

Bihar Women and Microfinance: A Gender Study

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Abstract

Women and men both play an important role in the development of society, but with the evolution of time, the condition of women in society has declined. To attain equality in society, the concept of gender equality has evolved. Gender equality is not just a fundamental right but also an essential foundation for creating a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. To attain a brighter and more sustainable development for all, the United Nations, along with its members, adopted 17 SDGs. Among the 17 SDGs, Gender Equality (SDG-05) ties in and is closely linked with microfinance that deals with women's empowerment. This paper tries to analyse how microfinance initiatives, particularly through their self-help groups, especially like "JEEVIKA" in Bihar, contributed towards women's economic empowerment and led towards Sustainable Development Goal 05, i.e., gender equality. This paper uses a qualitative research design method that has been employed for the study, primarily based on the analysis of secondary data to evaluate the role of microfinance through "JEEVIKA" in promoting gender equality, leading to sustainable development goal-05 in Bihar. The implementation of such microfinance programs in states like Bihar, through programs like JEEVIKA, has transformed the societal and economic status of women at large, leading to their economic empowerment and fostering gender equality.

Keywords: Economic Empowerment, Gender Equality, Jeevika, Microfinance, Sustainable Development Goals, Women Empowerment.

Introduction

"It is untrue that the soul of women is different from that of men. It is the same, with same powers and capacities." – Mahatma Gandhi. With this statement, Mahatma Gandhi emphasized the equality of men and women in terms of their spiritual and moral potential. The equalities of soul emphasize that men and women both have the same potential concerning strength, intelligence, and capabilities that extend to all the aspects of life, advocating for equal opportunities in economic, political, social, psychological, and technological aspects of life. The term gender equality implies equal rights for men and women in the society at large. In the context of women, who are always considered as the backbone of an economy, comprise nearly half of the global population, and remain marginalized in society. Despite having a major proportion in an economy, this section faces barriers like unequal employment opportunities, limited financial access, social discrimination, and psychological discrimination. The United Nations recognized these challenges and, in 2015, along with its 193 members, adopted the agenda of Sustainable Development Goals to promote

prosperity, protect the planet, and ensure peace and well-being for all. The Sustainable Development Goal is further subdivided into 17 SDGs, with goal 5 specifically targeting gender equality for all girls and women to boost their self-confidence and improve their status in society, which leads to women's empowerment. In India, the status of women has undergone a significant shift over time. During the Vedic period, women had a right to enjoy their autonomy, and they had social respect in society. They are free to choose their life partners and have the right to get educated and even the right to take control of their family; however, with the rise of patriarchal society, their role continued to be domestic responsibilities, which led them toward financial dependency and victims of domestic violence. In the present context, India's female labour force contributes only 18% to the gross domestic product despite having a 48% share of the population (1). According to the report published by NFHS 2019-2021, women who worked were paid in cash around 25% in urban areas and 25.6% in rural areas. Women, who married between the

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ages of 18 and 49 'experience spousal violence at a rate of around 24.2% in urban and 31.6% in rural areas across India (2). This gender disparity is even more pronounced in rural areas where opportunities for women are scarce and societal norms restrict women's participation. Microfinance has emerged as a transformative tool for the empowerment of women, particularly in rural areas, by providing small-scale financial services to those who lack collateral securities, enabling women to engage in income-generating activities and enhance their economic and social independence, leading to psychological empowerment. Previous studies have explored the role of microfinance in poverty alleviation in India and also in Bihar, but its impact on gender equality aligned specifically with Sustainable Development Goal 05, which talks about empowering women and girls, particularly in the regional context, specifically in the District of Bihar, remains unexplored. This study seeks to critically examine whether microfinance truly leads to the economic empowerment of women in the district of Bihar, using Sustainable Development Goal 05 as a framework for analysis. By assessing the role of microfinance in enhancing financial independence, entrepreneurship, and overall socio-economic status, this research contributes to the on-going disclosure of gender equality and sustainable development goal 05 in the context of Bihar.

