

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH MICROCREDIT: HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE BASED STUDY OF PAKISTAN

Dr. Sarah Wali Qazi, Humair Ali, and Dr. Tania Mushtaque

ABSTRACT

This study explores the women's experiences with microcredit and its influence on women empowerment. Although extensive literature is available on the positive verdict that emphasizes the entire process of microcredit access to women empowerment, this study reports the women's lived experiences and evaluates how the women perceive empowerment through microcredit programs. The study is qualitative in nature; employing the hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy; which supports the reality of various subjective perspectives and structuring the meaning of empowerment. The participants were women of upper Sindh region who have availed microcredit from different microfinance institutions. The data was assembled by using the interview protocol through in-depth interviews until the saturation level. The interpretative phenomenological analysis was applied for extracting the right information. The results postulate that micro level loans strengthen women and have a positive impact on their livelihood. This research will help microfinance institutions and the policymakers to design appropriate microcredit policies to empower the rural women.

Keywords: Microcredit; Rural Women; Women Economic Empowerment; Women Social Empowerment; Standard of Living.

INTRODUCTION

The heart of empowerment is 'power', and it is considered as the core concept of the empowerment process. The empowerment is possible through two means; first is the change in power and other is the expansion of power. If power is inflexible then no empowerment can be realized; as for empowerment, the power should be changeable from person to person. Secondly, it is a firm assumption that power expands (Aithal, 1999). Power

is the influence or control, which makes other people do what we want them to do, irrespective of their own interest. Power occurs in the context of the association between different possessions (Hammerslough, 2009); and people. In this way, the implication of power and power associations can vary, thus, the empowerment concept is considered as a changing process and it expands because the power is experienced, not on the expense of someone who is powerful (Agarwal, 2016; Ali & Hatta, 2012; Luttrell, Quiroz, Scrutton, & Bird, 2009).

Before understanding the term women empowerment, it is necessary to understand why women are disempowered (Addai, 2017). As the word 'disempowered' is the combination of 'dis' and 'empowered' which means lack of power or the process, which reduces the power or authority of an individual or group to make crucial decisions and shape their lives accordingly. According to the philosophers, researchers, and experts in the field of gender studies, disempowerment is not only the issue associated with the developing or underdeveloped countries but the women in developed countries are also facing hurdles in gaining power (Sinclair, 2012). There could be many reasons associated for example religion interpretation; patriarchal societies; lack of education; employment opportunities or financial resources (Sinclair, 2012; Bhat & Lakshmi, 2002).

Most of the religious interpreters misguide religious beliefs and suppress, ignore, or abuse the women. Every religion has some religious instructions about the men and women, but for women, the interpreters interpret it in a way they want to, by ignoring the true ideology behind the lessons given by the religions (Chaudhry, Nosheen, & Lodhi, 2012).

Women are believed to be inferior to men and considered as second-class category person (Agarwal, 2016; Hartmann, 2008). In this context, it is asserted that a national patriarchal society is where the male dominance prevails; and it is a society where women are not only under the men's power but also subject to discrimination, dishonor, exploitation, control, subjugation, and violence (Moghadam, 1994). The woman in patriarchal society face more hurdles in developing and sustaining their own identity because it is a common belief of men, that only men have right to earn and women are made to serve as homemakers. Because of these factors skilled and capable women are forcibly excluded from economic participation; and whatever labor they perform is neither recognized nor accounted (Ullah & Sohail, 2013).

From the above discussion, women's weak position around the world, can be visualized. In most of the emerging economies roles of women are predefined and they are now encouraged to be part of the national economic endeavors. However, women in Pakistan still face the cultural and religious taboos despite the fact that they comprise of almost half of the population and their efforts are playing a vital role in the economy, either in the formal or informal sectors. Being a member of national patriarchal society, women face many restrictions and limitation but even though with these difficulties they significantly contribute to their household income, they take part in sewing, threshing, harvesting, teaching, weaving, poultry and livestock businesses, and other small and medium industries, besides some educated women also work in the service sector (Hartmann, 2008).

Women's income demand and reliance are increased due to the risen poverty level and poor household, women today are required to work and provide economic support to their families. Despite being significant contributors, their efforts remain hidden and obstructive; they are not empowered (Sohail, 2014). Their status is vulnerable due to certain factors including mobility, education, lack of financial funds, social restraints, minimal institutional support, and many other reasons which lead them to disempowerment (Sohail, 2014). The fact is that women and men experience deprivation in different proportion. UNDP claims that 70% of the world's poor are women and UNIFEM asserts that at least 60% of the world's poor are women. These 70% and 60% poor are those who are earning less than \$2 per day (Cheston & Kuhn, 2002). Poor women experience malnutrition, inaccessibility to health care and education, low employment opportunities, lack of credit, and more responsibilities of household that result in feminization of poverty (Bhat & Lakshmi, 2002).

