Research Article
Volume 11:5, 2022

Entrepreneurship & Organization Management

ISSN: 2169-026X Open Access

Grameen Bank's Microfinance Programme and Women's Social Capital in the Rural Areas of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Microfinance is one of the approaches used to tackle poverty. There are many debates over whether it is an effective scheme or not. An example of microfinance is seen being implemented by Grameen Bank (GB); it targets the rural areas of Bangladesh where women are the main beneficiary. Thus, the purpose of this research is to answer this question, what are the effects of GB's microfinance initiative on women's social capital in the rural areas of Bangladesh since its establishment in 1976? The information that will be analysed relating to the case study (women in the rural areas of Bangladesh) in this paper comes mainly from a study by Lamia Karim.

It is revealed that the GB's scheme has not only negatively affected women's social capital but also the community fabric has been seen to disintegrate. As a result of the program, many women have been seeking their self-interest and have become more individualistic. Indeed, due to the high rate of GB's interest and other factors, many women (the beneficiaries) have become poorer and are suffering. This paper provides evidence that the GB microfinance scheme is not the right approach to tackle poverty. The review will show that encouraging strong social capital can be an asset for poverty reduction, thus, when implementing any poverty reduction initiative this should be considered.

Keywords: Microfinance • Grameen bank • Social capital

Introduction

Poverty is a global issue that many scholars have tried to alleviate. One of the approaches to addressing this issue that is commonly used across the globe is the microfinance program. Microfinance is considered by many scholars to be an effective strategy of poverty alleviation [1-3]. One of the pioneering programs in this field is Grameen Bank (GB), which was established in a rural area of Bangladesh in 1976 and later implemented in many other countries. As it became a pioneer in fighting poverty, many studies were performed to evaluate its impact. This has led to different views on the subject in the literature. Its advocates look at it as a successful program that alleviates poverty and improves many people's lives [4]. Others describe it as a neoliberal approach that looks to gain profit from poor people. To help settle the debate, this paper employs a case study analysis of the women who borrow from GB's microfinance program, as they are the main beneficiaries of this program and they have common categories; they live in the same environment and have been affected by it, to examine GB's impacts on their social capital.

Thus, this study follows a deductive approach that starts with the social capital theory. Moreover, it is an explanatory study because it fills a research gap: no other studies look at the negative impact of GB on the social capital of participating women. The aim of this study is thus to answer the exploratory research question, "What are the effects of Grameen Bank's microfinance initiative on women's social capital in the rural areas of Bangladesh since its establishment in 1976?" It does not aim to generalise its findings, given the nature and purpose of case study methods within social science studies (Bailey). The information that will be analysed in this paper comes mainly from a study by Lamia Karim. This is an ethnographic study of the effects of microcredit on gender relations in the rural Bangladeshi community over eighteen months. It draws its evidence from the beneficiaries of GB themselves.

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Date of Submission: 06 February, 2022, Manuscript No. jeom-22-56246; **Editor assigned:** 09 March, 2022, PreQC No. P-56246; **Reviewed:** 10 March, 2022, QC No-56246; **Revised:** 17 May, 2022; Manuscript No. R-56246; **Published:** 22 May, 2022, 2022, DOI: 10.37421/2169-026X.2022.11.366

Literature Review

The microfinance approach

Microfinance programs have become a popular instrument for fighting poverty in the Global South since the 1970s. In 2004, one billion US dollars were committed by the international donor community to the microfinance sector. In 2005, the United Nations (UN) declared it the year of microcredit, which shows how important microfinance policy is. Microfinance's mission is to provide "small loans to individuals usually within groups as capital investment to enable income-generation through self-employment" [5]. Thus, this mission is based on allowing poor people access to credit, which helps them to escape poverty. The number of people who take loans from this program has increased over time. Banerjee, et al. [6] point out that the number of very poor families who take microloans has increased from 7.6 million in 1997 to 137.5 million in 2010-more than 18-fold.

