

## **Transforming Lives: The Multidimensional Impact of Self-Help Groups on Women's Empowerment**

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### **Abstract**

*Self-help groups (SHGs) have become a viable strategy to contribute to women's socio-economic and political empowerment, particularly in rural and marginalized regions. In this paper, the researcher focused on determining how SHG membership affects women's access to financial resources, decision-making autonomy, and social status, highlighting the current anomalies of structural and gendered discrimination. According to the research outcomes on the impact of SHGs, the gender relations related to financial control give power to men. In contrast, Women tend to control finances for a more extended period of time. Mobility restrictions, unchallenged gender roles, and caste bias remain an impediment to the empowerment of women through SHGs. The paper confirms the conclusion that financial inclusion is not enough to empower women. As a viable formula of SHGs, microfinance must undergo a fundamental change from a microcredit provider to a multipurpose source. This evolution will help bring about the change in awareness, ownership, and accessibility in the market. The paper addresses the need to evaluate the longer-term impact on communities, especially women, and mechanisms for continuing to support SHGs as drivers of positive change. It is essential for policy overhaul to promote structural changes, a shift in societal approaches, and the need for women's SHGs to develop endogenous and*

*sustainable self-empowerment strategies to mainstream systems that currently do not empower women but rather confine them to substandard status.*

**Keywords:** *Self-help groups (SHGs), women empowerment, financial inclusion, microfinance, gender equity*

## **1. Introduction**

SHGs have proven effective in eradicating poverty and empowering women to engage in income-generating activities worldwide. These groups offer women collateral-free credit, micro-credit, and capacity development, enabling them to engage in economic activities and improve their family standards and income. (Datta, 2015). The SHG model is based on the sound principles of joint responsibility and borrowing, accumulation of social capital, equitable sharing of resources, and shared responsibility, which enables women to be banked formally in an approach that helps increase financial literacy and lower borrowing from informal sources (Kumar et al., 2019). Over the years, SHGs have expanded from offering microcredit and acting as an enabler of credit for livelihood needs to a one-stop shop providing remedies for other issues, such as awareness on health and education, governance challenges, and gender inequalities (Kumar et al., 2021).

Microcredit was institutionalized in India in 1992 through the Self-Help Group Bank Linkage Program to target the rural poor, especially women. (Garikipati, 2012). It was replaced by the Swaranajayanti Grameen Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) in 1999, and in 2010-11 by the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), which established microfinance as among the most important strategies in the world for poverty reduction and women's empowerment (Sengupta, 2024). These schemes were explicitly targeted toward women as the direct beneficiaries because they have a higher repayment rate and are more inclined to invest in the health of their family members compared to their male counterparts (Desai & Joshi, 2014). By 2022,

India had made a deliberate shift towards gender-driven economic activities as 84% of the overall SHGs consisted of women and were actively operating with more than 10 million members, making SHGs the backbone of rural development and empowering over 120 million households (NABARD, 2020).

However, although the situation has improved, access to credit alone cannot guarantee women's empowerment. Several women lack control over finances, as male household members often decide how loans are spent, perpetuating patriarchal financial systems (Garikipati, 2012). Studies show that 70% of SHG loans ultimately end up being controlled by male family members, constraining women's potential to accumulate assets, invest in enterprises, or achieve financial autonomy (Goetz & Gupta, 1996). These limitations limit the transformative capacity of SHGs, rendering many women economically engaged but financially dependent. Aside from financial limitations, socio-economic and cultural barriers further limit women's empowerment through SHGs. Caste-based discrimination also continues to be a limiting factor, excluding lower-caste and tribal women from participating fully in SHG programs, availing credit, and being involved in decision-making (Brody et al., 2017). Moreover, mobility constraints, financial illiteracy, and restricted access to formal markets confine women's SHG-related endeavors to subsistence-level activities (Kumar et al., 2021).