Microcredit, on the other hand, is one of the products of microfinance which is related to small loans. The word 'Micro' represents small and 'credit' means loans, in the form of money; these loans are lent to the poor to exploit their capacities and become productive economic contributors (Dobra 2011).

Relatedly, the purpose of this study is to describe the upper Sindh's women participants' perceptions and experiences about their empowerment and well-being with microcredit programs. The study aims to explore the lived experiences of women and finding the role of microcredit in achieving their economic empowerment, decision capability

for utilization of capital, social empowerment, and enhanced living standards which in turn may reduce the overall poverty level. Several research studies have been conducted on this subject but from Pakistan's perspective it is still not clearly visible and are very few published research studies are available for reference. MFI's and MFB's are working in the underprivileged areas of Pakistan with an intention to provide microloans to the poor people, but it is not clear that the provision of microloans nurtures rural women to be empowered. In this national patriarchal society, some MFI's are targeting women, and some are not; it is quite perceptible that women face social and cultural problems like unequal employment opportunities or may be prevented from their rights (Ali & Hatta, 2012). This study also analyzes the critical factors which lead to the failure of businesses and disempower women even after obtaining the microcredit facility.

The possible research questions are; how women of upper Sindh interpret and describe the empowerment process from their perspective? how these women realize and feel the overall experience by availing and utilizing Microcredit? and what are the structural themes that facilitate the description of overall women empowerment? The study intends to highlight the role of microcredit programs in constructing empowerment among this weak segment of society.

The empowerment is described differently in different context and cultures, but in this research study, Mayoux's Empowerment model has been used to explore and understand the empowerment among rural women of Sindh. The three dimensions of Mayoux's empowerment model are based on three spheres of life that are economic, familial, and socio-political (Kabeer, 2005; Mayoux, 2005). Thus, this study will support to develop the theoretical or structural meaning of empowerment from the Pakistani women's perspective, specially the meaning of empowerment would be gauged from the rural women perspective. On the other hand, this research work would be helpful for microfinance practitioners and policy makers to critically examine the status of their loans on women empowerment paradigm to design policies for promoting women empowerment initiatives more effectively. This work is noteworthy because it articulates the beneficiaries' experiences and point of views, women in the worldwide are the main target market of microcredit, as to empower them to gain strength and eliminate poverty, but their view in the context of upper rural Sindh, Pakistan is missing. In short, this study comprises micro reality that would enrich and nourish macro policies for women empowerment in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Microcredit is the element of microfinance as microfinance is not only bound with the provision of small loans but other financial services like insurance and savings are also the part of microfinance (Zulfiqar, 2017). Jonathan Swift, in early 1700, along with another nationalist of Ireland initiated the Microfinance Institutions (MFIs), which provided financial support to the poor of rural areas to a certain extent, without any collateral. Spooner, in mid-1800, highlighted microcredit, as the best way of poverty alleviation. MFI leads the foundation of People's Banks, Credit Unions, and other formal fund cooperatives in rural and urban Europe (CGAP, 2006). In 1895, the Indonesian People's Credit Banks came into existence and acquired the position of chief microfinance system with a wide network of 9000 branches (Hulme, Gopinath, & Arun, 2009). In 1959 Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan introduced first MFI in Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD). He lent small loans to entrepreneurs and established models of microlending. Today, BARD is working in many different countries including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri-Lanka, Haiti, Liberia, and others (Ali & Alam, 2010). Moreover, In the 1970s, microcredit programs appeared in developing countries with the purpose to provide loans to deprived women, to enable them to invest in small enterprises. In 1976, Professor Muhammad Yunus in Chittagong University designed an experimental credit program to serve the poor and in 1983, he launched Grameen Bank, which presently has more than 4 million clients. BARD and other giant institutes were developed in the same era and encouraged the success of Grameen Bank (Basher, 2010).

Otero in 1999 explained that the microcredit provides financial aid to the low-income group who are poor but self-employed (Otero, 1999). Ledgerwood in the same year illustrated that microfinance is not only about saving and credit lending but insurance and payment service are also a part of it (Pokhriyal, Rani, & Uniyal, 2014; Ledgerwood, 1999). In 2001, Schreiner and Colombet lighten the gap that microcredit is specifically for poor families and is an effort to offer deposits and credits.

