

## Microfinance and Women's Empowerment: A Study of Urban Slum Households in Delhi

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### *Abstract*

This paper evaluates the impact of microfinance institution (MFI) loans on women's empowerment in urban Delhi slums, using primary data collected from 368 households in 2016. The households were divided into treatment and control groups based on their access to MFI loans. Selected indicators of women's empowerment were drawn from the literature and NFHS-3 (2005-06). The findings reveal a positive correlation between MFI loans and women's empowerment, highlighting improved participation in financial decisions, increased autonomy in health care and household purchases, and greater freedom of movement. Women in the treatment group also exhibited higher self-confidence, and increased respect within the family. Additionally, there was a notable rise in the number of women with bank accounts and their ability to use financial resources independently. These results support the hypothesis that MFI loans significantly enhance women's empowerment.

**Keywords:** *Women's Empowerment, Microfinance, Urban Slums, Financial Autonomy, Self-Confidence*

### 1. Introduction

There does not seem to exist any single straightforward definition of the term women empowerment. As a starting point, according to Kabeer (1999), "women empowerment refers to the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability." Swain and Wallentin (2007) described women's empowerment as an ongoing process where women contest and transform prevailing social norms and cultural practices to enhance their well-being. This concept is dynamic, involving a continual process of change within the framework of women's lives and surroundings, giving them the ability to make decisions that impact both their internal development of self-awareness and confidence as well as their external development of mobility, health, education, awareness, and decision-making status within the family. Numerous studies have examined women's autonomy in income control (Selvi and Shanmughun, 2016),

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decision-making power (Holvoet, 2005; Gibb, 2008), freedom of movement (Singh and Singh, 2012), gender equality (Berglund, 2007; Goetz and Gupta 1996), access to resources (Garikipati, 2008), self-confidence, and psychological well-being (Lakwo, 2006).

Research consistently shows that microcredit positively impacts women's empowerment. Access to microfinance plays a crucial role in empowering women by improving their economic independence and boosting their self-confidence. With financial resources at their disposal, women can start or expand small businesses, increasing their income-earning potential. This financial autonomy not only improves their economic status but also elevates their decision-making power within households and communities. Moreover, the experience of managing finances and enterprises builds their self-confidence, enabling them to challenge and navigate cultural and social norms more effectively. As they gain financial literacy and business skills, they become more aware of their rights and capabilities, fostering a sense of empowerment that permeates various aspects of their lives.

Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to evaluate the role of microfinance institution's (MFI's) loans in contributing to women's empowerment in urban Delhi slums. It is hypothesized that women clients availing loans from microfinance institutions tend to be more empowered than those who have not taken any loans. The analysis is based on the primary data collected from 368 households in Delhi Slums in 2016.

Following the introduction, the subsequent section provides an overview of the existing literature, linking microfinance with women empowerment. Section 3 presents data base and methodology used. Section 4 presents the descriptive results showing the impact of MFI's loans on various dimensions of women's empowerment. The last section concludes.

## **2 Impact of Microfinance on Women's Empowerment – A Brief Survey of Existing Literature**

Several research have demonstrated the beneficial effects of microcredit on women's empowerment. By increasing their financial independence and self-confidence, women who have access to microfinance are better able to take charge of their lives, enabling them to effectively challenge and navigate cultural and social norms.

Hashemi et al. (1996) study of credit programmes of Grameen Bank and BRAC in Bangladesh showed a positive impact of microcredit on women's empowerment as manifested in women's increased mobility, greater ability to make purchases, asset ownership, and their effective involvement in the

household decision-making process. However, the effect of BRAC was found to be better than that of Grameen Bank. Kabeer (2001) observed that in Bangladesh, those women who received loans exhibit more confidence, and have greater access to money and an enhanced sense of self-worth. The loan, though, seemed to have increased their workload, but it has seemingly empowered them in the realm of decision-making ability within the households. In some cases, it resulted in higher ownership of assets by women and better education for their daughters.

The effects of access to credit when assessed in Uganda by Lakwo (2006), found three levels of fostering of women empowerment. At the individual level, women experienced higher self-esteem and improved status in the households as evident from the shifting of roles from men to them. Within the households, women were found to have better decision-making power regarding the purchases of assets and livelihood strategies. The women also played a crucial role, took up leadership positions, and boldly opposed social practices like polygamy as well as economically exploitative practices of the banks. Holvet's (2005) study of microcredit and women empowerment in India found active participation by women in decisions regarding the use of loan money. This effect was more pronounced among those who had participated in the programs for a longer period. Pitt et al. (2006) found that the participation of women in microcredit programs increased their involvement in the decision-making process within their families and also improved their social networking. It further improved their access to resources and facilitated their geographical mobility. Swain and Wallentin (2007) reported an increase in women's asset ownership, employment status, and household income in five Indian states. However, variations in the empowerment measures were argued to be a result of factors such as cultural norms, behavioural differences, and the kind of awareness and training the women have been exposed to.