While a strong argument has been made for the positive impacts of SHGs on improving access to financial services and social inclusion, new research questions remain to be clearly defined regarding how and in what ways financial inclusion results in the actual revitalization of the economy and, more importantly, in the redistribution of power structures. Still, more needs to be understood about how financial independence relates to decision-making and mobility, especially in rural and marginalized areas. Currently, many women in SHGs remain in a vulnerable position, financially dependent, and the male members of their families continue to

hold significant control over financial decisions (Datta, 2015; Desai & Joshi, 2014; Kumar et al., 2019).

The following paper assesses how SHGs empower women by enhancing their economic self-reliance, decision-making ability, and social status, as well as the factors preventing long-term empowerment of women. Although SHG-bank linkages have enabled women to access finance, financial literacy, credit awareness, and business training are crucial for women to gain liberation from microfinance toward wealth (Deininger & Liu, 2013). By addressing these issues through gender-sensitive policies, enhanced financial education, and market integration strategies, SHG schemes can transition from short-term poverty alleviation to sustainable socio-economic empowerment models.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### *2.1 SHGs as a Mechanism for Socio-Economic Empowerment*

The SHG model has emerged as a key mechanism for enhancing women's financial inclusion and empowerment process in developing nations by integrating access to formal credit, skill development, and collective decision-making (Desai & Joshi, 2014; Sanyal, 2009). Although initially focused on credit and savings, SHGs now address broader development issues, including participation in governance, reduced inequalities, and human development (Kumar et al., 2021). While SHGs help women become financially independent, it is noted that access to credit alone does not provide financial autonomy, as male relatives directly control the use of loans by women, limiting their decision-making power regarding loan use (Garikipati, 2012; Goetz & Gupta, 1996). Even though SHGs have reduced their dependence on informal sources of finance and borrowing, they remain out of reach for lower-caste and economically marginalized women, limiting their financial and leadership participation (Amin et al., 2003; Brody et al., 2017). Policy measures encouraging

co-ownership of financial resources and enterprises can lead to greater economic control by women (Holvoet, 2005).

## *2.2 Social and Political Empowerment through SHGs*

Besides economic benefits, SHGs promote social empowerment through increased collective agency, mobility, and engagement in governance (Kumar et al., 2019; Sanyal, 2009). The self-help groups (SHGs) give women more self-confidence when making family financial decisions, participating in local government forums known as gram Sabhas, and advocating for various government schemes (Desai & Joshi, 2014; Holvoet, 2005). However, culture and tradition regarding gender and caste hierarchy persist among women exercising their democratic rights for representation and leadership (Alam & Nizamuddin, 2013; Brody et al., 2017). Initiatives in gender sensitization, such as the ANGeL program in Bangladesh, suggest that cultural resistance to women's leadership can be minimized (Kumar et al., 2021). The study of SHGs concerning the improvement in the economic status of their members is an area that has not been extensively researched, despite research on SHGs and their ability to raise finances. Economic empowerment has a positive effect on challenging gender norms. However, women's financial independence and ownership of assets remained relatively rigid due to structural factors (Garikipati, 2012).

The societal structures prevent the realization of SHGs' impact on access to credit and other opportunities. Most women are still cagey, depend on their male relatives for financial support, or do not have management power over the resources used in SHGs (Goetz & Gupta, 1996). Moreover, microfinance institutions are sometimes more interested in their clients' repayment rates than in empowerment, forcing women to include their male relatives in financial operations and depriving them of economic independence (Kabeer, 2005; Sengupta, 2024). This is made worse by

the fact that the loans are often used for consumption needs at the household level and not for investment purposes. This corresponds to the paper showing that women are also financially charged more due to these factors. In addition, the participation of women in SHGs did not reduce their workload, as they are still expected to do unpaid care work and productive work, thus rendering them immobile (Amin et al., 2003).

