make Daily Expenditures

A woman becomes important in the family through a combination of small responsibilities, just as the idea of a big task is hidden in a small matter. All female borrowers can buy small household items without taking money from male members, but 72% of the non-borrowers can buy them with their own money. On the other hand, only 22% of the women among the informants can buy larger or slightly more expensive items themselves, and 16% of the non-borrowers can buy relatively expensive items themselves. Since the income of the borrowers is limited and the beneficiaries non-borrowers do not have any income, they do not have enough money, which sometimes makes them unable to buy something even when they need it. In this case, the borrowers spend their time better than the beneficiaries, for example, those who work as tailors, keep a large number of poultry, cows, and goats, and almost always have money.

23 out of 25 microloan lenders and 19 out of 25 non-lenders can purchase low-value daily necessities with their own savings or earnings. On the other hand, purchasing high-value items is quite weak for both microloan recipients and non-lenders. Only 7 out of 25 recipients and only 4 non-lenders can purchase high-value items. They stated that the purchasing power of the recipients has increased after taking microloans compared to the previous time.

A microfinance borrower woman said,

"I have taken the first installment, the first time usually pays 5000-10,000 taka. One of our brothers-in-law is paying 30,000 taka in installments regularly and pays well. He requested from the NGO office for me, and then they gave me 10,000 taka for the first time. I bought a sewing machine and related instruments with that money. I don't get work every day in the village; I have to pay 250 taka in installments weekly. My husband is a daily wage laborer; he also does not get work every day. So we try to save the installment money at the beginning of the week, but the people from the NGO come to the house and insult us. With the income, I can buy small things for the family, such as a kitchen or a market. I can contribute 2-1 thousand for the big expenses, but so far, I have not been able to do anything expensive for the family with only my savings." (Face-to-face interview with borrower, 2025)

Another borrower said,

"I took a loan of 20000 taka and bought a van for my husband, with an installment of 550 taka per week. The earnings of my husband throughout the week are mostly used to buy food for a family of 5 and pay the installments. It goes to the two children who are studying; they have a lot of expenses, and their father pays for everything. He doesn't give me much money." (Face-to-face interview with borrower, 2025)

A non-borrower woman mentioned,

"I raise poultry; I have quite a few hens and ducks. By selling poultry and eggs, I pay for my son's khata and pens, a private monthly payment of 200 taka, and during Eid, I can buy new clothes for my daughter's children, but I don't earn more than that from raising poultry. And I always have a small amount of money from selling eggs, so my husband doesn't give me money. If it costs 2-3 thousand taka to fill up my son's form or buy a book, if we have to give something big to my daughter's in-laws' house, or if we need more money in a crisis, my husband manages it." (Face-to-face interview with non-borrower, 2025)

Based on Kabeer's RAA model, being able to buy small and large household items is an achievement that is achieved as a result of implementing one's own choices and decisions. NGO members are significantly ahead in purchasing everything from household chores to necessary, expensive, or large-cost tasks and items in this research area.

Contribute to Child Education

Many children are deprived of education due to a lack of money in rural areas. If mothers can contribute to the cost of their children's education, it may contribute to improving the literacy rate in the country, but also reduce unemployment and contribute to achieving SDG 4, quality education. Hasan mentioned that microfinance has already achieved a significant impact on poverty reduction (Hasan, 1999). 88% of the female borrowers in this study are able to meet the small expenses of their children's education themselves, without having to rely on the male members of the family, but only 62% of the non-borrowers can.

In interviews, out of 25 microfinance borrowers, 22 can pay for their children's education expenses from their own savings or earnings, without taking it from their husbands. Before taking microfinance, they used to pay for their children's education expenses from their husbands, but after taking microfinance, they do various types of work at home to earn a small income, as a result of which they can now pay for the small expenses of their children's education themselves. On the other hand, only 13 out of 25 microfinance non-borrowers can pay for their children's education expenses themselves; a small number of them are trying to earn money along with the family, and the rest are in a good financial condition; they always have money in hand even if they do not do gainful work.