In recent years, microfinance has emerged as a powerful tool mainly used to provide collateral-free credit, especially to the weaker sections of society and women, leading to economic empowerment and promoting gender equality in the society. The study is mainly grounded in two foundational theoretical concepts that frame the relationship between microfinance, women's empowerment, and gender equality, i.e., Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Approach and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach. According to Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Approach (1999), "Empowerment is a process of gaining the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where ability was previously denied." This model mainly highlights three inter-related dimensions—resource, agency, and achievements—which combined explain how access to financial services combined with social and institutional support can enhance women's decision-making power and improve their social status. Under this approach, a

resource is not just money, but it also includes knowledge, social capital, and institutional support to make women empowered and takes effective and efficient decisions in order to empower them. Agency indicates institutions, i.e., microfinance, which provide strength to the women by giving them financial resources and boosting their self-confidence to take decisions. Achievement indicates an improvement in women's lives, which makes them socially, psychologically, and economically empowered. Complementing this view, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach emphasizes that development should be evaluated not only by increasing the income and ownership of assets and material things but also by the expansion and freedom of capability to use the resources and make decisions independently. From this perspective, microfinance contributes to gender equality not only by increasing women's financial capital by providing financial support but also by improving their self-worth and enabling them to participate more in family as well as community decision-making. Together, this bot framework provides a clear idea about how microfinance initiatives in Bihar can lead to the economic empowerment of women, lead to gender equality, and achieve SDG 05.

Sustainable development refers to a development approach under which efforts are made by humans to ensure the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the future generation. It mainly emphasizes balancing the need for economic development, social justice, and environmental preservation to foster a more balanced, well-fed, and affluent world for all. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the agenda of sustainable development along with its 193 member countries across the world, focusing on peace and prosperity for people and the planet for the present and the future generation. At its heart are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call to action by all the developing and underdeveloped countries. The sustainable development goals include ending poverty and hunger, improving health and education, reducing inequalities, and empowering economic growth to attain a sustainable environment. Out of a total of 17 SDGs, Sustainable Development Goal 05 deals with "Gender Equalities: Empowering women and girls." Gender equality means developing a concept that ensures

equal rights, opportunities, and treatment in all aspects of life for all the people living in the society at large. This includes access to education, healthcare, employment, political parties, and freedom from discrimination or violence based on gender. In association with the sustainable development goal agenda, gender equality as per SDG-5 means breaking down all the barriers that prevent women and girls, regardless of their gender, from reaching their full potential and ensuring that all women and girls can live with dignity, fairness, and respect. It involves not only equal treatment but also addressing the underlying social, cultural, and economic structures that promote gender-based inequalities. Gender equality relates to the sustainable development goal for the following reason: it relies on reducing poverty connected with the sustainable development goal-01 and encouraging economic growth connected with the sustainable development goal-08. Gender equality in education and the labour market ensures the reduction of discrimination in the condition of women and girls in society, makes them economically empowered, boosts their entrepreneurial skills, and leads to an increase in the contribution towards the gross domestic product of the country.

A study conducted in Bangladesh on "Sustainable empowerment initiative among rural women through microcredit borrowing" states that microfinance attains sustainability by providing opportunities to its borrowers of microcredit, which leads to women's empowerment. This study also reveals that microfinance creates a significant impact on women's empowerment by giving opportunities to women in such a way that their participation increases in overall decision-making and other independent movements, which leads to enhancing their standard of living in society. This mainly leads to enhancing women's empowerment to attain sustainable development goals in Bangladesh (3). One of the researchers in their study on the role of Islamic microfinance institutions for sustainable development goals in Bangladesh states that microfinance impacts the empowerment of women to attain sustainability with its various instrument models. This instrument mainly works as a tool that helps in reducing poverty, ending hunger for food, providing good health, creating equality in

education, providing clean drinking water, and empowering women linked with various sustainable development goals and a sustainable economic climate for women (4). A study conducted in Pakistan on the effect of women's empowerment concludes that microfinance has significantly impacted the empowerment of women by reducing poverty and improving social status. It is also evident that the increased participation of women in microfinance leads to economic empowerment and uplifting the position of women in their families. This makes microfinance the most important and efficient tool for women's empowerment and a better platform for achieving sustainable development goals (5).