Several studies examined India's largest microfinance programme, i.e., the Self-Help Group-Bank Linkage Programme (SHG-BLP) in various states of India and found that SHG linkages, by providing credit, empower women (Littlefield et al., 2003; Cheston and Kuhn, 2002). Women's association with SHGs has significantly contributed to improving their self-confidence (MYRADA, 2002; Moyle et al., 2006; Jothi, 2010; Sarumathi and Mohan, 2011; Alam and Nizamuddin, 2012) and their sense of self-worth and self-esteem (Alam and Nizamuddin, 2012). The SHG members experienced increased freedom of movement with their groups and leaders (Sarumathi and Mohan, 2011). It helped women to be better entrepreneurs and decision-

makers by developing organizational and managerial skill and expanding business activities (Sarumathi and Mohan, 2011). SHG participation increases the earnings of women and their monetary contribution to the household's income (MYRADA, 2002; Jothi, 2010; Swain and Varghese, 2011) thereby gaining respect in their households (Swain and Varghese, 2011). Overall there were positive behavioural changes in women post-joining SHGs (Moyle et al., 2006). Kumar et al. (2012) stated that joining SHGs helped women access more information about the programs, establishments, and the world outside their homes. Selvi and Shanmughun (2016) observed tremendous improvement in the social and cultural environment of women associated with SHGs along with their participation in productive activities and an increase in the monthly expenditure of households.

### **3 Database and Methodology:**

The study extensively utilizes data from the third National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) conducted in 2005-06 to explore various dimensions of women's empowerment in India, focusing on specific indicators. The research also involves primary data collected from clients of microfinance institutions (MFIs), employing a structured household questionnaire for the survey. The questionnaire is designed to include various indicators of empowerment chosen from vast literature and the NFHS -3(2005-06).

The sample size comprises 368 women or households residing in selected urban Delhi slums where MFIs are active. The selection of MFIs was carried out using a purposive sampling method, while the sample households (women) and slums were chosen using a convenience sampling method. The sample is divided into a treatment group (T-group) and a control group (C-group) based on their access to loans from microfinance institutions (MFIs). The T-group includes respondents who have already received MFI loans and have been associated with MFIs for at least three years. From the list of MFI clients, 215 individuals were randomly selected and included in the T-group based on their willingness to participate. The C-group consists of respondents who have been approved for their first MFI loan but have not yet received the funds. From the list of MFI clients, 153 individuals were randomly chosen and included in the C-group, also based on their willingness to respond. A survey of both groups, who share a similar socio-economic background, was conducted using a structured questionnaire during the last quarter of 2016. The responses of each household are recorded for two periods: the 'current' period and the 'before' period. For the T-group, the 'before' period refers to the time when they joined a specific MFI, while

for the C-group, it refers to three years before the survey date. The 'current' period is the time of conducting the household survey, which took place in the last quarter of 2016 for both groups. Data for the 'before' period is gathered on a recall basis. The extent of difference in the magnitude of indicators for the T-group and the C-group is used for evaluating the impact of MFI's loans on women empowerment between the two groups.

#### 4 Results: Impact of MFI's Loans on Various Dimensions of Women Empowerment:

The questionnaire used in the present study includes the following six indicators of women empowerment, chosen from the vast literature and the NFHS -3 (2005-06). The questions taken from NFHS-3 have been put in quotes.

##### 4.1. Control over income:

To assess control over income, the employed women in the selected sample were asked: "Who decides how the money you earn will be used?" (NFHS-3). Also, the currently, married women were asked: "Who decides how your husband's earnings will be used?" (NFHS-3). It is believed that women's employment and earnings are more likely to empower them if they are involved, either independently or together with their husbands, in making decisions about how both their own earnings and their husband's earnings are utilized. (NFHS-3). The results are summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Control over income (Responses in Percentages)**

Period	Opinion	Control Group		Treatment Group	
		Decision (women earning)	Decision (husband earning)	Decision (women earning)	Decision (husband earning)
Current	Respondent	47.3	8.4	45.6	15.8
	Respondent and husband jointly	43.1	67.2	52.4	70.5
	Respondent and others	1.4	-	-	-
	Husband	8.3	17.6	1.4	10.5
	Someone else	1.4	6.66	0.7	3.1
Before	Respondent	47.2	8.3	44.2	14.4
	Respondent and husband jointly	43.1	66.6	49.2	58.2
	Respondent and others	1.4	-	-	-
	Husband	7	18.2	5.8	20.6
	Someone else	1.4	6.8	0.8	6.7

Source: Author's calculation (primary data).