This study is based on the women empowerment paradigm out of the three paradigms of financial sustainability and poverty mitigation. This women empowerment paradigm design is based on gender policies; a concept proposed by different NGOs. The researchers of the microfinance pasture, from the many years, explored the gender impact of microfinance programs. The central aim of this paradigm is to provide poor women with credit facilities (Mayoux, 2005). According to the author, in access of microfinance services, gender discrimination also occurs. Even in successful microfinance programs, contribution to women empowerment is often restricted to a

certain level. Women empowerment cannot occur just because of microcredit, rather it also needs strategically designed programs. Each organization has different ways or programs for women empowerment. The author has drafted a report on Taraqee Foundation's (TFs) Micro-Finance and Economic Development program (MFED) whose main motto is to alleviate poverty through microcredit and saving facilities to both women and men to support gender equality (Qazi & Rashidi, 2018a; Kapila, Singla, & Gupta, 2016).

MFIs provide funds to women to fulfil their families' financial needs and to boost entrepreneurial spirit among women so they can take decisions and educate them, mentor them by executing strong network for women's (Sameul et al., 2012). Relatedly, a study was conducted on women empowerment in Nepal and Pakistan which disclosed that the women grow self-assurance and can be good decision makers through MFIs activities. But in both the countries, social and cultural beliefs prevent women to participate and thus the women cannot contribute much and feel disempowered (Sharma, 2015).

Correspondingly, one of the trusts in Ghana researched about microfinance programs and women stability. The author's assert that for women, access to credit the first step towards the empowerment journey. According to this research, the women achieved status of responsibility and trustworthiness through training and loans; they develop profitable relationships with the people they deal with, and they feel that they were given more respect than before (Cheston & Kuhn, 2002). It is assumed that women's empowerment has been amplified through the microfinance program which gives financial autonomy and has a positive economic impact (Bali Swain, & Wallentin, 2017).

Similarly, one of the studies is based on the women experiences conducted in Sri Lanka, assuming that microcredit is the unique innovation of credit for the self-employment of the poor towards a better life. Microcredit is considered as the tool, which is specifically designed as anti-poverty medicine (Pokhriyal, Rani, & Uniyal, 2014). Likewise, McCarter (2006), concluded through the study of ten countries that women are much more enthusiastic towards initiating their businesses; it is considered that the microfinance industry has reduced the gap between informal sectors and commercial actors. Women are enjoying self-employment, building their assets, deal with the risks and keep themselves above the poverty line (Anu, 2015; McCarter, 2006).

In the nutshell, women obtain loans and eliminate the hardships, in a system where women were neglected from participating in the economic activities. Their experience about business operations reflect that they feel

secure and their importance in the family surged and they became a crucial part of the decision-making process. In short, from their respective point of view microcredit play a significant role in eliminating their poverty (Sinha, Mahapatra, Dutta, & Sengupta, 2018).

Mayoux's Three Construct Model of Empowerment

Women empowerment is the growth of freedom of preference and achievement, to shape one's life (Nasir, 2013). The word empowerment has numerous dimensions but Mayoux (2005), has provided the three-construct model and most authors endorse and use this three-dimensional model to evaluate the women empowerment. These three constructs are economic, social, and political (like the levels of mobilization), and the third one is improved or higher living standard which is commonly known as familial empowerment. According to Mayoux (2005); and Golla et al. (2011), empowerment has multiple dimensions. These are:

Women Economic Empowerment: This suggests that women can be competent to participate in the economy and make better decisions for their economic position. When they are able to make judgments regarding credit and savings, then they can maximize their own and family's welfare. Through one woman's wise investment, employment opportunities for other women emerge; women can access their own success; efficiently implement their business practices; can control the cash, credit instalments, savings, investments, and other assets; women can be productive as they are wise investors with intrinsic skills (Golla et al., 2011; Mayoux, 2005). However, being involved in economic activity for women is not easy due to the prevailing thinking patterns, some women sometimes avail credit, but they are unable to use them in a proper way as they are not economically independent. But, this should be considered from the holistic view which should consider not only return in terms of money, but aspects like control over the income, know-how of market information, access to the market, bargaining power, collective power and perception of self-financial sustainability should also be taken into account (Basargekar, 2008).

Akram and Hussain (2011), studied sixty-eight (68) households which availed microcredit in the district Okara, Pakistan. They concluded that almost eighty-six percent (86%) of the respondents agreed with the developmental initiatives of microfinance that due to the small loans their income level increased and their living standards were enhanced. They agreed with the point that microcredit had affected their lives positively and that it was an effective strategy for poor people to escape the poverty and be economically independent (Munoz, 2016; Akram & Hussain, 2011).