In the context of the National Paper about India, A study conducted on access to microfinance as a resilience policy to address sustainable development goals concludes that microfinance plays an important role in the context of smoothing the risk of unfavourable situations. It primarily works with a flexible policy, tackling adverse situations and poverty, empowering people, especially women, and improving their standard of living in society. (6). Women's empowerment as a sustainable goal through microcredit finance services regarding women's entrepreneurship reveals that microcredit services constitute a favourable relationship with the development of women's entrepreneurship. With microfinance, the credit facility of women increases, leading them to make investment decisions that boost entrepreneurship in them and lead to women's empowerment (7). A study on women's participation in achieving the sustainability of microfinance institutions examines the impact of female participation in the demand and supply side of microfinance on financial sustainability. This study reveals the negative impact on female borrowers and the positive impact on the outreach dimension. The results conclude that female participation in microfinance increases social performance and decreases financial sustainability (8). A study on the impact of microfinance on the empowerment of women workers shows that the demographic variables are not influencing the factors of women's empowerment. Women workers are not getting empowered by availing themselves of microfinance services. Microfinance works as a helpful tool that does not work on the empowerment of women; instead, it creates family

empowerment because the loan is utilized as another source of income (9). A study conducted to examine the role of microfinance in promoting sustainable development and reducing poverty explains that microfinance has enabled many individuals to start their small businesses, especially women. With access to financial resources, the income of households increases, which improves standards of living (10).

About the study conducted by various researchers in the context of Bihar, the performance of microfinance in the context of the empowerment of women in different ways, like a study on the impact of microfinance on poverty alleviation in the rural area of Bihar, reveals that microfinance creates a significant impact with a reduction in poverty and the creation of financial inclusion. Due to microfinance and its program, the income-earning activity of women increases, which mainly leads to an increase in the households of families with female heads (11). Another study conducted on microfinance in India with special reference to Bihar shows that in Bihar, microfinance mainly works as a game-changer in promoting social empowerment, financial inclusion, and economic empowerment among women at large (12). A study conducted on the contribution made by self-help groups towards the empowerment of women concludes that the women use microfinance loans as a secondary source of income; they mainly use this amount to improve their living standards and status in society at large (13). A study on the role of the JEEVIKA program in poverty alleviation shows that JEEVIKA creates a favourable impact on the empowerment of women through SHGs in Bihar by creating social awareness and active participation, increasing saving habits, and leading to an increase in the income level at their household. With this initiative, women get social recognition and a separate identity in society (14). A study conducted to measure the measures taken for women's economic empowerment in Bihar shows that policies like the LPG Connection for women in BPL families and the Chief Minister Girls Upliftment Scheme create diverse effects on the empowerment of women in Bihar (15).

While doing the literature review, it is evident that microfinance in the context of the empowerment of women shows positive as well as negative impacts. Many of the studies in the context of the international and national levels explain that

women's empowerment as sustainable development through microfinance creates a positive impact on the empowerment of women and leads to enhancing their condition in society, while some studies also explain that women are not getting empowered by availing themselves of microfinance services. Work as a helpful tool, which does not work on the empowerment of women; instead, microfinance creates family empowerment because the loan is utilized as another source of income. In the context of specific regions like Bihar, there are few studies found in the context of the empowerment of women leading towards sustainable development. Bihar is a state where most of its population depends upon agriculture. It is a state of a male-dominated society, with limited access of women to economic decision-making, limited financial opportunity, and limited opportunity to improve livelihood. Microfinance initiative programs like SHG "JEEVIKA" try to fill the gap by providing access to loans and savings to the poor, contributing to economic independence and empowerment, especially for women. So, this study attempts to address how microfinance initiatives, mainly with JEEVIKA in Bihar, can serve as an effective tool in reducing gender inequalities and promoting economic empowerment aligned with SDG-05, particularly in socio-economically challenged states in Bihar.

Methodology

This research mainly examines that how microfinance initiatives through their self-help groups, especially like "JEEVIKA" in Bihar, promote women's economic empowerment and lead towards Sustainable Development Goal 05. This study looked at how a microfinance initiative through its self-help group can serve as an effective tool in the economic empowerment of women and help in reducing gender inequality aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal-05 in the socio-economically challenged state of Bihar through its self-help group "JEEVIKA." This study employs a qualitative research design based entirely and solely on secondary data sources to evaluate microfinance's role in promoting gender equality towards sustainable development goal 05. To examine the relationship between microfinance (SHGs) and women's economic empowerment, as an independent variable, access to microfinance,

