


THE IMPACT OF MICROFINANCE ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: A CASE STUDY OF MAZAR-I-SHARIF, BALKH, AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to assess the effect of microfinance on the empowerment of women in Afghanistan in terms of economic, educational, decision-making, and social status. The country has been plagued by poverty and conflict for more than 30 years, with women being the most severely impacted. Microfinance institutions have been introduced to alleviate poverty, with a focus on women. A quantitative research method was used, with 100 randomly selected women clients of Microcredit. The study found that microfinance has had a significant impact on women's economic empowerment, education, decision-making, and social status. However, access to microfinance services was challenging due to the need for a guarantor. Furthermore, the regression analysis showed that microfinance's economic empowerment, education, decision-making, and social status have a positive and significant impact on women's empowerment in Afghanistan. However, under the new regime, Microcredit is no longer available for women, which could have a significant impact on their empowerment, given the high poverty rate, particularly among women. Therefore, the study recommends that the government allow and encourage microfinance institutions to provide credit facilities to women in these challenging circumstances.

Keywords: Micro-finance, Women Empowerment, Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan

Jel Code: G2, G21, J16

1. Introduction

By the year 2000, Afghanistan held the unfortunate distinction of being the nation with the largest refugee population globally, the highest mortality rate, and the highest production of opium. Within the country, over half of its population remained largely unseen and received negligible attention in terms of social, political, and economic matters. This situation, as highlighted by Nemat (2011), rendered them practically invisible and marginalized within Afghan Society. Since

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1996, Afghanistan has undergone significant political upheavals and transformations. The Taliban, an extremist Islamist group, seized control of the country in 1996, imposing a strict interpretation of Islamic law. Their rule resulted in repressive policies, particularly affecting women's rights and cultural freedoms. In 2001, following the 9/11 attacks, the United States intervened, ousting the Taliban regime, and initiating a period of reconstruction and democratization. Subsequent years saw the establishment of a fragile democratic government, but the security situation remained precarious due to persistent insurgencies. Fast-forwarding to 2021, the U.S. announced its withdrawal, leading to the rapid takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban once again on 15 August 2021, marking a turbulent chapter in the country's political history. The international community closely monitored the situation, grappling with the implications of this power shift and the future of Afghan governance.

Furthermore, in terms of gender inequality, Afghanistan grapples with severe gender inequality, as reflected in its Global Gender Inequality Index (GII) values over the years. In 2015, the GII stood at 0.706, indicating notable gender disparities. By 2019, although a slight improvement was noted with a reduction to 0.665, the situation worsened in 2021, with the index rising to 0.678 (UNDP, 2021). Alarming findings from the Global Gender Gap Report (2023) by the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2023) underscore Afghanistan's persistent struggle for gender equality. The nation consistently ranks at the bottom among 146 countries, earning the unfortunate distinction of being the world's worst country in gender equality in 2021 and 2022. Despite a marginal increase in the GII in 2021, Afghanistan's gender equality score remains distressingly low at 40.5%, securing its place at the bottom of the distribution, 149. The Taliban's assumption of control in August 2021 exacerbated the situation, as they imposed orders curtailing women's rights and freedoms, further entrenching gender inequality within Afghan Society

Furthermore, according to a 2011 survey by the Thomson Foundation it is released that one of the most dangerous places for women is Afghanistan (Luccaro & Gaston, 2014). Women in certain parts of the world are facing significant dangers, such as high mortality rates, restricted access to medical care, education, and social and economic rights, as well as abuse and violence. According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), a shocking 87% of women in Afghanistan are subjected to abuse and violence (cited at Ullah, 2017). Furthermore, reports from Human Rights Watch (HRW) indicate that women in areas under Taliban control are constantly living in fear of threats, intimidation, and violence. The Taliban has targeted girls' schools, female political leaders, and activists, resulting in several murders (Khan & Zyck, 2012).

Besides, on the economic front, the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) ¹ reported that participation in women's labour force is much lower than men's, 47% and 86%, respectively (Khan & Zyck, 2012). In addition, based on the Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey, the active economic population includes 80% men and only 20% women; however, almost half

¹ "National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment, which the Afghan government and the European Union conducted." Accessed February 2, 2024, <https://www.ilo.org/surveyLib/index.php/catalog/7922/download/48989>. Retrieved by Central Statistic Organization of Afghanistan.

of the country's population is women (Mariia et al., 2019). The Parliamentary Information and Research Service (PIRS) of the Canadian government reports that women need more support in their efforts to make a living, as they have restricted economic prospects and are predominantly confined to working within their households. PIRS notes that women's participation in the workforce is primarily restricted to occupations such as agriculture and animal husbandry. Also, it is presented that even if women generate income for their household, they have limited control over that (Khan & Zyck, 2012).

A considerable number of women in Afghanistan are experiencing poverty, with most falling into the category of "chronically poor" as defined by the Millennium Development Goals of Afghanistan report (MDGs, 2005). Available resources for these women only generate USD1 per person daily. This poverty is not limited to women who head households but is prevalent among most women in the country (Noor et al., 2008).

The literacy rate in Afghanistan is the lowest globally, with women being disproportionately affected. The gap can be attributed, in large part, to the six-year rule of the Taliban, during which girls' schools were closed (Campbell, 2017). Importantly, it is currently continuing in Afghanistan. As a result, according to UNISCO's reports, the adult literacy rate for females was 29.81% in 2018, which shows a meagre literacy rate compared to other countries (Afghanistan-Literacy rate, 2018). For instance, the literacy rates for females in Spain, Italy, Greece, the United Arab Emirates, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Malaysia are 97.97%, 98.97%, 97.39%, 95.10%, 99.68%, 99.5%, and 93.5%, respectively (Afghanistan-Literacy rate, 2018). Moreover, the literacy rate of Afghanistan in 2022 was 37.3% (22.6% for women and 52.1% for men) (UNESCO, 2023). Due to their limited literacy levels, Afghan women face significant challenges in securing formal employment, resulting in less than 20% of them being able to contribute to household income. Furthermore, Afghan men tend to invest more in their sons' education, even sending them abroad for higher education, while neglecting the education of their daughters. This is often due to gender bias, as Afghan men tend to view women as unlikely to become family breadwinners (Rahimi, 1991; Mashwani, 2017).