According to the literature, SHGs improve financial access, social capital, and political participation, but in terms of financial sustainability, women's financial control restricts SHGs' economic structures (Garikipati, 2012; Goetz & Gupta, 1996). Memberships incorporate women in more significant decisions and household governance, but exclude them from formal leadership and governance positions. The household continues to be dominated by men, and casteism remains persistent. (Alam & Nizamuddin, 2013; Brody et al., 2017). Therefore, for sustainable empowerment, long-term follow-up measures, gender-sensitive approaches to financial management, and women's property holding will have to be incorporated into the SHG operations. (Garikipati, 2012; Kumar et al., 2021). In future studies, attention should be paid to the long-term economic effects of the SHG graduates, further progress in making the financial services digital, and the market connectivity that shall assist the SHGs to move on from the provision of merely access to a consistent form of empowerment (Sengupta, 2024).

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Based on the social capital theory, self-help groups help understand the extent of change they bring about in the socio-economic status of women. Sanyal (2009) specified that social capital can be regarded as the actual or potential resources within the network of relationships built on trust and involving shared norms, values, and purposes. Thus, regarding SHGs, social capital is conspicuous in terms of people's mutual financial dealings, improved social organization and structures

that encourage community belonging, and support systems, all of which help improve women's economic opportunities and the management of resources. Being part of SHGs widens social connections and reinforces women's solidarity, facilitating better access to public entitlement schemes and community assets (Kumar et al., 2019). Through regular group meetings, SHG participants enhance their communication skills, financial understanding, and leadership qualities, encouraging their engagement in local governance and decision-making processes at both community and household levels (Brody et al., 2017). The collective nature of SHGs also creates a sense of unity, allowing women to overcome social barriers and seek economic opportunities more effectively (Sanyal, 2009). Social capital in SHGs economically facilitates access to credit, entrepreneurship, and market connections, reducing women's dependence on informal moneylenders (Datta, 2015). However, not all easy access to resources will likely result in empowerment. Current research shows that male-dominated financial systems will likely restrict women's access to SHG loans and their financial independence capacity (Garikipati, 2012; Goetz & Gupta, 1996). This underscores the need for financial inclusion to be paired with structural changes in asset ownership and institutional support (Holvoet, 2005).

Kabeer's (2005) capability approach provides a critical perspective on empowerment, stressing that merely having access to resources is inadequate if women do not possess the agency to make autonomous financial and social choices. Effective SHG programs are not only required to establish social trust and cooperative relationships. However, they should enable women to acquire skills to manage resources effectively, attain productive employment, and make economic decisions within households and communities. Therefore, while social capital enables women's agency, financial inclusion, and social cohesion, its long-term impact depends on structural reforms that address gendered financial constraints

and institutional obstacles. Enhanced market integration, guaranteed independent asset holding, and gender-sensitive financial policy are crucial to advancing SHGs as powerful empowerment tools, not short-term financial relief mechanisms.

## **4. Research Methodology**

This research study uses a descriptive approach to evaluate the effectiveness and implications of self-help groups. It utilizes secondary data sources, including articles from databases such as JSTOR, Springer, and ScienceDirect, as well as government reports from NABARD and the World Bank. Based on the analysis results, the study provides recommendations for enhancing the scalability and impact of SHGs. All data used in this study were ethically obtained from publicly available publications, ensuring openness and adherence to research integrity.

## **5. Empirical Insights: The Socio-Economic Impact of Self-Help Groups on Women's Empowerment**

### *5.1 Economic Empowerment*

#### *5.1.1 Improved financial inclusion and access to credit*

Self-help groups (SHGs) contributed significantly to improving financial inclusion by providing women access to formal banks and low-cost credit. Women were more actively involved in the regular but shorter loan cycles, reducing the need for moneylenders and high-interest debt risk (Datta, 2015). Programs like JEEViKA have facilitated the connection between SHG members, banks, and microfinance institutions, encouraging a shift away from usurious money lending (Datta, 2015; World Bank, 2022). In addition, involvement in SHGs has also contributed to savings since 95% of the members have ensured systematic savings compared to only 24% of non-SHG households (Datta, 2015; Kumar et al., 2019).