participation in SHGs, and improvement in household income are considered, and as a dependent variable, an increase in income, participation in economic activity, and enhancement in standard of living are considered. The outcome variable shows economic empowerment leading to gender equality through microfinance. The study hypothesized that "access to microfinance through its self-help group 'JEEVIKA' leads to the economic empowerment of women, which in turn promotes gender equality in Bihar." This research solely relies on secondary data and uses a descriptive analysis method to examine how microfinance through its self-help group leads to economic empowerment among women in promoting gender equality in Bihar. For this study, the descriptive analysis method is used because this method allows a detailed and structured evaluation using secondary data sources without statistical modelling and primary fieldwork for the study. Since this study does not involve any primary data collection or use any statistical tools, the descriptive analysis method is the most suitable for this study. The central hypothesis guiding this study is that "access to microfinance through self-help groups under JEEVIKA leads to the economic empowerment of women, which in turn promotes gender equality in Bihar." Data for the research is sourced from nationally recognized and reliable sources, including the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-05) 2019-2021 Report, the report of NABARD 2022-2023, and program evaluation reports from JEEVIKA (Bihar Rural Livelihood Promotion Society). In addition to the above, relevant academic literature and research studies, including peer-reviewed journals, books, and research paper discussions on microfinance, women's empowerment, and gender equality. This study also includes a socio-demographic profile of women in Bihar, drawn from secondary data sources. This section presents information on literacy levels, caste sections, rural-urban residence, and access to financial services. However, it must be noted that these data are aggregated at the state level, and micro-level disaggregation by sample group or geographic area was not available. As a result, while the study discusses intersectional dimensions, it is based on general and published findings rather than original survey data. Additionally, the studies incorporated

case studies, program evaluations, and success stories of women included in SHGs to illustrate how SHGs contribute to economic empowerment. Initiatives like Sister's Kitchen (Didi Ki Rasoi), rural markets (Grameen Bazar), etc., are examined to demonstrate how collective economic activities have led to increased autonomy and improved standards of living for women in Bihar. This study also considers the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on women's access to microfinance. Lastly, the scope and limitation of the study are clearly acknowledged. As no primary data collection was undertaken, and due to the aggregate nature of the data source, the study does not attempt detailed sampling or statistical generalization. Instead, it offers a qualitative and thematic understanding of the link between microfinance and women's empowerment in Bihar leading to gender equality.

Results and Discussion

In the context of India, gender equality is always a major concern, and it takes on a complex and multifaceted dimension. The country, with its rich cultural diversity and complex social dynamics, faces unique challenges in gender equality. In India, gender inequality is deeply rooted due to its socio-economic culture, patriarchal structure, and gender-based violence, which continue to affect women's empowerment. Various government initiatives have been introduced for the empowerment of women, and among all, microfinance has been recognized as one of the major and effective tools for the empowerment of women, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. Microfinance mainly provides financial support to the low group of society, especially women who are conventionally not able to use banking and other financial-related facilities due to a lack of collateral securities and a lack of financial knowledge. It is assumed to be the banking of the non-bankable by providing credit, savings, and other necessary financial facilities to those who have no collateral securities. In India, microfinance is mainly operated through NBFC-MFIs, SHGs, JLPs, and others. Out of these SHGs (self-help groups), they are considered an effective model for the empowerment of women toward gender equality. Under this model, women make an informal group of 15-20 members who join to save and provide loans to each other. These groups are mainly supported by various government programs,

NGOs, and banks that work as the foundation for the delivery of microfinance services in India, especially in rural and semi-urban areas for the empowerment of women. As per the report

published by NRLM (National Rural Livelihood Mission) in 2022-2023, around 8.5 million SHGs are operated in India, with over 100 million women participating.

Table 1: Represent Status of Microfinance among SHGs Exclusively for Women in India (16)

Category	No. of SHGS (In Lakhs)	Total Savings (Amt. in Crores)
SHGs Saving Linked	134.03	58,892.68
SHGs Saving Linked for Women	112.92	52,455.48
SHGs Credit Linked	42.96	1,45,200.23
SHGs Credit Linked for Women	41.42	1,39,315.69
SHGs having loan outstanding	69.57	1,88,078.80
SHGs having loan outstanding for Women	65.15	1,79,468.42

With this report in Table 1, it is evident that around 84.25% of the total SHGs are women-centric, which highlights the strong involvement of women in financial initiatives. Around 89% of total savings linked to women's SHGs contribute to a substantial portion of savings. 96.4% of total SHGs are women-

centric, suggesting that credit linkage is highly directed towards women's empowerment. The credit portion comprises 96% of total credit linked with women, showing the major involvement of women in financial inclusion.