The United Nations has reported that millions of women and girls in Afghanistan are facing significant challenges due to the country's conservative culture, including child marriage and honour killings, with the government struggling to enforce laws against such practices (UN Women, 2013). The Ministry of Women's Affairs in 2018, as cited in Mariia et al. (2019), has stated that 60-80% of all marriages in Afghanistan are forced, and 57% of brides are under the age of 16, leading to early childbearing and maternal deaths. According to Taylor and Perezniето (2014), microfinance is seen "as a way to empower women, not only by giving them greater access to resources but also by increasing their ability to control those resources. This can lead to economic empowerment for women, where they have equal access to and control over economic resources, thereby increasing their control over other areas of their lives. However, microfinance faces various challenges, including religious obstacles related to the Islamic prohibition on paying and receiving interest. Nichols (2010) stated that some microfinance institutions tried

to overcome this challenge by renaming interest fees as service and administrative fees. The impact of microfinance on women's empowerment, especially in terms of Microcredit, savings, and insurance products, is still uncertain. According to Ashraf et al. (2010), many studies on this issue may be biased in selecting females who have access to microfinance.

Moreover, cultural and socioeconomic factors, as well as attitudes towards loans, can affect the impact of microfinance on women's empowerment, resulting in variations from one region to another. Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of considering the social and cultural context when assessing the impact of microfinance on women's empowerment (Kabeer, 2001; Mayoux, 2000; Rahman, 1999). These studies have shown that the effectiveness of microfinance interventions varies greatly depending on local conditions, including cultural norms, socioeconomic factors, and institutional arrangements. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach to microfinance may not be appropriate. Several studies have shown varying results in the impact of microcredit on women's empowerment in different regions. For instance, studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa have shown both positive and negative impacts or no impact at all (Awojobi, 2014; Bercaw, 2012). However, there is a lack of empirical studies focusing on the impact of microfinance programs on women's empowerment in Afghanistan. Therefore, this research aims to examine the economic and social empowerment of women through microfinance in Balkh province, Afghanistan.

The study will also assess the accessibility of microfinance services, as borrowers face challenges such as unavailability and limited access to loans. Furthermore, borrowers' understanding of the credit structure and its nature will also be evaluated (Saeed & Akshay, 2008). Although most studies on women's empowerment through microfinance focus on rural areas, a study conducted in an urban area of Malaysia has shown that microfinance can also empower women in urban areas (Al-Shami et al., 2016). However, this study targets all women regardless of their marital status and location.

The history of banking in Afghanistan reflects the impact of decades of war, leading to the collapse of the formal banking system. Currently, microfinance services are provided by formal institutions like banks, semiformal entities like NGOs, and informal sources such as moneylenders. Imported microfinance models dominate, with a focus on group lending and solidarity groups. Individual lending, involving credit provision to individuals outside a group, is utilized by both banks and microfinance institutions (MFIs) in Afghanistan. Individual loan sizes range from \$120 to \$6000, with a client's credit history and relationship with the lending institution determining access to larger loans. Group lending methodologies involve forming small groups that act as guarantors for each other's loans, promoting peer pressure as collateral. The Village Banking approach, community-managed savings, and loan associations, faces limitations based on community savings capacity. Credit unions, introduced with USAID and MISFA funding, follow Islamic banking principles. Some organizations have experimented with Self Help Groups, Seed Banks, and integrated development programs to address specific social needs. Individual lending is

considered the most desirable, but challenges include weak infrastructure and administration costs for reaching rural clients (Hussein, 2009).

Although surveys have been carried out in Afghanistan to evaluate the impact of microfinance on women's lives and gender mainstreaming, no scholarly investigation has yet been undertaken on the subject of women's empowerment through microfinance in the country. These surveys, such as those conducted by Sengupta and Aubuchon (2008) and on gender mainstreaming in Afghanistan's microfinance sector, did not specifically focus on how microfinance empowered women in Afghanistan. However, given the critical role that women play in the economic development of any country, empowering women can have significant impacts on the country's overall economic growth and development. International institutions like the World Bank have recognized the empowerment of women as a crucial factor in achieving economic development. Thus, it is essential to know the impact of microfinance on women's empowerment by doing the field research.

Moreover, according to the Executive Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, Microcredit is about much more than access to money. It is about women gaining control over the means to make a living. It is about women lifting themselves out of poverty and vulnerability. It is about women achieving economic and political empowerment within their homes, their villages, their countries (Colaco & Rangamani, 2013: 1).

This research aims to address the gap in academic research on the impact of microfinance on women's empowerment in Afghanistan, particularly in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, Balkh province. By examining the micro-credit program's effects, the study intends to contribute to the existing literature and evidence on the topic. The primary objective is to analyze how microfinance programs impact women's empowerment in the region. Also, the study will answer the question, what is the relationship between microfinance and women's empowerment? What are the obstacles that women encounter when trying to gain access to microfinance programs?

2. Literature Review

Microfinance institutions (MFIs) in Afghanistan prioritize serving female clients, recognizing them as the most economically vulnerable due to limited access to productive assets. Hussein (2009) emphasizes this focus, aligning with Central Statistics Organization (2018) data highlighting women as a critical demographic in poverty. Haidari's (2018) research, utilizing primary data and regression analysis, reveals that women participating in microfinance contribute more to household income than non-participants. Nazari's (2016) field survey confirms the positive impact of microfinance credit on clients' earnings in Afghanistan.

There is a need for more research in this field in Afghanistan, so to complete this section, we are looking at other studies in countries that have situations similar to Afghanistan's. Several studies conducted in Pakistan have investigated the impact of microcredit on women's empowerment.