## *5.1.2 Debt Reduction and Financial Security*

Participation in SHGs has facilitated healthier borrowing practices, reducing reliance on asset-based loans and household financial stress (Datta, 2015). As Kabeer (2005) noted, almost all women have expanded their loan use, focusing on productive uses other than merely consuming household necessities. The study also shows that long-term participation in SHGs will likely enhance credit offer depth, ensure increased savings, and improve credit control among members.

## *5.1.3 Asset Ownership and Income Diversification*

SHG membership has been a tool in empowering women by shifting them from being groups of financially dependent individuals to being groups of holders of assets. The survey found that the treated communities that received SHG support saw a rise in livestock holdings by 4.6% against the control group, which saw an increase of only 2.9% (Datta, 2015). The involvement of SEWA has empowered landless women to find their sources of income and has played a strategic and fundamental role in managing household resources. SHG members of Orissa, Jharkhand, and Andhra Pradesh also entered other avenues of income sources and newer methods of agriculture that made them less vulnerable to economic consequences and/or less dependent (Balasubramanian et al., 2024; Kabeer, 2005).

## *5.1.4 Women's control over financial resources*

Despite growing credit access, women are often not in control of loan use, with male relatives tending to allocate money to high-return activities and restricting females to low-value activities like cattle rearing and home business (Goetz & Gupta, 1996; Holvoet, 2005). Empirical evidence reveals that although men use most SHG loans, repayment is done by women, which exercises gendered economic control (Goetz & Gupta, 1996). However, long-term membership in SHGs has increasingly enhanced women's economic empowerment, with greater

business operations, credit allocation, and financial decisions (Deininger & Liu, 2013).

## *5.2 Social Empowerment*

### *5.2.1 Household Decision-Making Power*

One of the significant social effects of SHG participation has been strengthening women's decision-making authority within the household. SHG members exercised more participation in domestic spending, money matters, and savings control, contesting patriarchal male-dominated family systems (Brody et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2021). SHG membership has also empowered women financially, constraining male members from overspending (Desai & Joshi, 2014).

### *5.2.2 Increased Mobility and Economic Autonomy*

Membership in SHGs has improved women's mobility by increasing participation in market transactions, economic activities, and social networks (Desai & Joshi, 2014). This involvement has created new livelihood opportunities, promoted financial literacy, and promoted business negotiations, leading to greater economic empowerment (Kumar et al., 2021). However, in very patriarchal societies, mobility is still restricted because family members place restrictions upon women's entry into the public sphere, limiting their use of SHG benefits (Goetz & Gupta, 1996).

### *5.2.3 Shifting Gender Norms and Social Inclusion*

Although SHGs have empowered women to be more self-assured and autonomous, their contribution towards changing deeply rooted gender roles is still minimal. Husbands of SHG members show increased participation in family decisions and higher control over productive assets, indicating positive spillover effects (Kumar et al., 2021). Participation in SHGs alone has not had a substantial impact on

domestic violence and rigid gender roles. Therefore, male-inclusive empowerment interventions are required (Balasubramanian et al., 2024; Kumar et al., 2021).

#### *5.2.4 Political Involvement and Leadership Roles*

SHGs have encouraged women's participation in decision-making and local government and increased the intensity of participation in Gram Sabha meetings, social mobilization, and institutions of governance (Holvoet, 2005). However, some barriers hinder women's representation in leadership roles, such as caste hierarchies and patriarchal culture (Alam & Nizamuddin, 2013; Brody et al., 2017). The study further shows that gender sensitization with male and community leaders, such as the ANGeL program in Bangladesh, can be applicable in the socialization of women's leadership positions and improve acceptance (Kumar et al., 2021).

#### *5.2.5 Social Capital Construction and Collective Action*

Engagement in SHGs has brought increased social capital, trust, and collective action among women (Datta, 2015; Sanyal, 2009). Group-based microfinance has helped to foster social cohesion and ensure cohesion in managing resources and the instrumentality of community-based economic measures, as it ensures a sense of responsibility among the group members (Sanyal, 2009). JEEViKA of Bihar reveals how the delivery of SHGs has facilitated families to come out of exploitative credit and how the achievements of economic and social emancipation are inevitable (Datta, 2015).