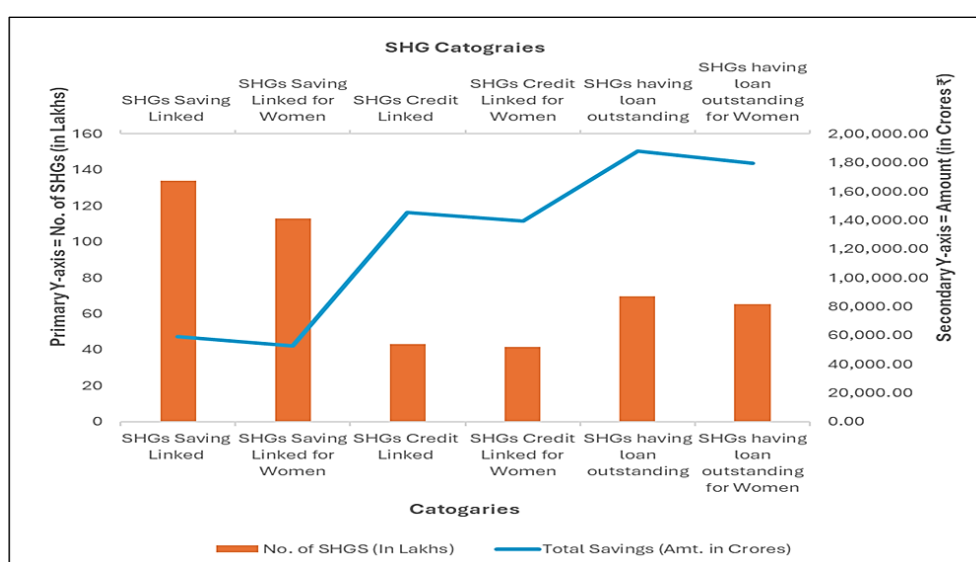


Figure 1: Represent SHGs Bank Linkage: Number vs. Amount (16)

Figure 1 indicates the “SHG Bank Linkage: Number vs. Amount” with the help of a graph. This graph encompasses the number of SHGs across six different categories with their total savings and credits. The x-axis in this graph shows SHGs linked with savings, credit, and loans outstanding, including women-specific SHGs. The y-axis includes two dimensions, i.e., the primary y-axis (left) shows the number of SHGs in lakhs, and the secondary y-axis (right) shows the total amount of savings in crores. The data showcase that most of the SHGs are linked with savings of about 135 lakhs, and many of them are women-centric,

around 113 lakhs. This indicates a high participation rate of women. On the other hand, fewer SHGs, around 43 lakhs, are linked to credit, but they handle more money, over 1.4 lakh crores. The highest money value is seen in SHGs with outstanding loans, especially those run by women, reaching 1.85 lakh crores. This means that saving SHGs involves more people, but credit-linked SHGs deal with more money. Overall analysis from the given chart indicates that women play a big role in both participation and money handling through SHGs, which shows their growing importance and economic empowerment leading to SDG 05.

Socio-Demographic Background of Women in Bihar

Bihar, considered the 12th largest state of India and one of the most populated and socioeconomically challenged states, presents a complex sociodemographic profile, especially for women in Bihar. According to the 2011 census, of a total population of 104.1 million, approximately 48.5%, i.e., around 63 million, belongs to individual women in the state. The majority of women, nearly around 89% of the women population, reside in the rural area, where access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities remains significantly limited. Most of the population in the rural area depends upon agriculture and its allied activities. Men are typically seen as the breadwinners of their families, and women are often expected to manage the household, taking care of their children. In Bihar, education remains a crucial area of concern for women. Many initiatives and programs have been run by the government to improve literacy, especially for women belonging to the rural sector, but still female literacy in Bihar is around 61%, which is much lower than the national average and far behind the male literacy rate. The gap in literacy arises due to the common concept of early marriage in the society at large scale, high level of poverty rate, household duties, and lack of access to education in rural areas. According to the caste-based survey of 2022, around 34.13% of households are identified as poor, and the earnings are less than Rs. 6,000 per month. According to the NHFS-05 data, around 41% of women aged between 20 and 24 were married before 18 years, which pushed them into early motherhood, which cut their education opportunities and limited their economic growth. The total fertility rate remains high at 2.98, restricting women's autonomy and placing them at health and financial risk. In the context of the labour participation rate, around 14% of women are engaged in paid work, with most working in the informal sector, such as agriculture and household labour. Caste and religion also affect the social identity of women in Bihar. Women from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and Muslim communities face multiple layers of discrimination and violence, including lower access to education, healthcare, and utilization of economic resources. The 2022 Bihar Caste Survey reveals that around 42.9% of

Scheduled Caste and 42.7% of Scheduled Tribe households live below the poverty line, which limits their educational attainment and opportunities, which creates a separate identity for them in the society.