Women are the main targets of this program. Littlefield, et al. [7] argue that microfinance targets women for several reasons: they approve of having more financial responsibilities than men, and thus a better repayment rate; they are more likely to invest their money in their households; it helps them to have more confidence and participate in decision making; and it makes women more assertive, which reduces the gap between genders. In contrast, Wright GAN [5] expresses concern that targeting women with development programs has led to overloading them and making them responsible for everything: cleaning, cooking, investing loans, and so on. This has raised a debate about whether this program is really helping poor families to cross the poverty line [8].

The advocates of this scheme look at it as a miracle that has helped people escape poverty. For example, Littlefield, et al. [9] argue that microfinance helps poor people not only with business investments, but also to meet their needs, such as health and education. The authors emphasise that microfinance is "the essential path out of poverty and hunger". Morduch and Haley [10] state that microfinance helps poor people to have smooth consumption, improves their nutrition (particularly for children) and has a positive impact on schooling. Moreover, Morduch states that "microfinance promises both to combat poverty and to develop the institutional capacity of financial systems through finding ways to cost-effectively lend money to poor households". Therefore, many aspects of poor people's lives can be improved through access to credit.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that escaping poverty is not only based on access to credit. A study by Banerjee, et al. found that microfinance is not enough to eradicate poverty and has negative effects on women's empowerment and human development. The authors (2015: 51) conclude that "microcredit therefore may not be the 'miracle' that it is sometimes claimed to be, although it does allow some households to invest in their small businesses". This is because their businesses are usually small: they mostly have no employees, target tiny groups, are unprofitable, and are difficult to expand. Hulme [11] adds that some poor people face difficulties in repaying their loans for various reasons: they lack the skills and knowledge to invest their loans, make bad decisions, and face circumstances beyond their control, like natural disasters. Overall, as Rogaly argues, "Micro-finance cannot be assumed to reduce poverty just because it achieves high levels of outreach or almost perfect repayment rates" [12].

A third perspective looks at microfinance as a "win-win" solution, where both poor people and financial institutions profit [13]. Hulme argues that "providing effective microfinance services to poor people is part of a poverty reduction strategy, but only a part".

Social capital and poverty reduction

Social capital has become an important factor in poverty alleviation. Many studies link social capital to economic development [14]. Putnam [15] defines social capital as the "connections among individuals' social networks, the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them". Field describes how to gain social capital: "the more people you know, and the more you share a common outlook with them, the richer you are in social capital" [16] Indeed, several principles must exist to have strong social capital. This is also suggested by the Australian Social Inclusion Board, which identifies participation in social networks, social norms and mutual trust. According to Doh and McNeely, a high level of trust is important for alleviating poverty and promoting economic development. Delhey and Newton [17] define trust as "the belief that will not deliberately or knowingly do us harm, if they can avoid it, and will look after our interests". This is because those who build their relationships based on trust are more likely to support each other in times of need with problems like poverty.

Many scholars argue that social capital has a positive impact on poverty alleviation and development. Weaver [18] points out that "the literature provides evidence that social capital is an effective strategy for reducing poverty and promoting economic well-being". Zhang, et al.state that "actors that are rich in social capital have a lower probability of living in poverty". Moreover, Robison and Siles argue that one of the significant positive roles that social capital plays within communities is reducing poverty. Indeed, the World Bank has emphasised the importance of social capital in reducing poverty and enhancing sustainable development [19]. On the other hand, Zhang, et al. argues that social networks are vital ingredients for economic development and bottom-up development based on a social capital perspective. Robison, et al. [20] argue similarly that "one reason to value social capital is because it can produce economic benefits and, if neglected, economic disadvantages". All this shows how important social capital is in poverty reduction and community development. Thus, many poverty reduction programs place importance on this area, working to enhance social capital within communities.

Social capital consists of bonding and bridging capital at the micro-level. Bonding capital works to create strong ties between family, friends, and neighbours. This helps to provide immediate assistance when it is needed, as in times of poverty. Bridging capital is gained through making contact with different groups in the community who have influence in institutions like the government to get their assistance [21]. Scholars point out that poor people need to have 'bridging' social capital, which might help them for economic purposes.