The study stresses the compelling aspect of SHGs in providing the above-targeted services like financial inclusion and social mobility to women. However, below-ground structures still have a role that prevents them from fully becoming empowered. SHG membership has led to improved household decision-making, increased access to various resources, increased political activism, and greater

mobility; embedded gender norms and fiscal dependence do not allow for sustained empowerment. To make SHGs a sustainable source of socio-economic change, we must provide them with leadership training, financial literacy, gender-sensitive policy, and legal reform interventions. In future studies, the long-run impact of SHGs on financial autonomy, borrowing, access to markets, and engagement in governance should be estimated to extend their impact beyond a poverty alleviation dimension to a sustainable empowerment dimension.

## **6. Discussion**

Thus, the above study confirms the ability of SHGs to facilitate financial inclusion and the social upliftment of their members. While self-help groups have empowered women in the flow of money, they do not necessarily empower women by controlling the financial assets formed based on loans taken. This is a problem concerning how the SHG program integrates women into existing financial arrangements without changing the power men hold over finances.

Then, there is the negative aspect of exclusion, where the lower-caste women and poor women are restricted from participating in SHGs. Most microfinance models consider clients with a greater ability to repay the loan, thus excluding people with unstable sources of income. This selective targeting poses several problems regarding microfinance, as it facilitates the poorest consumers to start their businesses, rather than institutions operated for their sustainability.

Another fundamental flaw is centralizing rates of repayment over empowering outcomes. Loan recovery is a primary performance metric in most microfinance institutions, and in some cases, the male members of the household are used to recover it. This strengthens men's dominance in this aspect, especially in finances, rather than empowering women. To combat this problem, there must be a transition toward empowerment-driven financial models, such as women's legal ownership of

assets, co-ownership arrangements, and direct credit disbursing mechanisms that exclude male intermediaries.

However, it may be challenging to ascertain whether there are any changes in gender norms regarding mobility and their contribution towards SHG members' domestic decision-making. The financial management by SHG members increased, but this has not empowered women in decision-making, as other scholars have noted. This prompts a question as to whether the SHGs perpetuate patriarchal relations with the integration of women into the networks of finance.

Furthermore, some women face issues of mobility limitation due to culturally backward and male-dominated societies. Women are still locked out of growing their businesses and participating in broader economic contexts, such as markets, training, and governance spaces. It has been stated here that with the help of supportive policies pushing on infrastructures for investment, secure transport, and liberalization of the market for products, these women should be helped to shift from the perpetuity of petty businesses to sustainable income-generating activities. Self-help groups (SHGs) also do not have proper mechanisms for tracking the long-term impact of microfinance, as most of the microfinance is operating through the closed-cycle loan mechanism, and based on the assessment of whether women are moving towards economic independence and financial security. Only through cross-sectional research would empirical data about the long-term sustainability of the empowerment paradigms based on micro-finance be available.

Despite the success in targeting the goals of financial inclusion, social capital development, and local governance, there are still issues of gender discrimination, the use of male intermediaries, and problems in the organizational structure of the SHGs. A policy framework is needed to turn SHGs into sustainable means of empowerment instead of simple micro-financial inclusion. Educating women to

comprehend the financial process and implementing favorable policies that consider women's rights, infrastructural reforms, and policy change will help establish women's leadership in the quest to own assets. Through such integrated approaches, SHGs can be practical tools for social and economic transformation and development, and reach their full potential of gender sensitivity and users' independence from subsidies.

## **7. Implications for Policy and Practice**

The results of this study show that even with a considerable increase in financial inclusion and social capital among women owing to the SHGs, their transformative potential remains constrained by structural barriers, gendered control over finances, and socio-economic exclusions. A practical policy approach must move beyond financial inclusion as an end in itself and focus on institutional arrangements that improve women's economic agency, decision-making, and long-term economic development (Garikipati, 2012; Goetz & Gupta, 1996).