Bihar is a purely agrarian society with a large portion of its workforce dependent upon agriculture and activities allied to agriculture. The demographic condition of Bihar, containing socio-economic barriers, leads towards the emergence of microfinance as a powerful instrument for women's empowerment by providing small loans and financial services to women who lack credit due to collateral securities and access to formal banking services. As per data available on the e-governance application launched by the Ministry of Rural Development, Bihar has become the first state with the largest number of self-help groups, which are largely managed by women, functioning under the JEEVIKA program for the empowerment of women in 38 districts having 534 blocks in Bihar. After getting involved in JEEVIKA, the annual income of household participants increases, which allows them to invest more in health, education, and nutrition, which promotes the standard of living of the women and their families and makes the female's position in the family stronger by making them financially secure. India's JEEVIKA Program, financed by the World Bank, is considered the country's largest state-level program working exclusively for women in the state of Bihar. From 2023 to 2024, the project has worked with more than 10 million women SHG members and the formation of 1.5 million SHGs, including them in economic activity by providing them access to financial resources, improving their health and nutrition, and generating employment and entrepreneurship activities, leading to women's empowerment and promoting gender equality in Bihar (SHG Count). In Bihar, the model of JEEVIKA, through its SHGs, promotes financial inclusion and the empowerment of women in a very effective way.

Effect of Covid-19 Pandemic on Women's Access to Microfinance in Bihar

As we all know, in 2020, the entire world faced a problem with the Covid-19 pandemic. The nationwide lockdown and public health restrictions imposed between 2020 and 2022 disrupted community-level financial activities

across the state of Bihar. The nationwide lockdown disturbed the routine SHG meetings; internal lending and financial literacy were suspended due to social distancing mandates. This disruption was most affected among women who are mainly involved in the informal sector and who lack access to credit. Despite the widespread disruption, the microfinance ecosystem in Bihar demonstrates notable resilience and innovation in empowering rural women in Bihar. During this situation, women in JEEVIKA worked as bank employees, ensuring that over 543 crores of transactions were completed using PSU devices to bring financial services to the doorstep of those who needed them in rural and remote areas of Bihar (17). Along with this, JEEVIKA creates economic empowerment opportunities for women belonging to rural communities by engaging them in the production of over 2.14 crore masks, which not only contribute to community health safety but also help them in the context of the generation of income, which improves their financial condition during that pandemic and makes them empowered (18). The women utilize the skills of stitching and tailoring, which create additional income for their families. To boost economic empowerment among women in Bihar, “Sister’s Kitchen (Didi Ki Rasoi),” a community kitchen, is run by women who belong to the Self-Help Group. With this group, they provide quality food to individuals and families and earn a livelihood through the management and operation of these kitchens, which strengthens their economic standing, especially when the women do not have any source of income. This encourages the standard of living of the family and boosts their economic independence. A report of the World Bank Group in context to a program run under microfinance in Bihar, i.e., Sister’s Kitchen (Didi Ki Rasoi)—rural lead enterprises create women entrepreneurship, enhance their economic independence, and empower women to promote gender equality.

In the context of the current scenario, the above 83 Sisters’ Kitchens (Didi Ki Rasoi) perform their day-to-day operations in different districts of Bihar, mainly in government hospitals, medical colleges, schools, banks, and other institutions. To perform this work, more than 1,200 women’s entrepreneurship and 150 full-time female employees are working, who are supported by 20 consultants having expertise in hotel management

and catering (19). The post-pandemic period reveals that SHGs in Bihar have successfully assessed a loan of Rs. 12,200 crores from the bank, which enables women to start their income-generating activities, from small ventures to agricultural ventures. With this initiative, women are allowed to boost their economic independence, diversify income sources, and build economic resilience for themselves and their families. In Bihar, a large number of programs are to be run by SHGs to empower women economically with different activities like Madhubani arts, grass craft (Sikki), Sujani embroidery (textile expressive art product), beekeeping, jute (*Corchorus* spp.) work, Sister’s Kitchen (Didi Ki Rasoi), Rural Market (Grameen Bazar), “Apna Jeevika” Hat—Evolving Rural Market Space, etc., making them financially strong and independent in the society at large. As per the report published by NABARD 2022-2023, South Bihar Grameen Bank (Dakshin Bihar Grameen Bank) runs a special financial literacy program and enables access to banking services for rural communities, especially among women, due to facing problems regarding lack of awareness about banking services and having limited access to livelihood opportunities. There are various case studies and related stories that show examples of women’s empowerment in Bihar through microfinance, especially in terms of economics, which promotes gender equality toward sustainable development goal 05.