Moreover, social capital both affects and is affected by other forms of capital, such as physical, human and cultural capital. As Bourdieu [22] states, "social capital is never completely independent". Evans [23] further argues that "without social capital, physical and human capital is easily squandered". Buckland argues that "social capital can increase the efficiency of existing physical and human capital assets". Robison et al. argue also that "the lesson of the last several decades is that the productivity of physical, financial, human, and natural forms of capital depends on social capital". Therefore, addressing poverty requires taking a holistic view of communities to support their strengths and help them address their weaknesses.

Rural communities in Bangladesh (community context)

Rural areas in Bangladesh used to have strong social capital. Dowla explains that before GB's microfinancing, people depended on each other to meet their credit needs. It was common there to lend money without interest. However, as this social exchange was not enough to meet the demands of entire communities, GB was established to capitalise on the existing social support system, using the strength of relationships between people to secure repayments. As Anderson et al. [24] argue, "Microfinance programs use existing social capital, particularly in their group lending techniques".

As women are the main targets for micro financing, Balk describes women's presence within the Bangladeshi community structure as "being heavily secluded and segregated, maintaining the tradition of purdah curtain". Women are traditionally responsible for the management of the home and children, and strong norms discourage females from seeking work outside the home, which is considered the duty of men [25]. Moreover, Develtere and Huybrechts point out that "women [in the rural areas of Bangladesh] are not supposed to have any income independent of their husbands". Recent studies show further that women in rural areas of Bangladesh suffer significantly from depression, which has increased in recent years. Indeed, research by Gausia, et al. [26] examining depressive suicidal ideation among women in rural areas of Bangladesh found a high prevalence of antenatal depression among women. The main factor associated with this is the high prevalence of physical violence by their husbands, which was reported by 31 per cent of the women in a study by Gausia, et al. [27]. Another study by Naved and Akhtar [28] found that physical abuse from husbands is four times more influential than other factors in increasing suicidal ideation among women in Bangladeshi communities.

Analysis

History of Grameen Bank

GB was established by economist Professor Muhammed Yunus in 1976 in Bangladesh. It became a bank in 1983 with a portfolio of $3.1 million and 36,000 members; by 1997, this increased to a portfolio of $260 million with 2.3 million borrowers, the majority of whom were women from rural areas [29]. Gehlich-Shillabeer state that "over the past two decades microcredit has advanced from a 'novel' idea to a Nobel Peace Prize-winning concept for poverty alleviation". The groundbreaking premise of this program was that borrowers did not require the possession of any physical capital to secure a loan. Instead, it utilises social solidarity by organising borrowers into groups of usually five people that require weekly check-up meetings as guarantees. In contrast, formal economic institutions do not provide loans to poor people without physical collateral. Thus, GB has become a model for addressing poverty in countries other than Bangladesh, spreading to 54 countries by 2008. Morduch [30] argues that the spread of GB across the globe occurred because few other tools promise to fight poverty as effectively.

GB's policy has changed over time. The main shift in its policy is to target women instead of men, who were originally the principal loan recipients at the outset of the bank's establishment. This shift to targeting women was due to gendered difficulties in paying back loans and men's attitudes towards bank workers. GB employees described male clients as "arrogant: they argue with bank workers and sometimes they even threaten and scare the bank workers" [31]. On the other hand, Karim justifies targeting women because men refuse to be subjected to GB's strict rules. Karm's study finds that the real beneficiaries of the loans are men, not women, since men use 95 per cent of the loans. GB knows that the men who use the loan remain silent in public to fulfil the mandate of targeting women, and women are more easily manipulated than men. However, Professor Yunus argues that the shift to targeting women is due to their important roles in their families and communities [32] states that GB serves 2.6 million people across the country, 95 per cent of whom are women. Indeed, by May 2008, 7.5 million people globally had borrowed from GB, with 97 per cent being women [33]. However, due to the increasing number of borrowers, the question arises as to whether this project has improved the borrowers' lives or not. To understand the broader context of this project, I will first utilise existing literature to outline the effects of GB in the economic, political and social realms.