One of the policy implications is a need for wider collective action to support women in control of funds. This is confirmed since although credit increases women's financial power, men take over credit assets in male-headed households and reduce women's economic capital (Goetz & Gupta, 1996). To this end, co-ownership structures have to be implemented to ensure that women acquire access to money and income in their own right through the advancement of loans. Programs designed to deposit directly under women's names or financial literacy training would also promote their economic engagement (Ashraf et al., 2010). There is a need for microfinance programs to include training and a market for the females to move from micro-businesses, which are usually subsistence-based, to businesses. There is limited market access, mobility, and schooling, which remain constraints to economic activities by women (Balasubramanian et al., 2024). This

means the policies should support network, financial technology, and value addition opportunities through value chain entry to improve profitability and growth (Zelu et al., 2024). In addition, the mobility barrier should be solved by secure means of transport and institutional arrangements for women to get to the markets (Goetz & Gupta, 1996). Another constraint of SHG is the social structure that has continued to present the norms of dominance of male authority on the social and economic decisions that the female members of the Society make (Kumar et al., 2021). In response to this, gender sensitization practices must be incorporated into the SHG models among the male members of the household as well as the leaders in the community. Research from the Bangladesh ANGeL initiative has shown that when men are trained to be gender-sensitive in decision-making, the prejudice that has been embedded in their thinking processes can be changed for a fairer process for both male and female applicants at the household as well as the community level (Kumar et al., 2021). In addition, there is a need to develop better models for SHG so that the women crossing the poverty line or the low-caste women can be reached. A similar case applies to most microfinance institutions that focus on repaying the client's capacity and locking out the neediest, who require the funds (Amin et al., 2003; Deininger & Liu, 2013). In response, there is an opportunity for an organizational financial product, such as flexible repayment, cheap loans, and global social protection programs, to provide access. Finally, long-term impact evaluation systems must be implemented to evaluate the sustainability of SHG-led empowerment, as most microfinance programs concentrate on short-term repayment rates regardless of whether women transition from group-based credit to mainstream financial independence (Kabeer, 2005). Therefore, the necessary precondition for maximizing the effectiveness of SHGs, in addition to ensuring the generally accepted key financial access and utilization of the resources or formal credit and savings, is applying the approach that combines several key structural interventions, including co-ownership of property, market access,

leadership development, and gender-sensitive financial instruments. To overcome these challenges, SHGs should grow from mere financial interventions to women's banking domains and social transformation (Goetz & Gupta, 1996; Kabeer, 2005; Kumar et al., 2021).

## **8. Conclusion**

Self-help groups (SHGs) have significantly improved women's financial access and social empowerment. Financial inclusion alone, however, does not necessarily guarantee economic autonomy. Despite the presumed saving, credit, and micro-enterprise participation in the household's financial management and decision-making, women still feel restricted by gender norms. Male family heads undertake higher-return investments, while women are expected to engage in low-return activities, thereby perpetuating male domination. This means that even though SHGs provide a source of economic power to women, they do not allow them to harness this fully. At a social level, SHG has brought about the better economic status of women, mobility, and participation in governance structures. However, it has left the women excluded based on caste, mobility, and a lack of changed mindsets to allow them into decision-making structures. This ongoing culture requires that SHGs must leap beyond micro-credit and repayment ceilings to overcome these system constraints, which are a reality. All these can be attained if the relevant authorities enhance the institutional changes, enhancing women's status and economic status, market access, and leadership in the government. The suggested policy implications for future development would include political sensitization of men, financial institution endorsement of women, and built-in mechanisms for continuing assessment so that the SHG can grow into its full potential. Besides financial linkages, whereby SHGs can position themselves as the channel for gendered development, financial, social, and institutional linkages are

important to getting SHGs to transform from lenders to catalysts for gendered change.

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