In this regard, one of the borrower informants shared,

"Our girls are in high school, and boys are in primary school; they do not have to spend much. I pay for the purchase of notebooks and pens, private fees, and examination fees. They do not have to take it from their father. I keep poultry, cows, and goats. I always have some money." (Face-to-face interview with borrower, 2025)

Another non-borrower informant informed,

"I do nothing except household chores. Even buying cows and goats requires money. My husband won't buy them and won't let me buy them on loan, so I don't have any money. Their father pays for all the expenses of our child." (Face-to-face interview with non-borrower, 2025)

This study found that microfinance borrowers are meeting the small expenses of their children's education themselves, which improves the quality of their children's education and allows them to study safely. According to Kabeer's model, this falls into the category of achievement because it is the result of women's decision-making and implementation of choices. If everyone can use the microfinance money properly, they may be able to meet the small expenses of their children's education themselves, they may not have to depend on their husbands for everything, and their children's education will also progress.

Capacity Building Programs

Skills are essential as well as qualifications for sustainable development. Due to a lack of skills, many women in rural areas are unable to participate in economic activities despite opportunities. A study found that only 19% of women engage in economic activities each year. Despite having microfinance transactions with NGOs for many years, most of the borrowers have not received any training from any NGO. Only 14% of the informants received training from women NGOs, and that too about a decade ago. Borrowers in rural areas are not highly educated, and they do not even know how to use the internet, so there is no alternative to various economic development training to properly utilize their microfinance money.

Face-to-face interviews showed that out of 25 microfinance borrowers, only 4 had received various types of technical training, but those who were not members of any NGO had not received any kind of skill development-related training from any NGO or government project.

According to Kabeer's model, capacity-building programs, i.e., vocational training, are resources that pave the way for decision-making and empowerment. Without technical or professional skills, it is tough to earn money. Even if one has money without any skills or structured plans, one cannot do anything productive with it. If women are skilled through technical training, they may be able to participate in various economic activities, along with managing their families. In the first half of the 2025 fiscal year, 2.1 million employees suddenly lost their jobs, of whom 85.7% are women (The Daily Star, 2025). This study found that those who are not members of NGOs have not taken any kind of training, and among those who are members of NGOs, only a few women have taken training; many have been dealing with NGOs for many years, but still do not have any training under their achievements. If we can transform them from human beings into human resources, there is a great potential for the country's GDP to increase significantly. Even if employees suddenly lose their jobs for any reason, they may not become unemployed.

Building Self-Confidence

Self-confidence can make plans a reality along with hard work. Implementation of a gender policy can play a pivotal role in advancing women's empowerment. According to the informants of this study, 64% of microfinance borrowers and 36% of non-borrowers felt confident in themselves to do something. In order to increase the level of women's self-confidence, everyone, regardless of religion, caste, or gender, must work to achieve SDG 5.

Face-to-face interviews showed that 18 out of 25 microfinance borrowers found confidence in themselves, and all of them were able to do productive and profitable work with the money from the microfinance, in addition to their household chores. On the other hand, only 6 out of 25 non-borrowers had confidence.

In this suspense, one of the informants shared,

"Earlier, I didn't have any money, so I couldn't do anything, but after taking out a loan, I gave my husband money to buy a van, and I bought two goats. Now, I have six goats from those two goats. My husband drives the van and runs the family. With Allah, there is no shortage in the family now, and he also values me a lot because I was the one who convinced him to take out a loan and buy a van. Now, when I think about doing anything, I feel like I can do it, I can sell my goats or take out a loan and do that work, and we will repay the loan by working hard." (Face-to-face interview with borrower, 2025)

Self-confidence is the agency that helps in implementing one's own likes and dislikes and decision-making. According to this study, those who are capable of earning and those who are incapable of earning increase or decrease their self-confidence, while those who can contribute to the family by earning or bear their own expenses are quite confident. Without self-confidence, active participation in the decision-making process is not possible, and nothing may be achieved. According to Hashemi et al. (1996), BRAC is working on eight different levels to achieve women's empowerment and confidence by providing microfinance to poor rural women in Bangladesh.