Economic effects

The main goal of GB is to address poverty. According to Latifee, studies show that about 50 per cent of the bank's borrowers had crossed the poverty line, another 25 per cent were close to crossing it and the rest were struggling due to health issues. Latifee adds that because of GB, many people have found jobs who previously had not earned any income, particularly females. Therefore, the program has improved many people's lives. One survey found that 91 per cent of borrowers reported that they had better lives after borrowing from GB. Schreiner states that a study by Hossain found that GB had also increased recipients' annual income by 43 per cent. Thus, these studies suggest that GB can have a positive economic impact on the community. However, these studies do not extensively acknowledge and discuss those who are struggling to repay their instalments due to GB's high interest rate. Indeed, they emphasise positive findings that support GB's programs and frame them as a panacea for poverty. Moreover, Karim states that microcredit "has been eulogized as a magic bullet of poverty alleviation". However, not all microfinance schemes initiated by GB successfully address people's lack of capital; if GB was the panacea for poverty, 43% of Bangladesh's population would not still live under the international poverty line [34].

On the other hand, Karim found that GB's microfinancing is a neoliberal approach. Harvey argues that "neoliberalism as an ideology rests on the idea that human welfare is best served by the withdrawal of the state from welfarist policies". A manager of GB replied to the author's reservations about the program: "Why are you surprised? Grameen Bank is a business and not a charity". Thus, as Karim argues, it is not a creditor but a debtor: it ties people together only to repay their debt.

Political effects

Alleviating poverty leads to increased freedoms. Latifee argues that the GB program has impacted poor people's political rights and obligations. Members of GB were elected as representatives within their local governments in 1997 and 2003. GB's borrowers have become leaders and decision-makers in their societies [35]. Based on this argument, women have been assisted to become independent within their communities and utilise their rights to be political leaders. However, studies have shown that not all women possess the freedom to utilise their loans freely, and some face violence because of this [36]. Thus, the question is raised of the extent to which women can utilise their political rights and be freely nominated for leadership positions.

Social effects

The central transformative effects of GB have occurred within the social sector. Latifee states that Bangladeshi women are, in general, not allowed to go outside the home; however, GB provides them with opportunities to develop social networks within the public space through the obligations of the microfinance program. Critically, the author does not discuss the extent of community resistance and what women face to do this. Furthermore, Latifee adds that the program assists in cultivating healthy lifestyles, where borrowers become conscious about their families' well-being. She notes that infant mortality has decreased by about 34 per cent among Grameen recipients. However, this study excluded other development programs in the country that may have impacted this figure, assuming a direct causal link between decreasing mortality rates and the GB program. The program does not directly work to improve health conditions or communities. Therefore, the following paragraphs will explore the effects of GB on women's social capital in rural areas of Bangladesh.

Social capital and GB

There is debate over whether the GB program has enhanced social capital or diminished it. Some scholars argue that GB has built social capital within rural communities of Bangladesh. Karim points out that the GB program aims to build social capital, which will positively affect community development. Dowla states that GB "is willing to sacrifice financial capital for the sake of maintaining social capital". Advocates of these arguments cite many reasons as evidence. Schreiner and Rouf argue that social capital in rural areas of Bangladesh is scarce because of how isolated women are from engaging in society; thus, GB addresses this issue through weekly meetings where women can socialise with their peers, share their experiences and receive support from each other. Moreover, Anderson et al. [37] claim that group lending techniques and group meetings have the potential to build human capital, which strengthens social capital in the community. The success of women in their business ventures allows them to provide job opportunities to local people, further strengthening social capital.

However, many scholars argue that the social capital already existing in rural areas of Bangladesh is the core element resulting in the success of the GB program. GB has used social solidarity as a guarantee for receiving loans, which would not happen without already-existing social networks within communities. As Matin, et al. [38] argue, the "greatest power of microfinance lies in the social, network and institutional capital that is unleashed in the proses of providing microfinance". Karlan found that GB's high repayment rate is due to social capital. Women share their experiences with other group members to reinforce their commitment to pay their loans on time, since deferring instalments may affect all members and, in turn, impact their social relationships. Furthermore, Larance [39] states that contrary to GB's argument, women have their own informal connections and associations, so their absence from public spaces does not mean they do not have existing relationships with other women. Indeed, if they do not already have existing relationships, how can they trust each other in money issues?