Case Studies Lead to Economic Empowerment of Women in Bihar

Story 01: Leela Devi of Baghmanjhua Village, Bhojpur District in Bihar, has 1 salaried person and five family members. According to her statement, “My husband is working in a grocery store, and it has not been easy to support our family just on his salary. In 2022, I joined Sister’s Kitchen (Didi Ki Rasoi)” with hesitation and fear to support my family. Before joining this group, I was just like an ordinary woman. I had no real sense of identity or uniqueness. Sister’s Kitchen (Didi Ki Rasoi) gives me a sense of self-respect, which boosts my social empowerment, as I don’t ask my husband for money anymore, which shows psychological empowerment. Now, I earn a salary of Rs. 8,000–10,000 each month to support my family, which shows financial or economic empowerment.

Story 02: Munni Kumari wants to support her family and increase her income for a better life and

has joined the SHGs Bank Sakhi Program. With this program, 287 bank accounts were opened by Munni's Bank Sakhi, which boosts financial inclusion and increases habits of saving, and with this, the women can open a bank account, save money, and transfer the funds for better utilization. This program mainly empowers women socially and economically and improves the condition of society at large. This initiative also promotes gender equality, which aligns with the sustainable development goal 05.

Story 03: Ms. Sarita belongs to Kesath Panchayat, Buxar district. She faced the problem of a financial crisis during the Covid-19 pandemic when her husband was the only earning member of the family. With the help of the self-help group, Sarita obtained a loan of Rs. 30,000 for opening a grocery shop. As per Sarita's statement, "I was able to do sales of Rs.600-800 per day and earn Rs.200-300 per day, which boosted their economic condition, improved their standard of living, improved their self-confidence, and made my position stronger in the family. With this, Sarita was able to promote economic empowerment linked to gender equality towards the sustainable development goal.

With the study, it is evident that microfinance has become the most significant program for the financial inclusion of women and their economic empowerment. With over 10 million women involved in 1.5 million SHGs, most of the rural women are enabled to get access to financial resources that they would be otherwise excluded from formal banking services. This program has opened the door for them to participate in economic activity, contribute to poverty alleviation, and achieve SDG. -05 This program has led to an increase in the household income, which has gotten a boost to a 30% rise in income. This boost in income supports the male member of the family, improves the standard of living of the family, and boosts the self-confidence of women. With this position of women in the family, get increases. Sister's Kitchen (Didi Ki Rasoi), a community kitchen run by women from SHGs, has led to the successful example of women entrepreneurship in over 1,200 women enterprises. These community kitchens boost job opportunities for women, provide them a suitable income, build self-confidence to manage their own businesses, and contribute to economic independence and social empowerment in the

community. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the production of over 2.14 crore masks created an outstanding effort to create an economic empowerment opportunity during the crisis in Bihar. This initiative by SHGs not only boosts public health safety but also creates an opportunity for women to earn income even in that situation where everyone is facing the problem of financial crisis.

Intersectional Dimension of Women's Economic Empowerment of Women in Bihar

The impact of microfinance on women's economic empowerment in Bihar is not homogeneous. It is significantly shaped by intersecting factors such as caste, marital status, literacy rate, rural-urban location, and many more. As per Census 2011, Scheduled Castes constitute approx. 15.9% of the state's population, while Scheduled Tribes women account for 13%. These groups have historically faced social exclusion, limited access to land and property, violence on a large scale both in family and in society, and discrimination in society at large. Women who belong to this particular section of society are often excluded from the decision-making role either in the family or in the society. Although many initiatives have been run by the government for their development and empowerment, in all of them, one initiative, like JEEVIKA, has increased the participation of these groups on a very large scale. The annual report of JEEVIKA 2022-2023 showcases that SC and ST Women receive small amounts of loans from SHGs for their development, but the amounts that are received by them have less participation in entrepreneurial activities due to lack of training and knowledge and due to societal barriers, values, and customs of their particular communities. As we already discussed, Bihar is a highly rural state; around 88.7% of its population belongs to the rural area. In the rural area, women often have less bank access due to less information about government schemes and traditional restrictions on going out of the home. These issues limit their participation in SHGs and reduce the chance of starting or expanding a business using microfinance. According to the 2011 census, only 61.8% of women in Bihar are literate, and in the context of rural areas, it is only around approx. 49%. Due to this, a woman who can't read or write may not