Khan (2012) study for District Bahawalpur focused on identifying socioeconomic factors influencing women's empowerment among microcredit recipients between 2002-2009. Utilizing multiple linear regression analysis, the study found that factors such as the woman's age, husband's education level, inherited assets, marital status, number of living sons, and microfinance amount received significantly influenced women's empowerment, with microfinance showing a positive effect. Fayyaz et al. (2016) also explored Bahawalpur, using a logit model on 400 samples, revealing that microcredit programs positively impact household income and enhance the quality of life in underdeveloped regions. Sulaiman (2012) study, employing the Johansen co-integration approach, established a long-term relationship between poverty, economic growth, microfinance, and women's empowerment in Pakistan, with positive and significant correlations. In the context of India, Garikipati (2008), Modi et al. (2014), and Lavoori & Paramanik (2014) collectively investigated the effects of microfinance services, particularly microcredit, on women's empowerment. Garikipati (2008) found that women's income and assets were positively impacted, supporting the conclusion of Modi et al. (2014) such that microfinance services empower women in both family and society. Lavoori & Paramanik (2014) highlighted the positive influence of husband's income, family size, and self-help group meetings on women's empowerment through microcredit, based on logit model analysis.

Several studies have investigated the relationship between women's empowerment and microcredit programs in various regions. Akhter and Cheng (2020) conducted research in Bangladesh, employing logistic regression analysis, and found that participation in microcredit positively impacts women's decision-making abilities, legal awareness, independent movements, mobility, and living standards. Debnath et al. (2019) focused on microcredit accessibility in rural Bangladesh, revealing that participation enhances women's control over savings and decision-making power within households. Pitt et al. (2006) demonstrated, using the ordinary least squares method, that microcredit contributes to overall women's empowerment. In Tanzania, Kirigiti Josephat et al. (2017) found that microfinance institutions positively impact economic, interpersonal, and familial empowerment, but not legal and political empowerment. Kato and Kratzer (2013) observed increased empowerment among MFI members, including control over savings, decision-making participation, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and enhanced mobility. Chhay (2011) reported positive economic effects of microfinance programs in Cambodia. In Yemen, Alshebami & Khandare (2015) highlighted the challenges women face in accessing microfinance but noted positive impacts for those who participate. Mulugeta & Gutu (2016) found positive effects on empowerment indicators in Ethiopia. Addai (2017) studied microfinance services in Ghana, revealing positive relationships with economic and social empowerment, influenced by marital status, education level, and age, while high-interest rates posed challenges.

Phuoc & Nguyen (2018) utilized logistic regression to analyze data from 544 women in Vietnam, revealing that microfinance members demonstrated higher empowerment levels in economic security, household decision-making, and community involvement compared to non-members. Corsi et al. (2006) emphasized the transformative impact of accessing credit, enabling financial independence, and lifting women out of poverty. Mudaliar and Mathur (2015)

observed significant empowerment effects of microfinance, supported by Ganle et al. (2015), although acknowledging variations in its impact. Al-Mamun et al. (2014) focused on Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia's microcredit program, finding positive effects on urban low-income women's empowerment. Al-Shami et al. (2016, 2017) supported these findings, noting enhanced gender equality, increased income, decision-making power, and self-esteem. Additionally, Islamic microfinance, as highlighted by the Islamic Development Bank (2020), can empower women in business by addressing their unique needs and roles, emphasizing the importance of a nuanced and inclusive approach for effective support in entrepreneurship and overall well-being.

Zulfiqar and Tabasum (2023) conducted interviews with fifty female borrowers engaged in income-generating activities, revealing that utilizing Islamic microfinance positively impacted women's ability to allocate funds for household needs, health, and education. However, it noted no significant influence on mobility and awareness, emphasizing that credit access alone is insufficient for empowerment without concurrent rights awareness. Khan et al. (2023) found a positively significant but moderate effect of microfinance on economic, political, and psychological aspects of women's empowerment, with a minor overall impact on social empowerment. Bawah et al. (2023) highlighted the significant assistance of microfinance schemes in the Sagnarigu Municipality for very low-income families, providing protection against risks and supporting women in decision-making. Gubhaju (2023) demonstrated positive effects of microfinance in Rautahat district, including increased income, savings, asset ownership, participation in household financial decisions, and enhanced mobility confidence. Collectively, these studies underscore the multifaceted impact of microfinance on various dimensions of women's empowerment. Numerous research endeavours (Mannah-Blankson, 2018; Addae-Korankye & Abada, 2017; Gupta, 2020; Batinge & Jenkins, 2021) indicate that microfinance institutions contribute to women's empowerment, fostering gender equity and enhancing household welfare through economic engagement. Alshebami's 2015 study emphasized prioritizing women's access to microfinance services worldwide, advocating for poverty alleviation, increased efficiency, sustainability and equality in empowerment. Chaudhary (2022) further supported the significant empowerment impact of microcredit initiatives on impoverished women, influencing family affairs, decision-making, self-confidence, and overall well-being

3. Theoretical Framework

Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework of the subject. It illustrates how the independent variables, economic improvement of women, education enhancement of women, and family and personal life decision making and social status of women through microfinance, may affect our dependent variable, women empowerment. It means that there is a direct relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The relationship is supported by Zulfiqar and Tabasum (2023), Khan et al. (2023), and Bawah et al. (2023).

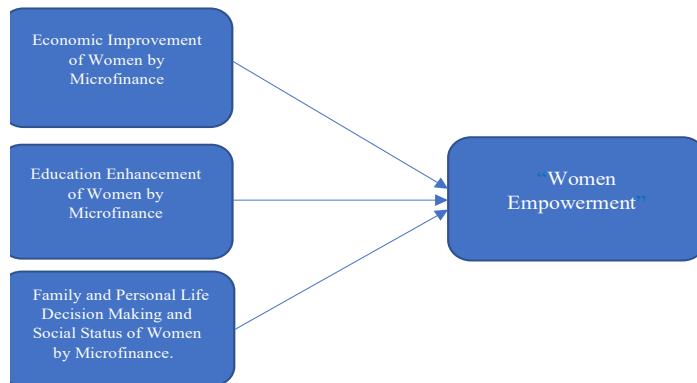


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Women's Empowerment

4. Data Collection and Sampling Method

This study, conducted in November 2020, utilized structured questionnaires to explore the topic of women's empowerment through microfinance in Afghanistan. The questionnaire, designed based on prior studies by Idrees et al. (2012) and Granlund (2013), aimed to measure empowerment. Participants were selected using a simple random sampling method from a program participant list. This approach ensures unbiased representation, as each individual has an equal chance of inclusion, aligning with recommendations from LoBiondo-Wood and Haber (1994) for comprehensive population coverage and Brink and Wood (1998) for obtaining a more representative sample. The advantage lies in unbiased representation, though there is a potential disadvantage of not fully capturing specific subgroups due to chance. This method enhances generalizability, reflecting how well the sample represents the entire population.