Higher Living Standard or Familial Empowerment: Economic participation facilitates women to raise their spending on their own and their families' well-being. Women's economic position prevents men from fruitless and harmful expenditure. The living standards can be raised if both men and women contribute to momentous income and share responsibilities. Welfare interventions provide financial services and put emphasis on women health, security, and education which augment their abilities and skills. Higher living status reflects improvement in the poverty level of poor households (Mayoux, 2005).

Social and Political Empowerment: Women can involve in decision making, be autonomous, self-confident and can manage their household income. Through these determinants, they can interact within the society and the specified quota seats in assembly for women, empower them politically (Li & Rama, 2015; Mayoux, 2005). According to the authors, if women have savings and capital with them, then they can be able to make sound decisions. Through wise decision making, they can generate more money and can easily uplift their own and family's wellbeing. Economic strength makes them confident and they can interact with society in a sophisticated manner (Basharat, Arshad, Abbass, & Aziz, 2015). The cognitive, psychological, political, and economic aspects of the empowerment are included in the elements which can strengthen women; Figure 1 shows the constituents which reflect the process and dimensions of women empowerment.

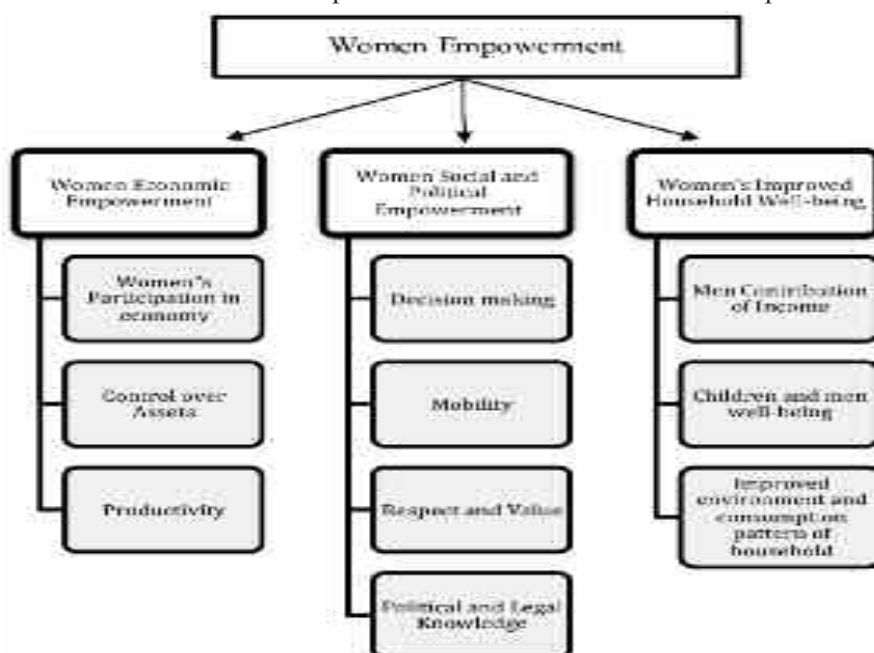


Figure 1. Mayoux Model for Empowerment

RESEARCH GAP

The purpose of this research is to discover the phenomenon of women empowerment through microcredit that can be obtained from women's verbal descriptions, from their perceptions and feelings regarding empowerment, and how microcredit influences their lives. There have been few qualitative studies conducted in different contexts that consider the influence of microcredit programs in gaining women empowerment but there are no substantial studies available which can gauge the specific lived experiences of women microcredit borrowers. The major studies related to microcredit and women empowerment have been conducted in the developing and underdeveloped countries which often examines the empirical relationship of the microcredit and empowerment. Although empowerment is itself a categorical variable and most of its indicators are also the categorical concepts like confidence level, mobility, feeling strengthened, therefore, the measurement through the statistical method and numerical analysis can lead to ambiguous results as the quantitative method does not have the capacity to measure categorical variables. Women Empowerment is measured through the categorical variables like confidence, decision-making power, enthusiasm and also has distinct dimensions of political, social, cultural, and familial empowerment (Kabeer, 2005). The need for capturing lived experiences of women about utilizing microcredit exaggerates this gap which would be fulfilled by applying hermeneutics phenomenological approach.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a mono-method qualitative research study which explore the respondents lived experiences with empowerment by their involvement in the microcredit program. Marshall and Rossman (2006), argued that the qualitative study is used to inquire and explore the perceptions and views of participants about their experiences (Rais, Mangan, Kumbhar, Hussain, & Sahito, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Thus, this study is based on a qualitative approach with hermeneutical phenomenological research philosophy and feminist paradigm. Phenomenology is basically an attempt to learn the other people's world through listening to their descriptions and explanations of their subjective world that they actually live in. Moreover, Hermeneutics Phenomenology, which is given by the Heidegger, is the theory of interpretation which means that participants would interpret their experiences and will not only focus on the description (Qazi & Rashidi, 2018b; Addeo, 2013).