Participating in the Family Decision-Making Process

Women play a key role in the smooth running of every household. The number of women and men is almost equal, so leaving this large number out of the decision-making process will not be completely fruitful for the country. According to the informants, 90% of female borrowers and 80% of non-borrowers are able to actively participate in family decision-making. In this regard, female borrowers are 10% ahead of their male counterparts. Informants said that in most families, both in terms of borrowers and non-borrowers, the husband and wife jointly decide on the decision-making process. A very small number of informants mentioned that their decisions are ignored in the family, none of whom can contribute financially to the family.

The non-receipients are far behind the microfinance recipients. Out of 25 borrowers, 23 are able to actively participate in the decision-making process of the family, and 16 non-borrowers are able to, according to the face-to-face interview. The beneficiaries said that after taking the microfinance, when they started doing some work with that money and started earning money and giving money to the family, their importance in the family has increased, and their decisions have become more important in the family's decisions than before.

In this context, one of the borrower informants reported,

"Earlier, I only worked for the family as a housewife. I had no income. Even if I bought something worth five taka, I had to look at my husband's face. So my words were not worth much in the family. But now, I have built a chicken farm in the courtyard of the house with the loan money. It has not yielded the expected profit. However, apart from giving some money to the family, I can also buy necessary things for my elderly mother, which I could not do before." (Face-to-face interview with borrower, 2025)

Another non-borrower informant reported,

"My son is the head of our family. He pays all the expenses of the family, so he does whatever he thinks is best and does not listen to us." (Face-to-face interview with non-borrower, 2025)

Based on Kabeer's model, the decision-making process is the agency that opens the door to achieving empowerment. Kabeer emphasized the relationship between women's empowerment within the family in the discussion of women (Kabeer, 2001). Generally, if a woman cannot actively participate in the decision-making process of her family, then it is almost impossible for her to make decisions outside the family, in society, or in the decision-making process of the state. In most of the households in the research area, it was observed that the decisions of both men and women are made by the family. However, the decisions of those who can earn money are naturally more important. Since women who take loans are more productive economically, they are undoubtedly ahead in the decision-making process. According to the Human Development Report 2025, the rate of women's participation in the labor force in Bangladesh is 43.4%, which is very necessary to keep the wheels of the national economy moving. If women can make such a contribution to the country's economy through the labor force, they may also make a significant contribution by actively participating in the decision-making process of the family; for this, there is a need for opportunity and equality. Only if the decisions of women and men are given equal importance in the decision-making process of every family, gender equality (SDG 5) may be ensured, and it will be easier to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Freedom of Movement

Freedom of movement and freedom of expression are fundamental rights recognized in the Constitution, which, by revealing the extraordinary qualities of people, develop them into an important means of achieving sustainable development for the state and society. In this case, freedom of movement refers to going to a relative's house, hospital, market, or anywhere outside the home on one's own decision in case of emergency. This study found that 78% of loan customers enjoy freedom of movement compared to only 36% of non-borrowers. Many of the loan customers reported that their travel outside the home has increased since joining the NGO.

Being able to move independently may help to increase self-confidence, which encourages them to start earning. In interviews, 14 out of 25 microfinance borrowers can move outside the house without their husbands' consent, according to their needs. 9 out of these 14 said that they were completely unable to earn after marriage; they could not go anywhere without their husband's consent, but since they started earning, the supervision over them has reduced, and they have started earning with the help of loan money. On the other hand, only 6 out of 25 loan non-borrowers can go far outside the house without the family's decision; the rest cannot make their own travel decisions and cannot bear the expenses because they cannot earn money.