The results show a small improvement in the empowerment of women in the treatment group. About 46 percent and 52 percent of women in the current period decide to spend their own earnings individually and jointly (with their

husbands) respectively as against 44 percent and 49 percent before. The access to loans from MFIs has increased the percentage of women making a joint decision (with their husbands) about spending their husband's earnings from 58 percent to 70 percent. This implies increased participation of women in making financial decisions. These results are consistent with Selvi and Shanmughum (2016), who found that accessing loans from MFIs makes women financially stronger and enables them to participate in the family's financial decisions. However, the situation does not seem to have changed much for the control group.

**4.2 Decision making:**

"To assess women's autonomy in decision-making, information was collected from all women on their participation in four different types of decisions. These covered decisions regarding (i) their own health care, (ii) making large household purchases, (iii) making routine purchases for daily household needs, and (iv) visiting their family or relatives. Women were asked who usually makes each decision: 'mainly you, mainly your husband, you and your husband jointly, or someone else?' (NFHS-3). The results are shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2 Decision-making (Responses in Percentages)**

Period	Opinion	Control Group				Treatment Group			
		Health Care	Major Purchases	Minor purchases	Visiting Family/ relatives	Health Care	Major Purchases	Minor purchases	Visiting Family/ relatives
Current	Respondent	47.7	11.1	82.4	37.9	56.7	17.2	86.5	51.2
	Respondent and husband jointly	41.8	38.6	10.5	42.5	38.6	67.0	10.2	42.3
	Respondent and others	2.6	5.2	3.3	2.6	0.5	5.6	1.4	0.5
	Husband	6.5	38.6	.7	11.1	4.2	8.4	-	5.1
	Someone else	1.3	6.5	3.3	5.9	-	1.9	1.9	0.9
Before	Respondent	45.8	10.5	81.7	37.3	50.2	12.1	86.0	43.3
	Respondent and husband jointly	43.8	39.9	11.1	43.8	42.3	37.2	10.2	43.7
	Respondent and others	2.6	5.2	3.3	2.6	0.9	5.1	1.4	0.5
	Husband	6.5	38.6	.7	11.1	6.5	43.3	-	10.7
	Someone else	1.3	5.9	3.3	5.2	-	2.3	2.3	1.9

Source: Author's calculation (primary data).

There has been minimal change in women's control over "minor decisions," as these have traditionally been their domain, with most women making such decisions independently. However, notable improvements are seen in other decision-making areas for the T-group compared to the C-group. For health care decisions, the T-group's percentage of women making decisions alone

rose from 50% to 57%, while the C-group's increase was from 46% to 48%. For decisions about visiting family or relatives, the T-group's percentage grew from 43% to 51%, compared to a slight increase from 37% to 38% in the C-group. Additionally, women in the T-group have gained more influence in major household purchases, with their joint decision-making with husbands rising from 37% to 67% and individual decision-making increasing from 12% to 17%. In contrast, changes in the C-group were minimal. Overall, the association with MFIs has positively influenced women's decision-making power, aligning with previous studies (Hashemi, 1996; Lakwo, 2006; Pitt et al., 2006; Singh and Singh, 2012).

**4.3. Access to resources:**

To assess women's access to financial resources, which forms an important element of women's empowerment, all respondents were asked whether they have a bank account (individual or joint), are they free to withdraw money, and decide how to use this money? They were further asked, "whether they have any money of their own that they alone can decide how to use" (NFHS-3) and who is the owner of their house. The results are shown in Table 3 and Table 4 below.

**Table 3: Access to resources (Responses in Percentages)**

Period	Opinion	Control Group			Treatment Group		
		Bank Account	Withdraw money from bank	Decides own money use alone	Bank Account	Withdraw money from bank	Decides own money use alone
Current	Yes	44.4 (Individual-82 Joint-18)	79	68.6	95.3 (Individual-92 Joint-8)	75.1	88.8
	No	55.6	21	31.4	4.7	24.9	11.2
Before	Yes	30.7 (Individual-81 Joint-19)	81	68.6	32.1 (Individual-85 Joint-15)	71	79.1
	No	69.3	19	31.4	67.9	29	20.9

Source: Author's calculation (primary data)

Comparing the treatment and control groups regarding bank accounts, the percentage of women with bank accounts increased significantly more in the treatment group, from 32% to 95%, compared to an increase from 31% to 44% in the control group. This larger increase in the treatment group is largely due to MFIs facilitating the opening of bank accounts by providing loans through cheques and assisting clients with account setup.