Non-probability, purposive sampling is used to select the participants of the research. Purposive or judgmental sampling was manipulated through which the respondents were selected who could answer the research questions and could enable the researcher to meet study objectives (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). The participants are the women who live in the upper Sindh area and have utilized the microcredit, the sampling frame for taking the in-depth interviews is at-least one year passed from the day they availed microcredit. Purposive is used because, in this research, researchers can judge the respondents who are able to answer the microcredit and empowerment related questions. Secondly, it is the assumption of Phenomenology that researcher must know the language of the respondents so most of the researchers of this study can understand Sindhi and Urdu.

The interviews were taken in natural settings the context of the study is upper Sindh areas specifically underprivileged one. The upper Sindh comprises Sukker, Shikarpur, Larkana, Ghotki and Moro. The data has been gathered through the in-depth interviews method by using the interview protocol and observation protocol. The interview protocol had been developed by taking the studies of Cole (2014); and Graflund (2013), the observation protocol was used for recording the reflective notes. The pilot interview was conducted from the Sujawal district and the interview was amended accordingly. For the face validity check, the interview protocol was sent to the expert for their opinion and ethical permission was taken from the microfinance institutes whose clients were interviewed. The data was gathered in two different trips of five days and during the interviews, reflexivity was practiced (Banerjee & Sain, 2016; Finlay, 2009). The interviews had been conducted until the saturation level, where no new information was generated.

INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Twenty-three women were interviewed to know about their experiences with microcredit programs from the underprivileged areas of upper Sindh. From these twenty-three women, seventeen women were running their businesses and successfully managing them, other six women were those who availed credit, but they were not the autonomous owner of that loan but worked as intermediaries in transferring the loan to the male family member. Seventeen participants effectively executed their businesses and their contribution towards their household was significant.

The data is incorporated in the form of the following matrix, which shows the interpretative phenomenological analysis; this matrix is developed after the process of transcribing the interviews then coding, sorting, and sifting was conducted, memo-ing was done and then this matrix was developed.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Essence and Discussion

Table 1. IPA Matrix

# of Participants	Women Economic Empowerment			Women Social and Political Empowerment				Women's Improved Household Wellbeing		
	Women's Participation in the Economy	Control Over Assets	Productivity	Decision Making	Mobility	Respect and Value	Political and Legal Knowledge	Men Contribution of Income	Children and Men Well-being	Improved environment and consumption pattern of household
1	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
2	yes	yes investing, owing assets	yes	yes	little bit	yes	no	little bit	better	yes
3	yes	yes investing	yes, earning enough	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	good	yes
4	yes	yes investing, owing assets	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	good	yes
5	yes	yes investing, owing assets	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	little bit	good	yes
6	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	better	yes
7	no	no	not associated with the earnings	no	no	same as earlier	no	yes	same	no
8	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	worse than before	no
9	yes	yes, a little bit as son takes part in business	yes	yes	little bit	yes	no	yes	better	yes
10	no	no	not involved	not directly involved	no	no	no	withdrawn	same	same
11	yes	yes	yes, but not that much	no	no	yes	no	yes	good	yes
12	no	no	no	no	no	no				
	no	withdrawn	worse than before	no						
13	yes	yes	yes	yes	little bit	yes	no	little bit	good	yes
14	yes	yes, a little bit	depends upon the money in hands	yes	no	yes	no	withdrawn	better	yes
15	yes	yes, a little bit	yes	yes	no	yes	no	little bit	good	yes
16	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	little bit	good	yes
17	not directly	no	no	not directly	no	yes	no	yes	not so good	same
18	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	good	yes

19	not directly	no, just taking part in saving	not involved	not directly	not that much	yes	no	yes	same	same
20	yes	yes	yes	yes	not allowed	yes	no	yes	better	yes
21	yes	not that much	yes, a little bit	yes	not allowed	yes	no	withdrawn	better	yes
22	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	better	yes
23	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	yes	better	yes

The analysis demonstrates the two aspects of women who availed microcredit, the first category of women are those who availed microcredit and utilized it with their own will and other are the ones who availed microcredit but transferred the amount to the male family member; either husband, brother, father or father in law. Women, who were running their own businesses, had much power to take decisions and involved themselves in the family planning too, their recognition within the family and society was increased and they could work with self-confidence although they are seen succumbed to the cultural influence.