4.1. Sample Size and Population

The aim of this study was to evaluate the impact of microfinance on women's economic empowerment, education enhancement, family, and personal life decision-making, and the accessibility of microfinance services. The target population consisted of female clients of microfinance institutions who had borrowed money for various purposes in the past or were currently receiving loans. The study randomly selected 100 women from the list of microfinance clients in Mazar-i-Sharif City, the capital of Balkh province. The city was chosen based on its convenient location, availability of sources, and reliable respondents. The data collected from the selected women were used to examine the research objectives.

4.2. Data Analysis Method

In this research, some statistical analysis and procedures such as normality test, reliability test, descriptive analysis, correlation tests, and multiple linear regression were applied to achieve the objective of the study. The equation for multiple linear regression is as follows.

$$WE = \beta_0 + \beta_1 EE + \beta_2 EDU + \beta_3 DMSS + u$$

where WE stands for women empowerment, which is our dependent variable, EE stands for economic empowerment of women, EDU stands for education enhancement of women, and DMSS stands for decision making and social status of women.

4.3. Normality Test

Various methods can be used to assess the normality of data. According to Doane and Seward (2011), normality can be determined by analysing kurtosis and skewness values. However, Pallant and Lae (2002) suggest that normal distribution can also be identified using histogram and Q-Q plots. For this research, the first method was used to analyze normality. Tiago (2021) explains that Kline (2011) suggests that data with a skewness value less than 3 and a kurtosis value lower than 10 are considered normally distributed. Therefore, the data for this research are customarily distributed based on the analysis of its kurtosis and skewness values. Table 1 presents the results of the descriptive analysis, including mean, skewness, kurtosis, and standard error.

Table 1: Normality Test

No	Items	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Standard error
Economic Empowerment of Women						
1	“More women have established businesses through MFIs	3.82	1.066	-1.258	1.051	.242
2	Creating work opportunities for other women	3.67	1.139	-.788	.123	.251
3	Using MFIs has increased women’s property possession	3.72	0.932	-.761	.835	.243
4	I have experienced growth in business through MFI services	3.18	1.283	-.268	-.944	.243
5	Contribution to household income has increased	3.74	1.144	.335	-2.251	.598
6	I am confident in managing a financial crisis	3.54	1.078	-.463	-.378	.242
7	I can purchase any household assets (TV, Fridge, Mobile, Furniture)	3.46	1.278	-.528	-.804	.243
Education Enhancement of Women						
1	Participating in microfinance helped me to improve my reading skills	3.43	1.402	-.472	-1.075	.242

2	Participating in microfinance helped me to improve my writing skills	3.21	1.416	-.239	-1.313	.242
3	Girls' schooling expenses are manageable	3.9	1.243	-1.031	.017	.242
4	I can decide which school to send the girls	4.21	0.977	.375	-2.801	.795
5	I can pursue my higher education	3.82	1.366	-1.198	-.085	.242
6	Improved my knowledge and skills for my own work/ business	3.54	1.141	-.643	-.104	.242
7	Participation in Microfinance improves the level of education (children's education)	3.56	1.008	-.832	.625	.241
Microcredit Accessibility						
1	Credit facilities are easily accessible in MFIs	3.65	1.038	-.671	-1.848	.598
2	The savings I make with MFIs are flexible with my income	3.39	0.984	-.272	-.065	.242
3	Training provided by microfinance is beneficial	3.94	0.993	-1.079	1.005	.242
4	Interest rates offered by MFIs are suitable for me	3.55	0.978	-.573	-.022	.242
5	Credit requirements of MFIs can be negotiated	3.59	1.055	-.692	.064	.242
6	The size of available credit suits my needs	3.59	1.045	-.849	.399	.242
7	Guarantee of loans and credit is manageable	2.9	1.219	-.020	-.901	.242
Family and Personal Life Decision Making						
1	I can take challenges and believe in myself	4.33	0.815	-2.001	4.001	1.024
2	I receive respect in the neighborhood	4	1.094	-1.478	1.525	.242
3	I have earned the respect of my family and Society after joining MFIs	3.94	1.062	-.888	.264	.242
4	I can decide what type of Birth Control Methods to use	3.77	1.129	-1.003	.495	.242
5	I am involved in girl's Marriage Decision	4	1.129	-1.236	1.049	.242
6	I can make decisions about Children's life	4.07	1.038	-1.444	2.163	.242
7	I have encouraged other women in Society since joining MFIs	3.85	1.048	-1.139	1.089	.242
Empowerment of Women						
1	By using microfinance services, I am confident in managing any financial difficulties	4.13	0.693	-.178	-.889	.242
2	Participating in micro-finance improved my social status	3.92	1.042	-.934	.414	.242
3	My reading and writing skills improved after joining Microfinance	3.59	1.196	-.523	-.775	.242
4	Micro-finance services enhanced my autonomy	3.91	1.027	-.963	.557	.242
5	After participating in micro-finance, my opinion is much more valued in family decision making"	4.19	0.919	-.998	.202	.551

4.4. Reliability Test

Reliability refers to the consistency of an instrument's results. Wall and Byrd (2001) define reliability as the extent to which an instrument produces consistent and stable results when measuring the same variables across different time periods. The reliability of data is essential in ensuring the validity and accuracy of research findings, as reliable data is accessible from unstable and random errors (Blumberg et al., 2014). Cronbach's alpha is commonly used as an indicator of internal consistency, with a score above 0.7 indicating more excellent reliability. Ensuring the reliability of the data collection instruments is critical in order to strengthen the validity of the constructs being measured and to enhance the stability and credibility of the research results. A coefficient of 0.3-0.6 explains a moderate correlation, while a coefficient of 0.7 or more is considered vital.