A loan customer said about freedom of movement:

"One year after our marriage, my mother fell ill. Suddenly, I rushed to my mother's house in a neighboring village. My husband had gone to work in the field. I didn't have a phone, so I couldn't tell her. I was a little late coming home. Sister-in-law told him that I had gone to see my mother, but he beat me up after I got back." (Face-to-face interview with borrower, 2025)

She also replied to further questions about the status of your movement:

"Two years ago, on the advice of the sister-in-law next door, I took out a loan and bought a sewing machine. I do sewing work along with my household chores. Now, by the grace of God, there is no shortage in our household. I work for 200-250 taka every day. I bought a mobile phone, and it works. Now, if I need to go somewhere, I call my father and tell him, and he doesn't say anything else."

Based on Kabeer's RAA model, freedom of movement outside the home is essentially under the ambit of agency, which suggests various ways of achieving empowerment. Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis show that loan-taking women are visibly ahead of non-lending women in moving outside the home as per their needs. Muhammad Yunus feels that Grameen Bank has taught him two things, one of which is that each person is very important (Yunus,

Muhammad. 2007). Everyone should be given the opportunity to express their identity without hesitation; only then will their talents, abilities, and skills be usable.

Controlling one's own life

Self-development is essential to succeed in one's efforts to do something developmental for one's family and society. Among the microfinance program participants in this study, 72% of women are able to make important choices, dislikes, and decisions in their own lives and try to implement them. On the other hand, only 28% of those outside the microfinance program are able to do so, and it is reported that their financial contribution to their own profession and family significantly helps.

In qualitative insights, out of 25 microfinance borrowers, 19 can make important decisions about their lives and their own lives alone, but only 7 can among microfinance non-borrowers. In both recipients and non-recipients, it has been seen that those whose family financial situation is quite good, who can help with household expenses by earning money in addition to their own, and who always have a reasonable amount of money for their daily expenses, are the ones who are ahead in making important decisions and activities in their lives.

In this context, one of the informants said,

"I took out a loan in my name to buy poultry, cows, and goats, but my husband used the money for his business. He bears all cost of our family, so I can't go beyond his word." (Face-to-face interview with borrower, 2025)

According to Kabeer's RAA model, control over one's life and making important decisions about it is an achievement, which is the result of accumulating wealth, making one's own choices and decisions. This is basically a prerequisite for women's empowerment in the family. Both qualitative and quantitative data show that women who transact loans are much ahead in this regard because they move outside the home, try to make their own decisions, and strive to contribute to the betterment of the family. Goetz and Gupta specifically point out in their study that most women's loans in rural areas are controlled by male relatives (Goetz and Gupta, 1996). However, it has been seen in many families that even if women take out loans, men work with that money, in which case, the development of women may be almost impossible.

Awareness about Gender Equality & Self-Protection

To achieve SDG 5, women's economic empowerment, education, and related awareness are needed for advancing gender equality in all remote areas of Bangladesh. Women in this study are quite oblivious to gender discrimination, physical, and mental abuse in the family. Many of them consider it as their fate, especially those who do not earn any income; they think that if they want to live on their husband's money, they will have to cope with this family. Again, there are different types of women who are reluctant to make any concessions in this regard, those who are working themselves and have participated in various trainings or meetings about it, but this number is very small. 68% of women among NGO members are aware of this issue, but only 16% of women among ordinary women who are not members of NGOs are aware of this issue.

Gender discrimination is a very familiar term in rural Bangladesh because most women there are dependent on men for almost everything. The face-to-face interviews showed that 16 out of 25 microfinance borrowers were aware of gender discrimination and self-defense strategies, while only 4 out of 25 were aware of the non-borrowers.