Women, who transferred their loans to their male family members, were not in the position to take decisions, as their men have the real power to take the money and to take every decision. Although the women availed microcredit and made investments in the business opportunities but unfortunately, due to their personal circumstances they were not empowered. The main reason behind this as per their perspective is the withdrawal of the men contributions from household expenditure, which led them with dual burden, as per their views they started working for sharing the responsibilities not taking the responsibilities solely.

Specifically, women who transferred their loans to the male family members lacked mobility, social recognition, self-sufficiency, stagnant social status, and no self-efficacy. But it was also observed and told by the respondents that the mobility is exceptionally low due to the traditional and cultural beliefs. However, their respect at home had been enhanced as they became the source of credit and financial support for their men.

Women are not aware of the political and legal rules even after participating in the economic activities as it has been the most negligible concern. All women who earned enough or their male family members had good earnings, expended sufficiently on the basic necessities like education, nutrition, and health care. Improvement in the well-being of the children, male family member collectively had improved the living standards of overall families which facilitate the happy environment. Most of the women shared that their

household environment was different before securing this microcredit, their circumstances and situations were dismal, and they would eat only the food leftovers, left by the male family members and children. Sometimes, they had to sleep-starved, but the women whose investment efforts went futile, face similar situation, even in the worst conditions, when they were not able to pay back their credit installment, their families starved, which further diminished their consumption pattern. Most of them supported that their familial empowerment increased even in the cases where men were the main credit holders as their consumption and living standards improved. Therefore, most of the women believe that microcredits have transformed their fortune.

This study supports the Agarwal (2016), findings that women's access to microcredit has upgraded their economic circumstances, family situations and social status within the family. According to the respondents, microfinance interventions have assembled momentous influences in the families' standard of living; improvement in their access to medical and health facilities, children's education, enhancement in earnings and savings, and creating employment opportunities for others. This study attempted to explore the categorical variables of women empowerment, which encompassed difficult analysis including the collateral qualitative variations like modifications in the controlling process and relationship changes. However, the study results align with the extracted findings of the Mayoux (2005), which concluded that financial strength along with women empowerment paradigm were illustrating the economic, social, and familial strength of women, which in turn alleviate poverty as well as progress the household well-being.

CONCLUSION

From the detailed discussion and analysis, it is explored that women's experiences with the microcredit are satisfactory and they are enjoying their lives and feel better than the before.

Women of the upper Sindh areas interpret the empowerment as the process of changing their lifestyles and their family's lifestyles. They think a stable financial position give them strength to deal with the world and internal familial issues. Their decision matters if they are contributing significantly towards the family. But most of the women were bound to the cultural values like education, as expressed by one respondent:

'It is against our traditional values if a girl studies, because when she

will be educated, she will do wrong deeds’

Therefore, women lived experiences were interpreted for the empowerment more through the social, cultural, and subcultural lens. As, another woman respondent said:

‘At least we are having two meals per day, before that we use to sleep with an empty stomach as due to the small amount of food, we first distribute that among our children then husband then we had if something is left for us’

These women, while sitting at their homes which were their working places too, considered themselves rich, as they see themselves financially powerful, as if they compare, they before livelihoods, they feel strengthened. The overall experience and feelings of women with the microcredit are pleasant as they enjoy respect and worth within the family and society and their earnings had made a significant difference in their living pattern. Few women, who are deprived of the autonomous use of credit or face tremendous loss in their businesses due to other circumstances, have neutral or unpleasant experience with this facility as they think it is a burden which they have taken without any extra compensation.

Microcredit programs support women to utilize their skills in an appropriate way, the poverty-stricken women are basically deprived of the basic necessities in which money is the major hurdle in their success. According to the women, the amount of PKR 15,000/ to PKR 20,000/ is enough for them to start their endeavor towards empowerment, no doubt in the upper Sindh region, empowerment is associated with two things; one is self-learning and the other is improved household well-being. Microcredit is playing a constructive role in augmenting empowerment among this weak segment of society.

The structural themes which facilitate the description of empowerment in the context of upper Sindh are women participation in the economic activities like making traditional bed sheets, traditional embroidery, opening grocery shops and even in the region of Shikarpur, pan beeri shop is also in tradition. Women involvement in decision making is another theme which is considered under the women empowerment, specifically, the decision making about family planning. Third, and the most dominant

theme is the improved well-being of the children and family members, in other words, familial empowerment. In this context, no social and political empowerment has been observed but only one or two women were aware of political aspects.