The reliability of the data collected for the five variables "women economic empowerment, women education enhancement, accessibility of microfinance program, family and personal life decision making, and women's empowerment was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The results presented in Table 2 demonstrate that all five variables have a Cronbach's alpha coefficient greater than 0.7, indicating that the data is reliable. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient greater than 0.7 is considered strong and provides higher stability to the results. These findings provide confidence that the data can be used for further analysis.

Table 2: Reliability Test

Indicators	Number of Items in each Segment	Cronbach's Alpha
Economic Empowerment of Women	7	0.815
Education Enhancement of Women	7	0.844
Microcredit Accessibility	7	0.805
Family and Personal Life Decision Making	7	0.824
Empowerment of Women	5	0.783

4.5. Descriptive Statistic Analysis

After confirming the reliability and normality of the data, descriptive analysis was conducted to provide an overview of the microfinance clients in the study. This involved using percentages and frequencies to describe their characteristics, as well as providing descriptive statistics for all variables included in the study, such as women's economic empowerment, education enhancement, accessibility of microfinance, family and personal life decision-making, and women's overall empowerment. The analysis was based on calculating the frequency, percentage, and mean values of the data.

4.5.1. Background of the Respondents

All 100 participants, which are selected from one microfinance bank, The First Microfinance Bank, in the study were female, as the focus was on women's empowerment through microfinance in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan. Table 3 represents some critical information about the background of the respondents in this study. First, in terms of the age of the respondents, the table indicates that the majority of the respondents fall within the age range of 18-25 with 45%, while the lowest percentage was found in the 55 and above age group, with only 3% of the respondents. In terms of marital status, the table displays that the highest percentage of respondents are single, accounting for 46 percent, followed by married at 42 percent. Only a tiny percentage of respondents, 5 percent, are divorced, while 7 percent are widowed.

Next, in terms of the education level of the respondents, the result shows that the largest group of participants, with 32 percent, have a bachelor's degree, followed by 31 respondents who are illiterate. Nine percent of the respondents hold a diploma, while another nine participants are literate. Nineteen percent of the respondents have a high school certificate. Finally, it is evident from the table that the majority of the participants, constituting 33 percent, are homemakers. The second largest group, comprising 21 percent, are students, while 18 percent are currently unemployed. Only 8 percent of the respondents identified as entrepreneurs, and 7 percent were self-employed. Finally, 13 percent of the participants reported having formal employment.

Table 3: Background of the Respondents

Indicators	%	Indicators	%
Age Group of Respondent		Marital Status of Respondents	
18-25	45	Single	46
26-35	26	Married	42
36-45	12	Widow	7
46-55	14	Divorced	5
55 and Above	3	Total	100
Total	100		
Education Level of Respondent		Occupation of Respondents	
High School	19	Entrepreneur	8
Literate	9	Formally Employed	13
Illiterate	31	Housewife	33
Diploma	9	Unemployed	18
Bachelor Degree	32	Self-employed	7
Total	100	Student	21
		Total	100

Table 4 provides a descriptive analysis of the economic empowerment of micro-credit clients. The data was gathered from seven questions related to their economic status after receiving micro-finance loans. The mean values for each question were computed, and the average mean value

was found to be 3.59. The highest mean value was recorded for question one, more women have established businesses through MFIs, with a mean value of 3.82. It was observed that the majority of women who received micro-finance services agreed with this statement, with 50% responding agree and 25% responding strongly agree. However, the lowest mean value was recorded for question four. I have experienced growth in business through MFI services. It was noted that the respondents were uncertain about the growth of their businesses through microcredit support.

Moreover, the analysis reveals that the question with the second highest mean value is using MFIs has increased women’s property possession, with a mean value of 3.72, indicating that 47 percent of micro-credit borrowers agreed with the statement. However, when it comes to the question of purchasing household assets such as a TV, fridge, mobile phone, or furniture, most of the respondents reported being unable to purchase any of these assets despite using MFIs.

The findings from Table 4 indicate that microfinance has a beneficial influence on women’s economic empowerment. The mean value of 3.59 indicates that the respondents agreed that microfinance has positive effects, including starting a business, helping with household finances, and managing financial difficulties. For a breakdown of the mean value and frequency for each question, please refer to Table 4.

Table 4: Women’s Economic Empowerment

Item	Statements	Level of Economic Empowerment					N	Mean	SD
		1	2	3	4	5			
1	More women have established businesses through MFIs	7	7	11	50	25	100	3.82	1.066
2	Creating work opportunities for other women	6	7	24	38	25	100	3.67	1.139
3	Using MFIs has increased women’s property possession	4	6	26	47	17	100	3.72	0.932
4	I have experienced growth in business through MFI services	13	16	26	28	17	100	3.18	1.283
5	Contribution to household income has increased	8	7	13	49	23	100	3.74	1.144
6	I am confident in managing a financial crisis	5	12	26	38	19	100	3.54	1.078
7	I can purchase any household assets (TV, Fridge, Mobile, Furniture)	11	12	21	30	26	100	3.46	1.278
	Mean							3.59	

Note: 1=Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree”

4.5.2. Education Enhancement of Women

Table 5 presents the results of the survey conducted to determine the impact of microfinance on women’s education. Seven questions were asked, and the mean values recorded were between 4.21 and 3.21. Question four, which is I can decide which school to send the girls to, has the highest mean value, followed by question three, “Girls’ schooling expenses are manageable.” The

responses indicate that women are now able to decide on their daughters' education and manage their schooling expenses after participating in the microfinance program.

Furthermore, according to the survey results presented in Table 5, women had a neutral response to the statement that participating in microfinance improves their writing skills. However, a majority of women agreed that microfinance programs help to improve their reading skills, which indicates a positive impact on their literacy levels. The mean value of 3.667 for this variable suggests that microfinance programs can have a positive impact on the education of women and girls. More detailed information about the frequency and percentage of responses for each statement can be found in Table 5.