One of the non-borrower informants reported,

"I married for love against my parents' wishes. After we had two sons, my husband and mother-in-law always mentally tortured me and did not let me eat properly. I told my parents a long time ago, but they said that now that we have two sons, what else can we do? Just adapt and manage. My husband does not let me do any work, saying that I will become self-reliant. I am enduring everything by looking at the

faces of my two sons; there is nothing I can do." (Face-to-face interview with non-borrower, 2025)

Another borrower said,

"I work in an NGO to collect installments, and I get a salary of 8,000 taka per month. My husband or in-laws sometimes cause a little trouble, but they do not cause a big trouble, only because I provide money for the family. I am very aware of gender discrimination and self-defense because I can manage my own expenses." (Face-to-face interview with borrower, 2025)

Kabeer, while discussing the implementation of gender policy in development and research cooperation, mentioned that Sherin Sadallah of Egypt explored gender dynamics in Islam and suggested various strategies and policies to eliminate gender inequality and power imbalance in Muslim societies (Kabeer, 2001). Awareness about gender equality and self-defense is basically a resource that helps in decision-making and choosing preferences, and thus facilitates the path to empowerment. In rural areas, women are generally quite indifferent to this issue; they accept it as their fate. Usually, due to their unemployment and lack of sufficient knowledge about it, they tolerate gender discrimination and violence silently. In this case, those who are members of NGOs sometimes discuss these by NGO workers, so they know a little bit, but those who do not go out of the house have almost no knowledge about this issue. If gender inequality can be eliminated and women's participation in economic activities can be increased, the national economic output of Bangladesh may grow by about 40 percent (S.B. Report, 2024).

5.3. Comparison of Relationship with the Family after Receiving Microcredit

Everyone, regardless of gender, religion, race, or ethnicity, has the right to form a family, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Nations, 1948). Everyone works tirelessly to form a happy family, and those who have financial difficulties in their families save money by taking microloans to improve their financial situation and work regularly to repay the loans.

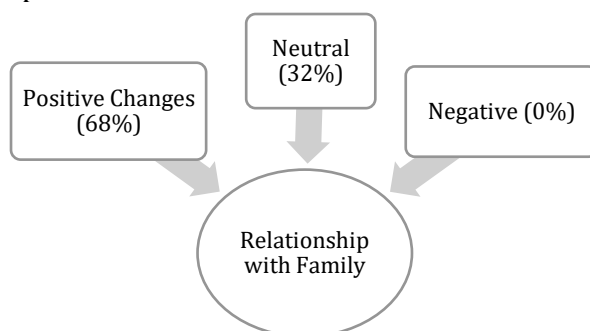


Figure 3: Changes in Relationships with Family Members after Receiving Microcredit

Source: Processed Primary Data (2025)

According to Pitt and Khandaker, women's participation in microcredit programs helps in increasing women's empowerment, but men's income in the family usually has a negative impact on women's empowerment (Pitt et al., 2003). In this study area, after receiving microcredit, 68% of women's family relations with their families have changed positively compared to before; that is, they have good relations with everyone. 32% of women have the same relations with their families after receiving microcredit. The most surprising thing is that none of the female informants in this area have had a worse relationship with their families after receiving microcredit.

One of the Borrower informants described,

"After taking the loan, my husband bought a van with that money and is driving it. Our family is doing much better than before, and everyone in my family loves me now because I took out a loan in my name." (Face-to-face interview with borrower, 2025)

5.4. Major Obstacles in Receiving and Managing Microcredits

According to the latest report published by the Microfinance Regulatory Authority (MRA), the sole regulatory authority for the microfinance sector in Bangladesh, the MRA has licensed 882 microfinance institutions as of June 2023. Under the jurisdiction of the MRA, a total of 731 microfinance institutions are actively engaged in providing microfinance services to 48.6 million people (MRA Report, 2023). Although many have improved their family solvency by taking microloans, there is a lot of negativity in the minds of the general public about this loan process because of the various complications that borrowers face at every step, from loan application to loan repayment. The complications that borrowers face from the loan application process to loan repayment, and the reasons why they do not take microloans, are presented below (Figures 4 and 5).