understand loan terms, may struggle to keep financial records, and may depend upon others to make financial decisions, which reduces the impact of microfinance on the empowerment of women. Bihar is the state that faces a large number of labour migrations every year, especially in the rural area. As per the research article, almost every five people in rural Bihar face the problem of labour migration. In this situation, the overall burden of the family shifted from the male member to the female member. With this shift, women's financial responsibilities increase, and participation in SHGs also increases, not for the purpose of empowerment but to treat microfinance loans as another source of income. All these challenges showcase that providing microfinance alone is not enough to empower all women equally; the empowerment also depends upon the values, norms, and customs of the society at large.

Impact of Financial Inclusion on Household Dynamics

The integration of women into microfinance through SHGs like JEEVIKA in Bihar significantly impacted household dynamics in both positive and negative ways. Microfinance, when accessed through programs like JEEVIKA, has enabled women to gain financial literacy through educational programs, access banking institutions and open bank accounts, use PSU and digital banking through SEVA Kendra, access institutional credit, and participate in training programs for new business opportunities, contributing to the social, psychological, and economic empowerment of women and also contributing to an increase in the household income of the family. This has helped many women to feel more confident and gain respect in their families and communities. In some homes, women are now more involved in the decision-making process, which shows their psychological empowerment in the society. But, apart from this, some traditional households still believe that women are born with a purpose to raise their children and manage the household in the society. Due to this situation, sometimes women are pressured to take out loans for male members of the families and relatives to satisfy their needs and wants. In the case of labour migration, when the burden of the families comes under the head of women, they treat microfinance as another source of income rather than their

empowerment opportunities. Due to having a lack of collateral securities, women take out loans to start businesses, but when the businesses don't perform well, women are the ones who have to pay the interest and face pressure to repay the loan money. So, microfinance in Bihar helps women become more financially independent, but it has also shown that real empowerment takes place when the support is obtained from families and society.

Conclusion

The finding of the study reveals that the implementation of the microfinance program in Bihar, through its programs like JEEVIKA, has significantly transformed the status of women in society at large, leading to women's economic empowerment and gender equality. With various positive outcomes such as providing women with access to finance, increased household income, entrepreneurial ventures, and improved crisis response, this program helps women to escape from socio-economic barriers, enables them to improve their financial stability, boosts their self-confidence, and improves their status in family and community. With the increased amount of income, the women can spend their money independently on the education and health sectors, which not only boosts their economic empowerment but also strengthens their position within their family, leading to social and psychological empowerment. The implementation of microfinance programs like Sister's Kitchen (Didi Ki Rasoi) and Bank Sakhis has transformed the status of women by providing various entrepreneurial opportunities, enhancing women's knowledge about finance, and providing access to the banking sector. This mainly led to the empowerment of women economically, directly contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 05. Along with these positive outcomes, there is still a need for further research to explore the long-term impact of these programs. Along with this, with the evolution of time and changing advanced technology, there is a need to study the barriers faced by women in the context of digital financial inclusion that still need to be explored. While economic empowerment is quantified in terms of income, there is still a need to study the longitudinal study related to the psychological and social need for microfinance, especially in Bihar.

Abbreviations

BPL: Below Poverty Line, JLPs: Joint Liability Groups, LPG: Liquefied Petroleum Gas, NABARD: National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, NBFC – MFI: Non-Banking Financial Company – Microfinance Institution, NFHS: National Family Health Survey, NGO: Non-Governmental Organization, NRLM: National Rural Livelihoods Mission, SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals, SHGs: Self-Help Groups,

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Author Contributions

The manuscript has accurate citations for all sources. All facets of this study, including conception, literature reviews, secondary source data gathering, analysis, conclusion, and manuscript writing, were entirely the author's responsibility.

Conflict of Interest

Regarding this study, the author discloses no conflicts of interest.

Ethics Approval

This study is purely and solely based on secondary data sources from available reports, academic publications, and official government documents. No primary data were collected, and no human participants were involved.

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