Table 5: Women's Education Enhancement

Item	Statements	Level of Women's Education Enhancement					N	Mean	SD
		1	2	3	4	5			
1	"Participating in microfinance helped me to improve my reading skills.	13	15	17	26	29	100	3.43	1.402
2	Participating in microfinance helped me to improve my writing skills.	16	21	13	26	24	100	3.21	1.416
3	Girl's schooling expenses are manageable	8	9	10	31	42	100	3.9	1.243
4	I can decide which school to send the girls	4	4	5	43	44	100	4.21	0.977
5	I can pursue my higher education	12	8	5	36	39	100	3.82	1.366
6	Improved my knowledge and skills for my own work/business	8	8	28	34	22	100	3.54	1.141
7	Participation in Microfinance improves the level of education (children's education)	5	7	28	45	15	100	3.56	1.008
	Mean							3.667	

"Note: 1=Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree"

4.5.3. Decision Making and Social Status

The survey inquired about the effect of micro-finance on the personal and family decision-making and social status of clients through seven questions. The descriptive analysis of mean values for these questions is presented in Table 6, where the range is between 3.77 to 4.33. The question with the highest mean value is number one, which is I can take challenges and believe in myself with a mean value of 4.33. This indicates that participating in micro-finance programs can boost women's confidence in tackling challenges and believing in themselves. The statement with the second highest mean value is number six, which is I can make decisions over children's lives, with a mean value of 4.07. It shows that women gain the ability to make decisions regarding their children's future through participating in micro-finance programs.

Moreover, 44 percent of the borrowers agreed, and 37 percent strongly agreed with statement number two, which is I receive respect in the neighbourhood and had a mean value of 4.0. This

implies that women who join micro-finance programs are respected in their neighbourhoods. Similarly, statement number five, I am involved in girl's marriage decision, also had a mean value of 4.0, indicating that women can participate in the decision-making process for their daughters' marriage after participating in micro-finance programs. Therefore, these results demonstrate that micro-finance programs have a positive impact on the decision-making abilities of women and their social status in their communities.

Based on the responses to statement number three, which asked if the clients had gained respect from their families and Society after joining MFIs, it was reported that 34 percent of the respondents agreed, and 37 percent strongly agreed with the statement. These results suggest that participating in micro-credit programs has a positive impact on women's confidence and decision-making abilities, as well as their social status within their families and communities.

Thus, the survey's results revealed that women who have taken microfinance loans have experienced significant improvements in their personal and family life decision-making abilities, as well as their social status. This is demonstrated by the average mean value of 3.99, which indicates a strong positive impact of microfinance on the lives of women. In summary, participating in microfinance programs has been shown to be highly beneficial for women, resulting in significant improvements in their decision-making abilities and social status.

Table 6: Family Decision-Making and Social Status

Item	Statements	Level of Family Decision-Making & Social Status					N	Mean	SD
		1	2	3	4	5			
1	I can take challenges and believe in myself	1	4	5	41	49	100	4.33	0.815
2	I receive respect in the neighbourhood	5	6	8	44	37	100	4	1.094
3	I have earned the respect of my family and Society after joining MFIs	4	6	19	34	37	100	3.94	1.062
4	I can decide what type of birth control methods to use	8	5	16	44	27	100	3.77	1.129
5	I am involved in girl's marriage decision	5	5	14	35	41	100	4	1.129
6	I can make decisions about children's lives	4	3	13	42	38	100	4.07	1.038
7	I encourage other women in Society since joining MFIs	6	5	13	48	28	100	3.85	1.048
Mean								3.99	

Note: 1=Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree"

4.5.4. Accessibility of Microfinance Services

To evaluate the accessibility of “microfinance services among borrowers,” the survey posed seven questions, and the results are displayed in Table 7. The mean values ranged from 3.94 to 2.90, indicating that respondents generally agreed with the statements. Most respondents found the training provided by microfinance institutions to be beneficial, with 46% agreeing and 31% strongly agreeing, resulting in a mean value of 3.94. Additionally, almost two-thirds of

respondents (47% agreed, 19% strongly agreed) found credit facilities to be easily accessible in MFIs. This indicates that women have a straightforward path to obtaining micro-credit facilities. Moreover, the majority of respondents (45% agreed, 18% strongly agreed) reported that the size of the available credit met their needs. This suggests that the size of the micro-credit loans is suitable for the needs of the women.

The survey results showed that women found it challenging to manage the requirement of a guarantor or collateral, as evidenced by the low mean value of 2.90 for statement number seven. However, despite this challenge, the overall mean value of 3.516 suggests that microfinance services remain accessible to women. This indicates that despite the difficulty in finding a guarantor, women are still able to access microfinance loans and benefit from the services offered.

Table 7: Accessibility of Microfinance Services

Item	Statements	Accessibility of Microfinance Services					N	Mean	SD
		1	2	3	4	5			
1	More women have established businesses through MFIs	4	10	20	47	19	100	3.65	1.038
2	Creating work opportunities for other women	4	12	39	31	14	100	3.39	0.984
3	Using MFIs has increased women's property possession	3	7	13	46	31	100	3.94	0.993
4	I have experienced growth in business through MFI services	4	11	26	44	15	100	3.55	0.978
5	Contribution to household income has increased	7	10	22	42	19	100	3.59	1.055
6	"I am confident in managing the financial crisis	6	8	23	45	18	100	3.59	1.045
7	I can purchase any household assets (TV, Fridge, Mobile, Furniture)."	15	22	30	24	9	100	2.9	1.219
	Mean							3.52	

"Note: 1=Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree"

4.5.5. Women Empowerment

The survey included five questions to assess the level of women's empowerment through microfinance. Table 8 shows that the mean values range from 3.59 to 4.19. The highest mean value (4.19) was recorded for the statement, "After participating in microfinance, my opinion is much more valued in family decision-making." This indicates that most women who have taken microfinance loans are empowered in their families, and their opinions are considered in decision-making. The study's findings on the positive impact of microfinance on women's decision-making abilities are in line with previous research conducted by Nehad (2017) and Kabeer (2001), which indicated that women's income generation plays a significant role in family decision-making. The second highest mean value (4.13) was recorded for the statement, by using microfinance services, I am confident in managing any financial difficulties, indicating that microfinance services have enabled women to become financially empowered, independent,

and capable of managing financial challenges. This finding is consistent with earlier studies by Kabeer (2001) and Addai (2017), which showed that microfinance services can empower women economically, enhance their financial status, and increase their purchasing power.