Microfinance India (2006) highlighted that urban poor often struggle with opening bank accounts due to the need for an 'introducer,' a requirement that

MFIs help overcome. Additionally, the proportion of women with individual bank accounts grew more in the treatment group (from 85% to 92%), which indicates increasing empowerment as individual accounts offer greater autonomy over funds. The percentage of women who felt free to withdraw money from their accounts also rose in the treatment group (from 70% to 75%) while slightly decreased in the control group. This suggests that MFIs have significantly advanced financial inclusion and empowerment for their clients.

Regarding decisions on spending money withdrawn from the bank, the treatment group saw a slight decrease in the percentage of women making these decisions alone, but a notable increase in joint decisions with their husbands (from 46% to 58%). In contrast, the control group showed little change in joint decision-making.

Additionally, when asked if they have personal money they can independently decide how to use, the percentage of women in the control group remained unchanged, while it rose significantly in the treatment group, from 79% to 89%. MYRADA (2002) found similar results. The fact that women are able to accumulate money and use their savings for making individual independent decisions, is an indicator of women's growing autonomy and increasing empowerment.

**Table 4: Decision about spending money and house ownership (Responses in Percentages)**

Period	Opinion	Control Group		Treatment Group	
		Who makes the decision about spending the bank's money	Who owns the house	Who makes the decision about spending the bank's money	Who owns the house
Current	Respondent	32.4	14.5	32.7	17.4
	Husband	11.8	71	8.8	69.1
	Others	2.9	14.5	0.5	13.5
	Respondent and husband jointly	50	-	57.9	-
	Respondent and others	2.9	-	0.5	-
Before	Respondent	36.2	14.5	34.8	16.3
	Husband	10.6	71	17.4	69.7
	Others	2.1	14.5	1.4	14.04
	Respondent and husband jointly	49	-	46.4	-
	Respondent and others	2.1	-	-	-

Source: Author's calculation (primary data)



The results on house ownership patterns, as shown in Table 4, reveal a slight increase in the percentage of women owning houses in the treatment group, from 16% to 17%, with a corresponding decrease in ownership by husbands and other family members. There is no change in the case of the C-group. This suggests that new houses purchased with loan funds are often registered in women's names, indicating a modest shift in ownership towards women due to their association with MFIs.

While some studies, such as those by Kabeer (2001) and Bali Swain and Wallentin (2007), support these findings by showing increased asset ownership among women, others, like Garikipati (2008) and Kumar (2013), argue that microfinance access does not significantly alter ownership patterns or control over assets. Kumar (2013) specifically noted that self-help groups (SHGs) did not improve women's control over resources and assets.

#### 4.4 Freedom of movement

"Freedom of movement outside the home is an integral aspect of women's autonomy and empowerment" (NFHS-3). The question was asked to all women if they could visit the following places—markets, health facilities, outside the locality, friends and relatives, places to entertain themselves or to use public transport—alone, only with someone, or not at all. The results for the C-group and T-group are presented in Table 5 and Table 6, respectively.

**Table 5: Freedom of movement-Control Group (Responses in Percentages)**

Period	Opinion	Market	Health facility	Public Transport	Place of Entertainment	Visiting family/friends	Visiting place outside the locality
Current	Alone	89.5	64.1	39.2	38.6	60.1	36.6
	With someone else	9.2	35.9	52.9	35.3	33.3	49.0
	Not allowed	1.3		7.8	26.1	6.5	14.4
Before	Alone	88.2	63.4	33.3	38.6	58.2	30.7
	With someone else	10.5	36.6	59.5	35.3	35.3	54.9
	Not allowed	1.3		7.2	26.1	6.5	14.4

Source: Author's calculation (primary data).

As can be seen from Table 6, the women in the C-group have reported a rise in their mobility alone, for all the indicators. In the current period, about 6 percent more women are using public transport and visiting places outside their locality alone. This is accompanied by the fall in the percentage of women who previously used public transport and visited places outside their locality, with someone else.

**Table 6: Freedom of movement-Treatment Group  
(Responses in Percentages)**

Period	Opinion	Market	Health facility	Public Transport	Place of Entertainment	Visiting family/friends	Visiting place outside the locality
Current	Alone	97.7	80.0	72.6	44.2	73.5	68.8
	With someone else	1.4	19.5	24.7	38.6	23.3	24.7
	Not allowed	.9	.5	2.8	17.2	3.3	6.5
Before	Alone	91.2	61.4	23.7	31.6	56.3	21.4
	With someone else	7.9	37.2	62.8	46.0	39.1	56.3
	Not allowed	.9	1.4	13.5	22.3	4.7	22.3

Source: Author's calculation (primary data).