Overall, microcredit is considered as the key weapon for poverty mitigation as it improves the well-being of the household and is effective in fetching empowerment among women. Accordingly, it should be planned holistically and may be provided rightly to the women to improve their status and empower them.

REFERENCES

- Addeo, D. F. (2013). *Hermeneutics as a Research Method: How to do research using Hermeneutics approach*. Italy: University of Salerno.
- Addai, B. (2017). Women Empowerment Through Microfinance: Empirical Evidence from Ghana. *Journal of Finance and Accounting*, 5(1), 1-11. doi: 10.11648/j.jfa.20170501.11
- Agarwal, Y. (2016). Microfinance and Poverty Alleviation. *Imperial Journal of Interdisciplinary Research (IJIR)*, 2(11), 1575-1577.
- Aithal, V. (1999, June). Empowerment and global action of women-theory and practice. In *conference "Women's World"* (Vol. 99, pp. 20-26).
- Akram, M., & Hussain, I. (2011). The Role of Microfinance in uplifting Income Level: A study of District Okara - Pakistan. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Business*, 2(11), 83-94.
- Ali, A., & Alam, M. A. (2010). *Role and Performance of Microcredit in Pakistan*. Department of Economics and Informatics, University West, Sweden.
- Ali, I., & Hatta, Z. A. (2012). Women's empowerment or disempowerment through microfinance: Evidence from Bangladesh. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review*, 6(2), 111-121.
- Ali, K., & Hamid, A. (2010). Problems of Working Women in The Rural Informal Sector of Punjab (Pakistan). *Lahore Journal of Economics*, 2(4), 89-98.
- Anu, M. (2015). Bangladesh-A model of Neoliberalism: The case of Microfinance and NGOs. *Monthly Review*.
- Bali Swain, R., & Wallentin, F. Y. (2017). The impact of microfinance on factors empowering women: Differences in regional and delivery mechanisms in India's SHG programme. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 53(5), 684-699.
- Banerjee, P., & Sain, K. (2016). A Case Study on Women Empowerment and Financial Literacy through SHGs. *International Journal of Research in Economics and Social Sciences*, 6(11), 295-301.
- Basharat, A., Arshad, A., Abbass, S., & Aziz, S. (2015). *Pakistan*

Microfinance Review 2015: An Annual Assessment of the Microfinance Industry. Islamabad: Pakistan Microfinance Network.

- Basher, M. A. (2010). Promotional role of microcredit: evidence from the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh. *Journal of International Development: The Journal of the Development Studies Association*, 22(4), 521-529.
- Basargekar, P. (2008). Economic Empowerment Through Microfinance: An Assessment of CSR Activity run by Forbes Marshall Ltd. *International Journal of Business Insights & Transformation*, 2(1), 64-74.
- Bhat, R., & Lakshmi, J. (2002, July). Feminisation of poverty and empowerment of women: An Indian perspective & experience. In *International Women's Conference. Conference Paper (pp. 6-11)*, Australia: Townsville.
- CGAP. (2006, April 14). *Microfinance: History of Microfinance*. Retrieved September 16, 2013, from Global Envision: exploring market-driven solutions to poverty: <http://www.globalenvision.org/library/4/1051>
- Chaudhry, I.S., Nosheen, F., & Lodhi, M. I. (2012). Women Empowerment in Pakistan with Special Reference to Islamic Viewpoint: An Empirical Study. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 32(1), 171-183.
- Cheston, S., & Kuhn, L. (2002). Empowering women through microfinance. UNIFEM Draft, *Opportunity International*, 64.
- Cole, S. (2014). *Seven Women Speak: Perceptions of Economic Empowerment Opportunities Among Diverse Women in Four Different Cape Town Communities Today*. SIT Digital Collections.
- Dobra, A. (2011). Microfinance: Champion in poverty alleviation and failure in female empowerment. *Munich Personal RePEc Archive*, 134-144.
- Finlay, L. (2009). Debating phenomenological research methods. *Phenomenology & Practice*, 3 (1), 6-25.
- Golla, A. M., Malhotra, A., Nanda, P., Mehra, R., Kes, A., Jacobs, K., & Namy, S. (2011). Understanding and measuring women's economic empowerment. *International center for research*, 6-9.