One of the questions in the questionnaire was related to the improvement of reading and writing skills after joining the microfinance program. The mean value for this statement was 3.6, indicating that a significant proportion of the borrowers believed that their reading and writing skills improved after participating in the micro-credit program. Expressly, 60 percent of the respondents agreed with this statement, while only 22 percent disagreed.

The second statement in the questionnaire, participating in micro-finance improved my social status, had a mean value of 3.92, indicating that female borrowers experience an improvement in their social status after receiving micro-credit loans, which results in tremendous respect from Society. Similarly, the fourth statement, micro-finance services enhanced my autonomy, had a mean value of 3.91, suggesting that microfinance clients are generally satisfied with the services provided by MFIs and feel empowered in various aspects of their lives, with 72% of respondents expressing satisfaction with micro-credit services. Overall, the average mean value for the women empowerment variable was 3.94, indicating that microfinance has made a significant contribution to women's empowerment, with the majority of borrowers feeling empowered through the program.

Table 8: Women's Empowerment

Item	Statements	Level of Women Empowerment					N	Mean	SD
		1	2	3	4	5			
1	I am confident in managing any financial difficulties using microfinance	0	0	15	52	33	100	4.13	0.693
2	Participating in Miro-finance improved my social status	3	7	17	41	32	100	3.92	1.042
3	My reading and writing skills improved after joining Microfinance	5	17	18	34	26	100	3.59	1.196
4	Microfinance services enhanced my autonomy	3	9	14	41	33	100	3.91	1.027
5	It is much more valued in family decision-making after using Microcredit.	2	5	11	38	44	100	4.19	0.919
	Mean							3.94	
"Note: 1=Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree"									

4.6. One-Way ANOVA

In this study, a One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) is employed to assess potential variations in the demographic characteristics of female borrowers. The aim is to examine the influence of microfinance services on aspects such as economic empowerment, education enhancement, decision-making ability, and social status among women. These selected variables are considered

susceptible to the effects of microfinance. The demographic details under investigation encompass the age, marital status, and educational attainment of the borrowers.

4.6.1. Differences of Borrowers' Demographic Information on Women's Economic Empowerment

The findings presented in Table 9 indicate that there are no statistically significant differences observed in the age groups and marital status of microcredit clients, as evidenced by the p-values exceeding 5 percent ($p=0.597$, $p=0.491$). This suggests that women's economic empowerment through microfinance remains unaffected by variations in age and marital status among participants. In essence, neither age nor marital status plays a decisive role in influencing the economic empowerment of women through microfinance.

Moreover, the analysis reveals no significant disparity in the level of education ($p=0.179$). This implies that the impact of microfinance on women's economic empowerment is consistent across various educational backgrounds among female microcredit users. Consequently, differences in the level of education among respondents do not significantly influence the level of economic empowerment experienced by women through microcredit programs.

Table 9: ANOVA Test on the Level of Economic Empowerment of Women and Age, Marital Status, and Education

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-test	p-value
Age	Between Groups	25.944	20	1.297	.893	.597
	Within Groups	114.806	79	1.453		
	Total	140.750	99			
Marital_status	Between Groups	12.868	20	.643	.983	.491
	Within Groups	51.722	79	.655		
	Total	64.590	99			
Education_level	Between Groups	54.577	20	2.729	1.342	.179
	Within Groups	160.663	79	2.034		
	Total	215.240	99			

4.6.2. Differences of Borrowers' Demographic Information on Women's Education Enhancement

The research team conducted a One-way ANOVA test to assess the impact of microfinance on the educational improvement of women across various demographic factors, as outlined in Table 10. The results reveal non-significant differences in education enhancement among women across various age groups and marital status categories, with p-values exceeding 0.05 ($p=0.325$ and $p=0.451$). This suggests that the age and marital status of female borrowers do not play a significant role in influencing their educational improvement through microfinance. Notably,

irrespective of age or marital status, most borrowers are married and aged above 25 years old, and their involvement in education enhancement through microfinance remains consistent.

Furthermore, no significant differences are observed in the educational background of women ($p=0.906$), indicating that the level of education does not impact the extent of education enhancement facilitated by micro-credit loans. This underscores the notion that women, regardless of their educational background, experience similar levels of educational improvement through microfinance.

Table 10: ANOVA Test on the Level of Women’s Education Enhancement and Age, Marital Status, and Education Level

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-test	p-value
Age	Between Groups	34.630	22	1.574	1.142	.325
	Within Groups	106.120	77	1.378		
	Total	140.750	99			
Marital_status	Between Groups	14.582	22	.663	1.021	.451
	Within Groups	50.008	77	.649		
	Total	64.590	99			
Education_level	Between Groups	31.844	22	1.447	.608	.906
	Within Groups	183.396	77	2.382		
	Total	215.240	99			

4.6.3. Differences of Borrowers’ Demographic Information on Decision-Making and Social Status

According to the findings presented in Table 11, no statistically significant differences are observed in the decision-making and social status of microfinance clients based on age groups and marital status, with significance levels exceeding 0.05 ($p=0.832$ & $p=0.203$). This suggests that the age and marital status of women utilizing microfinance services do not significantly influence their decisions in family and personal matters, nor do they impact their social status through microfinance. In contrast, there are notable and statistically significant differences based on education level ($p=0.027$). Women with higher educational backgrounds demonstrate increased participation in family decision-making, particularly regarding children’s education and marriage. Additionally, education level significantly influences the social status of women engaged in microfinance programs. Hence, women tend to modulate their decision-making involvement and social status based on their educational backgrounds.