The T-group shows a greater improvement in mobility compared to the C-group, with more women visiting various places alone. Specifically, 98 percent now go to the market alone (up from 91 percent), 80 percent visit health facilities alone (up from 61 percent), and 74 percent visit friends and relatives alone (up from 56 percent). Significant improvements are also seen in using public transport alone (from 24 percent to 73 percent) and traveling outside their locality alone (from 21 percent to 70 percent).

The T-group shows a significantly greater improvement in mobility compared to the C-group. Initially, many women were accompanied by male family members to MFI offices, but over time, they began traveling independently or in groups. This shift has boosted their confidence, allowing them to venture outside their localities and use different modes of transportation. As a result, women who were once mostly homebound are now actively visiting various places for work and leisure. These findings align with other studies showing that microfinance programs enhance women's confidence and mobility (Hashemi et al., 1996; Pitt et al., 2006; Sarumathi and Mohan, 2011; Begum and Rathnah, 2010; Jothi, 2010).

**4.5. Psychological well-being and self-worth**

Microcredit boosts women's self-esteem and respect within their families by allowing them to contribute financially (Li et al., 2011c). To assess their psychological well-being, women were asked if they felt satisfied with their contributions to family welfare and if their status and respect had improved within the family. The results are as follows.

**Table 7: Psychological well-being and self-worth (Responses in Percentages)**

Period	Opinion	Control Group		Treatment Group	
		Contributing to family welfare	Improved Status	Contributing to family welfare	Improved Status
Current	Yes	48.4	12.4	99.1	91.6
	No	51.6	87.6	0.5	8.4
Before	Yes	46.4	9.2	42.8	9.3
	No	53.6	90.8	57.2	90.7

Source: Author's calculation (primary data).

The results showed an overall improvement, with the T-group experiencing more significant gains than the C-group. About 99 percent of women in the T-group and 48 percent in the C-group felt they contributed to their family's welfare (up from 43 percent and 46 percent, respectively, before). Additionally, 92 percent of women in the T-group and only 12 percent in the C-group reported improved status and increased respect (up from 9 percent for both groups previously). Women involved with MFIs thus gain substantial financial recognition and psychological satisfaction, elevating their family status, consistent with findings from various studies (Puhazhendi and Badatya, 2002; Puhazhendhi and Satyasai, 2000; Kabeer, 2001; Lakwo, 2006; Sarumathi and Mohan, 2011; Alam and Nizamuddin, 2012).

**4.6. Self-confidence**

To evaluate the increase in women's self-confidence, respondents in the T-group were asked if they felt comfortable visiting the MFI's office alone to take out loans and if they felt confident and fearless when interacting with a loan officer. According to Table 8, approximately 99 percent of women reported that they now visit the MFI's office independently and interact with loan officers with confidence, compared to only about 13 percent before the intervention. This boost in self-confidence is attributed to their regular interactions with the MFI, where they engage with staff both individually and in groups. Thus, MFIs play a significant role in enhancing the self-confidence of their participants, supporting the results found in other studies.

**Table 8: Self-confidence (Responses in Percentages)**

Period	Opinion	Treatment Group	
		Interact with the loan officer	Visit office alone
Current	Yes	99.1	99.1
	No	0.9	0.9
Before	Yes	13.5	12.6
	No	86.5	87.4

Source: Author's calculation (primary data).

## 5. Conclusion

This paper assessed the impact of MFI loans on women's empowerment using primary data from 368 households in urban Delhi slums in 2016. The households were divided into treatment (T-group) and control (C-group) groups based on their access to MFI loans. Indicators of women's empowerment were selected from existing literature and the NFHS-3 (2005-06). The findings reveal a positive correlation between MFI loans and women's empowerment. Women in the treatment group demonstrated greater empowerment in financial decision-making related to both their own and their husbands' earnings. They showed increased empowerment in areas such as health care decisions, household purchases, and visiting family or relatives. Additionally, there was a notable rise in the number and percentage of women with bank accounts, along with greater freedom to withdraw and manage their money. Improvements were also observed in freedom of movement, self-confidence, self-worth, and respect within the family for the treatment group. These results confirm the literature and support the hypothesis that women clients availing loans from microfinance institutions tend to be more empowered than those who have not taken any loans. Thus, microfinance institutions play a significant role in enhancing women's empowerment through their loan programs.

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