- Graflund, F. (2013). The impact of Microcredit on Women's Empowerment. A case study of Microcredit in the Tangail district, Bangladesh. Lund University.
- Hammerslough, J. (2009). *Dematerializing: Taming the power of possessions*. Da Capo Press.
- Hartmann, H. (2008). Capitalism, patriarchy, and job segregation by sex. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1(3, Part 2), 137-169.
- Kapila, M., Singla, A., & Gupta, M. (2016). Impact of Microcredit on Women Empowerment in India: An Empirical Study of Punjab State. *World Congress on Engineering*.
- Hulme, D., Gopinath, A. T., & Arun, T. (Eds.). (2009). *Microfinance: A Reader. Routledge Studies in Development Economics*. New York: Routledge.
- Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. *Gender & Development*, 13(1), 13-24.
- Ledgerwood, J. (1999). *Sustainable banking with the poor microfinance handbook*.
- Li, Y., & Rama, M. (2015). Firm Dynamics, Productivity Growth, and Job Creation in Developing Countries: The Role of Micro- and Small Enterprises. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 30(1), 3-38.
- Luttrell, C., Quiroz, S., Scrutton, C., & Bird, K. (2009). *Understanding and operationalising empowerment* (pp. 1-16). London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2006). The how of the study: Building the research design. *Designing qualitative research*, 55-101.
- Mayoux, L. (2005). *Women empowerment through sustainable microfinance. Rethinking Best*. Pakistan: Aga Khan foundation Canada.
- McCarter, E. (2006). Women and microfinance: why we should do more. *U. Md. LJ Race, Religion, Gender & Class*, 6, 353.
- Moghadam, V. M. (Ed.). (1994). *Gender and national identity: women and politics in Muslim societies*. Baringstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Munoz, L. G. (2016). *Gender, Development and Globalization. Economics as if all people matters*. New York: Routledge.
- Nasir, S. (2013). Microfinance in India: Contemporary issues and challenges. *Middle-east journal of scientific research*, 15(2), 191-199.
- Otero, M. (1999). Bringing development back, into microfinance. *Journal of Microfinance/ESR Review*, 1(1), 2.
- Pokhriyal, A. K., Rani, R., & Uniyal, J. (2014). Role of Microfinance in the Empowerment of Women. *Journal of Business and Finance*, 1(1), 21-31.
- Qazi, S. W., & Rashidi, Z. (2018a). Nurturing Women Empowerment? A Phenomenological Study of the Linkages between Women, Micro Entrepreneurship and Access to Microcredit. *Journal of Management Sciences*, 3-21.
- Qazi, S. W., & Rashidi, Z. (2018b). Phenomenological Experiences of Women through Microcredit Programs of Upper Sindh: Stepping towards the Empowerment. *NICE Research Journal*, 200-222.
- Rais, M. U., Mangan, T., Kumbhar, M. I., Hussain, A., & Sahito, J. M. (2016). Impact of Microfinance on Income of Small Farmers in District Dadu, Sindh. *Sci.Int.*, 28(3), 2763-2766.
- Sameul, A., Sharon, A.A., Charlotte, B., Ekow, C. F., & Mary, K. (2012), Empowerment of Rural Women: The Role of Microfinance Institutions", Ghana: Christian Service University College.
- Schreiner, M., & Colombet, H. H. (2001). Microfinance, regulation, and uncollateralised loans to small producers in Argentina. *Dev Policy Rev.*
- Sekaran, U., & Bougie, R. (2010). Theoretical framework in theoretical framework and hypothesis development. *Research methods for business: A skill building approach*, 80.
- Sharma, P. R. (2015). An Empirical overview of Microenterprises and Microfinance Development in Nepal. *Journal of Nepalese Business Studies*, 9(1), 3-12.
- Sinclair, T. J. (2012). *Beyond Their Control: The Disempowerment of Women in Middle Eastern and African Literature*. East Carolina University.

- Sinha, M., Mahapatra, S. S., Dutta, A., & Sengupta, P. P. (2019). Microfinance and Women Empowerment: An Empirical Analysis. In *Handbook of Research on Microfinancial Impacts on Women Empowerment, Poverty, and Inequality* (pp. 52-64). Pennsylvania: IGI Global.
- Sohail, M. (2014). Women empowerment and economic development-an exploratory study in Pakistan. *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly*, 5(4), 210.
- Ullah, M. Z., & Sohail, N. (2013). Uncovering the Link between Micro Credit and Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women: A Case Study of Pakistan. *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*, 4(12), 9, 16.
- Zulfiqar, G. (2017). Does Microfinance Enhance Gender Equity in Access to Finance? Evidence from Pakistan. *Feminist Economics*, 1(2), 160-185.