Table 11: ANOVA Test on Level of Decision Making and Social Status and Age, Marital Status, and Education

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-test	p-value
Age	Between Groups	22.005	21	1.048	.688	.832
	Within Groups	118.745	78	1.522		
	Total	140.750	99			
Marital_status	Between Groups	16.723	21	.796	1.298	.203
	Within Groups	47.867	78	.614		
	Total	64.590	99			
Education_level	Between Groups	71.625	21	3.411	1.852	.027
	Within Groups	143.615	78	1.841		
	Total	215.240	99			

4.6.4. Differences in Borrowers' Demographic Information on Women's Empowerment Through Micro-Finance

This segment aimed to assess the empowerment levels of women across different demographics, including age groups, educational levels, marital status, and locations, through the application of One-way ANOVA analysis.

The outcomes, as presented in Table 12, revealed no statistically significant differences for diverse age groups, marital statuses of borrowers, and educational levels, with significance values exceeding 0.05 ($p=0.396$, $p=0.396$, & $p=0.293$). These results suggest that the impact of microfinance does not exert a significant influence on the empowerment levels of women based on marital status, various age groups, and educational backgrounds among microfinance clients. In essence, the empowerment of women through microfinance remains consistent across different age groups, marital statuses, and educational backgrounds of microcredit clients.

Table 12: ANOVA Test on the Level of Women Empowerment and Age, Marital Status, and Education Level”

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-test	p-value
Age	Between Groups	22.588	15	1.506	1.071	.396
	Within Groups	118.162	84	1.407		
	Total	140.750	99			
Marital_status	Between Groups	10.467	15	.698	1.083	.384
	Within Groups	54.123	84	.644		
	Total	64.590	99			

Education_level	Between Groups	37.813	15	2.521	1.193	.293
	Within Groups	177.427	84	2.112		
	Total	215.240	99			

4.7. Correlation

The study conducted a correlation analysis between the independent and dependent variables, which is displayed in Table 13. This analysis aimed to identify the relationship between each independent variable and the dependent variable and to detect any issues related to multicollinearity. Multicollinearity occurs when variables are highly correlated with each other, which can create problems in statistical analysis. The results of the analysis indicate that there is no multicollinearity problem in this study, as all variables have weak correlations with each other.

Table 13: Correlation Matrix

Variables	“Economic Empowerment”	“Education Enhancement”	“Accessibility of Microfinance”	“Decision Making and Social Status”	“Women Empowerment”
Economic Empowerment	1				
Education Enhancement	0.595**	1			
Accessibility of Micro-finance	0.491**	0.501**	1		
Decision-Making and Social Status	0.465**	0.306**	0.561**	1	
Women empowerment	0.579**	0.486**	0.668**	0.676**	1
**Correlation is significant at 5% level ($p > 0.05$)					

5. Result and Discussion

Table 14 displays the findings of the multiple regression analysis carried out to investigate the factors influencing women’s empowerment through microfinance. The analysis tested three alternative hypotheses that were derived from previous research studies. The first hypothesis states that women’s economic empowerment through microfinance has a positive impact on their overall empowerment. The second hypothesis suggests that microfinance programs that enhance women’s education have a positive impact on their empowerment. The third hypothesis proposes that microcredit loans that improve women’s decision-making abilities and social status have a positive impact on their empowerment.

The analysis using multiple regression demonstrated a noteworthy and favourable correlation between women’s economic empowerment achieved through microfinance and their overall empowerment. This outcome lends support to the hypothesis that microfinance initiatives

play a constructive role in enhancing women's economic empowerment, consequently exerting a substantial influence on their empowerment, with a statistically significant impact at a 5% significance level.

According to the multiple regression analysis, the second factor that positively impacts women's empowerment is education enhancement through microfinance. The results show that improving women's education level through microfinance has a significant impact on their empowerment at a 5% level. This finding is in line with the hypothesis, which suggests that education is crucial for empowerment, and microfinance can contribute to enhancing women's education, thus increasing their level of empowerment.

The results of the multiple regression analysis confirm "that the third variable, namely decision making and social status, has a positive and significant impact on women's empowerment through microfinance at a 1% significance level." This finding supports the hypothesis that microfinance can enhance women's decision-making abilities and social status, thereby positively contributing to their empowerment. The increase in decision-making and social status through Microcredit is associated with an increase in women's empowerment level. Moreover, the results reveal that the R-squared value is 0.56, indicating that all independent variables collectively explain 56% of the variance in women's empowerment through microfinance. Moreover, the Durbin-Watson test statistics of 1.82, 2.10, and 2.46 indicate that there is no substantial evidence of autocorrelation in the residuals of the regression model. These values, which are not significantly different from the expected value of 2, fall within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5. Consequently, we conclude that the residuals are independent, supporting the assumption of no autocorrelation. This enhances the reliability of the multiple regression analysis, suggesting that the model's results are not biased by the correlation of errors and can be interpreted with confidence.

Table 14: Multiple Regression Analysis

Variables	coefficient	p-value	t-statistic	Durbin Watson-test
EE	0.235	0.0130**	2.505	1.82
EDU	0.187	0.0200**	2.337	2.10
DMSS	0.523	0.0000***	6.761	2.46
Constant"	0.356	0.287	1.071	
R ²	0.56			

Note: *, **, *** denote significance at 10%, 5%, and 1% respectively.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the case study of Mazar-i-Sharif City demonstrates the positive impact of microfinance on women's empowerment in Afghanistan. The study shows that microfinance has significantly contributed to the economic and financial empowerment of women in the city, as borrowers experience greater economic freedom and the ability to address financial

challenges. Additionally, microfinance has improved the education level of women and enhanced their decision-making and social status, resulting in a more empowered position for women in the community. The study also highlights the challenges in accessing microfinance services, particularly for those who lack collateral or a guarantor. Therefore, there is a need for policymakers and microfinance institutions to address these challenges and make microfinance more accessible to women in Afghanistan, particularly in urban areas. Overall, this case study provides valuable insights into the positive impact of microfinance on women's empowerment in Afghanistan and emphasizes the importance of further investment in microfinance as a means of alleviating poverty and empowering women.

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