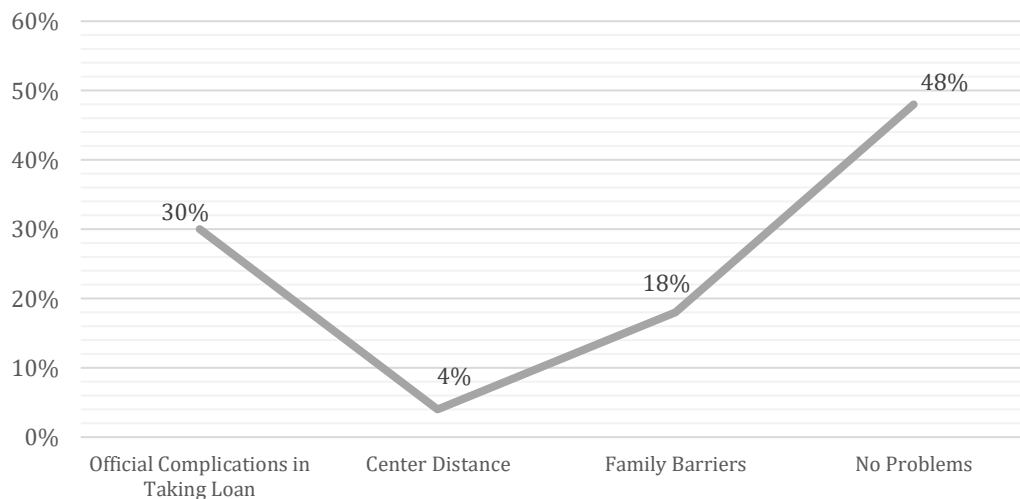


Figure 4: Problems of NGOs' Microcredit Services (according to Borrowers)
Source: Processed Primary Data (2025)

Among the informants, 30% of the borrowers said that NGO office representatives repeatedly auctioned them for the same work while taking the loan, and also created various types of official complications. 18% of the women said that their families did not agree to take a microloan, but they ignored this obstacle and tried to do something by taking a microloan themselves. The distance from the weekly loan collection center to the homes of 4% of the borrowers was quite long. And 48% of the borrowers said that they did not face any major problems from taking the loan to the present.

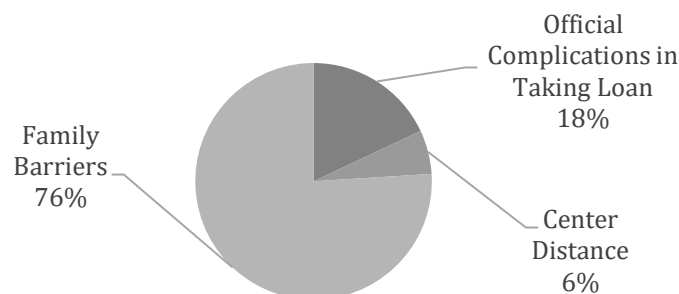


Figure 5: Reasons for Women Not Taking Microcredits of Non-borrower Women
Source: Processed Primary Data (2025)

Through the questionnaire survey, the borrowers of this study were asked why they did not take microloans. Have they ever tried to take microloans but did not get them due to some problem, or have they never tried to take them? Among the respondents, 18% of the women could not take a loan even after trying due to the complexity of the office in taking loans, 6% of the women wanted to take a microloan but did not take it due to the distance of the center from

their homes and 76% of the women did not take a microloan due to family restrictions as their family financial condition was fairly good.

Some common problems emerged from the words of most of the informants, which are: lack of adequate training, high interest rates, not giving loans only to women or only to men when necessary, fear of losing self-esteem due to pressure from NGOs due to not being able to repay the loan on time and negative comments made by the general public about NGOs without knowing the details. If these problems can be identified correctly and effective steps can be taken to solve them, then the number of borrowers will undoubtedly increase, and the unemployment rate in the country will decrease.