Norms of Trust

The main concept emerging from the literature related to social capital is trust-building, which relates to the GB program in two ways. There is the trust between poor people and money lenders, such as GB, and the trust among people that serves as the foundation of their relationships and a core element of strong social capital. Indeed, "trust is based on reputation and has ultimately to be acquired through behaviour over time in well-understood circumstances".

Regarding the first type of trust, financial institutions often require physical possessions and capital that poor people usually do not have to secure a loan, which makes it difficult for them to receive loans. GB's initiative allowed them to secure a loan. Dowla argues that GB's repayment rate is due to the trust that has been established between the bank and its borrowers. According to Dowla, this has led to trust between poor people and other loan providers, whereas before, this program's loan providers did not trust poor people to repay their loans. As a result, GB's recovery rate was 98 per cent, but the commercial government banks recovered less than 20 per cent [40]. This occurred even though GB's borrowers are poor and have a higher investment risk than the commercial bank borrowers, who could borrow based on physical collateral. However, the author did not provide any case evidence of formal institutions changing their policy and trusting poor people enough to offer them loans without physical possessions as collateral.

The second type of trust, between borrowers themselves, has also been affected. The social solidarity that is the basis for guaranteeing loans from GB is not built on trust, as GB contends, but is based on peer pressure. Dowla states that "the main motive behind organizing the borrowers into groups is to use peer pressure or 'social collateral' to guarantee repayment since all members are jointly liable for the loan". Indeed, studies have found that GB uses peer pressure to achieve a high repayment rate.

This is one of the downsides of social capital. Gilchrist argues that peer pressure may adversely impact an individual's decisions or contribute to excluding others from groups. This may increase poverty levels rather than reduce them. This is what happens with some of GB's borrowers who are not able to repay in time. As Karim found in the research,"House-breaking occurred several (six to seven) times, whereas smaller forms of public shaming occurred every week. There were several incidences of suicide committed by men who had been shamed by their inability to protect the honour of their families". This is because of the peer pressure and pressure on other members to pay their loans on time. As one of the borrowers who vandalized someone's house said, "It is not good to break someone's house, but we are forced to do it. This is how we get loans from Grameen Bank and other NGOs. They put pressure on us to recover the money, then we all get together and force defaulting members to give us the money. We don't care how we do it". This supports individualism, serves self-interest, and encourages competitiveness, which affects a community's social capital. Indeed, some poor people are not accepted by group members when they perceive they will default and thus fail to receive loans. Therefore, group solidarity serves GB's purposes rather than supporting community members and building trust.

Women's social wellbeing

GB advocates argue that the microfinance initiative has improved many people's lives and empowered women as the main beneficiaries of this program. Rahman states that there are many studies that consider this scheme as empowering rural Bangladeshi women and supporting their independence and confidence as leaders within their societies. For example, Fairley [44] and Amin and Becker state that providing women access to credit through this program has positively resulted in increased independence. Providing women access to capital separate from their husbands gives them power within their families and communities. Thus, empowering women is based on providing access to credit, resulting in increased independence, a platform for their voices in society, and influence in decision making. Moreover, Khandker argues that GB's provision of "credit to women led to improvements in the nutritional wellbeing of both male and female children". Thus, this will result in better living conditions for the whole community.

However, many studies have found that GB's program has led to increased domestic violence. The violence increases when women receive loans, generate more income than their partners or are unable to access the loans and need to wait [45]. argues that due to the GB program, 67 per cent of female borrowers have experienced domestic violence, with 70 per cent of cases being attributed to husbands. This is because GB does not consider the impact of loans on the community fabric and seeks to reap benefits as a neoliberal scheme. As Rouf states, women in Bangladesh "are controlled by men and are part of men's property". Karim points out that men laughed when they were asked whether the loan belonged to the women or not, and says "since their wives belong to them, the money rightfully belongs to them".

In many cases, bank employees fully acknowledge that men use the loans that women receive from the bank (Rahman). This is because, as Isserles believes, GB is founded on a neoliberal economic philosophy that focuses on profit. This has resulted in social coercion. Moreover, other scholars argue that GB has used women as mediators between men and GB: where the bank failed to force men to pay their instalments, women are more obedient to repayment obligations. As a result, they face corporal punishment from their husbands if they do not share their loans with them, compounded by peer pressure to pay their instalments on time . Therefore, women's empowerment may be a goal of GB, but studies show that it has exacerbated negative social conditions.