6. Conclusion

The Bangladesh government is continuously implementing various policies to increase gender equality in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and build a balanced nation. In fact, Bangladesh will not be able to achieve the desired success in any field without the active participation of women in the workforce. As of 28 April 2025 (*Bangladesh Population (2025) Live — Countrymeters*, 2024), there were a total of 88,360,803 males in the country, which is 50.6% of the total population, and a total of 86,251,943 females, which is 49.4% of the total population. The rights and status of women in society are increasing day by day. They are making their mark in all fields, including education, politics, agriculture, entrepreneurship, the labor force, and migrant women workers. However, even in the year 2025, many rural women do not get adequate capital despite their desire to start their work for economic liberation.

Sustainable development is not possible unless women can exercise complete independence in the economic and decision-making process because the ratio of men to women in the current country is 99:100. Women should be given full support from NGO authorities and families to become financially self-reliant by taking microloans from NGOs. The statistical findings of this study highlight a significant difference in the levels of empowerment of microcredit borrowers and non-borrowers. According to the chi-square test, participation in microcredit programs is associated with women's economic development, participation in the family decision-making process, and self-confidence, etc. The findings recommend that microcredit contributes to empowering women, but it alone is not enough for establishing full empowerment of anybody, such as the ability to purchase expensive items for the welfare of the family. Based on the information provided by the research informants, the researcher has some suggestions for microloan programs and the empowerment of rural women:

In the developing world, members of lower-middle and middle-class families usually take microloans to alleviate the financial hardship of the family. They try to use it as a special resort in times of crisis. But due to official complications, many do not want to take microloans easily. If the financial situation suddenly deteriorates and the loan cannot be paid on time, NGO people go to the borrower's house and misbehave with them - this is why many people do not want to take microloans, thinking of respect. Therefore, the official complications in this regard should be reduced, and the fear of the people should be removed. Moreover, many ordinary people in the villages have a negative idea about NGOs because they do not know the details about NGOs, so more publicity should be given about microloan projects and the activities of NGOs, so that everyone's negative ideas about them are removed.

Rural women usually take microloans for income-generating activities so that they can build a secure future. But NGOs initially give small loans, with which it is almost impossible to start a business from scratch. Moreover, the interest rate on NGO loans is very high. If there is a way to improve the economic status of the people, they do not want to take microloans because it is pressure. Therefore, if the loan amount is increased and the interest rate is reduced at the initial stage, the project will be quite effective as well, and the number of customers will increase. The borrowers should be given adequate training in poultry and goat and cattle

farming, tailoring, handicrafts and cottage industries, cotton farming, vegetable farming, fish farming, etc., as needed, so that they can properly utilize their microloan money. In addition, the Bangladesh government and NGOs should arrange various types of training for women in order to make them aware of their rights and actively participate in all fields.

In rural areas, widowed or divorced men and women often want to become financially independent by taking microloans. But NGOs do not give loans without the consent, signature, and information of both husband and wife; as a result, many people cannot take microloans because they cannot fulfill these conditions, despite their desire. Again, many people around the house, forced to fulfill these conditions, take microloans from various NGOs posing as husband and wife. NGO authorities should provide loans on easy terms to men and women who are victims of such situations. Moreover, if NGOs publish an annual report on the success or failure of microloan borrowers after disbursing the money every year and evaluate it, and then work for development, then the effectiveness of the microloan project will undoubtedly increase.

In Bangladesh, along with the government, numerous NGOs are working under various projects, including microfinance, training, etc., for women's empowerment. According to the Ministry of Social Welfare, in the fiscal year 2023-24, NGOs across the country provided a total of 1,60,770 crore taka of microfinance in that year. If such projects of the government and NGOs are successfully implemented, they will play a helpful role in achieving sustainable development along with women's empowerment.

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