How has this impacted the whole community?

In the social sciences, there is a difference between a service delivery approach and a community development approach that aims to improve people's lives. Fahim Quadir believes that microcredit banks such as GB and NGOs in Bangladesh are designed according to service delivery approaches and are not suited to empowering women in their communities. This is evident if the women are not able to pay their instalments on time, as GB uses coercive force and power to make them do so. Indeed, there is evidence that GB uses the police to force women to make repayments. Karim states that they use "the apparatuses of the state, such as the police and courts, to harass these poor women to pay up". This tactic brings shame to women in a community built on strong social capital, where such news spreads quickly across the society. This shame might lead to divorce and, in some cases, suicide. As Karim states, "If the woman gets publicly shamed, the family is dishonoured". This seems to be neglected by GB's policy; as the manager of a leading Bangladeshi NGO related to GB reported. "We are committing Julum (oppression) on the poor We force them women to pay even if they have to sell possessions, sometimes even taking the rice from the mouths of their children".

Therefore, GB can create community conflicts and the disempowerment of women. Women have become more vulnerable in cases where GB has increased male domination. Accordingly, the suicide rate has increased among women in recent years, though the loans tend to have been used by husbands or relatives. According to Rouf, 47 per cent of GB's borrowers face domestic violence from their husbands, which affects family structure. As mentioned before, Rahman adds that GB's solidarity groups also contributed to the increase in violence. This method is used by GB as a safeguard to recover loans. Karim believes that "the prevailing situation among group members is one of strife and not one of solidarity". This affects their social networks and the social capital of the whole community.

Karim describes community relationships under GB as driven by self-interest rather than mutual support. Mallick considers this the "social costs resulting from microcredit". Moreover, Nandy describes the sense of community in the era of GB microfinance: "The neighbours are no longer neighbours; you discover that they have become individualized fellow citizens, who neither expect nor give quarter to anyone, often not even to their own families". Indeed, providing women access to credit threatens men's roles, with some resenting the perception of increased independence; thus, their relations become intense and violent. Moreover, Nawaz and McLaren found in their study on Bangladesh that women face the burden of working more hours doing both reproductive work (housework) and productive work (such as business). Thus, the authors (2016:21) conclude that "having microfinance for productive work can hardly result in women's empowerment if the reproductive aspect is ignored".

Conclusion

Studies reveal the importance of social capital in poverty reduction and economic development. On the other hand, there are debates about whether microfinance helps poor people to cross the poverty line. Based on analysis of the previous studies related to GB's scheme, particularly Karim's study, I have found that this program has impacted the social structure in the rural areas of Bangladesh. Communities' social capital was used to strengthen the program in the society and resulted in people becoming more individualistic and seeking their self-interest, which affected community social capital. What poor people actually need is to strengthen their bridging social capital through such programs; however, this program has affected the bonding social capital with their families and friends. Women, as the main targets of this program, have become more vulnerable among their families and friends. Due to the loan consequences, women face violence from their relatives, especially husbands, and some of them commit violence against other members who default on their payments. This affects their trust and, thus, their social capital. On the other hand, due to the violence they face, they become disempowered in their society when the program uses them as tools or mediators between the bank and men (the real beneficiaries of the loans). This is because the program does not attempt to educate men and help them change their perception towards women or target both genders (such as a husband and wife) to collaborate on a loan. Instead, it ignores men's power in a patriarchal community. The program might help to increase human capital in some exceptional cases, but the strength of human capital is affected by social capital. Overall, community altruism and the social fabric have been adversely impacted by GB's approach, in which negative social effects are ignored to seek profit. As the Prime Minister of Bangladesh said in March 2011 on the topic of financial institutions like GB, they "are sucking blood from the poor in the name of poverty alleviation".

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How to cite this article: Ahmed Saif Saad A-Shaaili. "Grameen Bank's Micro-finance Programme and Women's Social Capital in the Rural Areas of Bangladesh" *J Entrepren Organiz Manag* 11 (2022): 366.