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Impact of Small Medium Enterprise (SME) Program on Socioeconomic Development of Poor Women in Bangladesh: A Case Study on SME Program of BRAC Bank

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the impact of SME program of BRAC Bank on socio economic development of poor women in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh 50% people are living below poverty line and 25% are living in absolute poverty. They are suffering from acute rural-urban economic disparity coupled with illiteracy. The country's economy is basically agrarian one with a vast majority living in rural areas. BRAC Bank was founded with the major objective of establishing a balanced economic growth by ensuring reduction of rural-urban disparity and equitable distribution of income. Both primary and secondary data have been used in this study. A total number of 130 clients from 3 bank branches and 50 bank personnel were interviewed for this study in Rajshahi Zone. Two sets of interview schedules were used to collect data from the respondents. The collected data are processed and analyzed in logical order.

Keywords: BRAC Bank, SME, Socio economic development, Poverty, Poor women

INTRODUCTION

Women constitute almost half of the total population in the world. But their representation in gainful employment is comparatively low. According to an I.L.O. report, in 1980 "women are 50 per cent of the world's population, do the two-thirds of the world's work hours, receive ten percent of the world's income and own less than one per cent of world property". In most countries, average earnings of women are lower than those of men. In several developing countries, marriage is the only career for most women. For centuries, women have been victim of social prejudices and discrimination. Even today, parents prefer male child to female. Women are generally presumed to be weak, passive, dependent and people-oriented. On the

other hand, men are considered strong, aggressive, independent and things-oriented. Assumptions become reality when society prepares males and females for performance in presumed roles.

The structure of a modern country has largely been built on the basis of bank. Banking system is therefore called the lifeblood of an economy. In a developing country like Bangladesh banks are required to play a vital role in the overall development of the economy and hence are involved in multi-furious activities. (Bakar, 1996). A vast majority of people especially of the contemporary world is beset with a number of critical problems like poverty, unemployment, and injustice, disparity between resources and income, inflation, economic instability etc. due to the presence of interest based economy.

The issue of banking employment and banking services continues to be a perennial source of discussion among academicians, policy makers and practitioners (Chowdhury, Saha, Moral, 1995). BRAC contributes a great deal for achieving different socio-economic objectives such as eradication of mass poverty, reduction of gender gap, women development, equitable distribution of wealth, sufficient opportunities for gainful employment, maximization of national products, optimum economic growth and so forth. With the fulfillment of the above objectives, a radical change is expected to take place in the overall situation of the country. The most important objectives of BRAC Bank are poverty alleviation and rural development of Bangladesh. For the fulfillment of these objectives BRAC Bank has taken a program named "SME program" This study is thus an attempt to show the impact of SME program of BRAC Bank on socio-economic development of poor women in Bangladesh.

Objective of the Study

The core objective of the study is to analyze the impact of the SME program of BRAC Bank on socio economic development of poor women in Bangladesh.

Scope of the Study

Women in third world countries, particularly in Muslim countries, face many social difficulties. Social structures and the state environment are not favorable to the economic and social development of women. Since 1970s, a global concern about differently gendered perspectives and raising women's standard of living has been expressed in many ways. In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on

been expressed in many ways. In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on "Empowerment of Women" held in Beijing, China, emphasized the need for the political, economic and legal empowerment of women. But in conventional Bangladeshi society, women's role was 'naturally' limited to the family. The World Conference identified that if women are to be empowered to contribute to the welfare of their family and society then the most effective way is for them to be treated with dignity in society and to be self-employed, as self-employment leads to economic empowerment. In the Bangladeshi context, major development organizations such as the Asian Development Bank and the United Nations Development Program argue that empowerment should give the vast majority of women the freedom to choose self fulfillment and economic self-development as well as equal access to domestic and community research, opportunities and powers (ADB 2001; UNDP 1994).

The study covers the development activities in a number of areas such as production, agriculture and irrigation equipment, livestock, poultry, fisheries, and construction materials for rural housing in the district of Rajshahi through receiving credit from BRAC Bank. Furthermore, the study will be concerned with the socio-economic development of poor women in rural areas who are directly associated with the BRAC Bank at least for obtaining credit.

Limitations of the Study

1. **Inferential analysis:** The study might have also suffered from the limitation that is generally attributed to inferential analysis. What the respondents stated and what they were actually doing might be different. The findings are based on what the respondents stated that they were doing.

2. **Shortage of time and money**: The authors could not do a very vast research because of the shortage of time and money. They tried their best to finish the research with limited amount of money and resource. So, they had to face two constraints to conduct this research: one is time and the other is financial constraint.

3. **Non-beneficiaries of BRAC Bank:** it would have been better if non-beneficiaries of BRAC Bank could have been included in the study. It would be better to interview those nonparticipants but they are excluded from the study because of their non-availability.

4. **Larger sample:** It would be better if data could be taken from larger sample than what has been considered here. It would be better if data could be taken from all the customers in the study area.

5. Other limitations: The majority of the clients do not maintain any formal record of their income and expenditures, particulars of Bank investments etc. Normally they have answered the questions from their memories, which might have adversely affected the reliability of the data at least to certain extent.

The limitations discussed above are, however, very common in case of any field study. It can be assumed that the limitations stated above would not affect the findings of the present study. Because proper methodology, appropriate statistical techniques have been used to overcome these limitations. However, it is the authors' honest belief that the findings of the study have reached a fairly accurate standard.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Boserup's (1970) exploration of labour distinctions between men and women brought gender issues to the attention of economists, sociologists and psychologists, highlighting women's invisible contribution to economic growth and their shaping of social structure. In contrast, Fraser (1989), Roberts (1979) and Moser (1989) explore different roles and amount of work done by women in production and non-production cycles. The triple role of women in production, reproduction and community-based work has been noted as one of the major sources of a sustainable household economy (Kabeer, 1992, 1998, 2000, 2002; Roberts, 1991; Sen, 1989; Tinker, 1990).

Boserup noted that low cultivation, male dominance in agricultural farming, population density and landholding capacity contributed to keeping women from agricultural development (Mohanty, 1991; Scott, 1995), whereas Moser (1987) and Molyneux (1985) describe how colonial capitalism and wealth formulation oppressed women in third world countries, and how cash in agriculture benefited men over women and thus increased the gap between the economic opportunities of men and women. However, Boserup ignored wage discrimination against women in the labour market (Bandarage, 1984), different difficulties faced by women entering the labour market, and did not examine the complexities of rural social structure (Sen, 1994,1999).

It was not until the 1980s that the concepts of women in development (WID) as well as women and development (WAD) emerged as important issues and women's status in the social structure and how the position of a household would be determined by the holding of property rights (Basu, 1995; Buvinic, 1983; Goetz, 1988; Rathgeben, 1990). As Engles and Marx (1942) argued that the institution of

private property and marriage contributed to the decline of women's status, Marxist feminists developed their strategies to achieve property and childbearing rights and to reduce men's control over their wives through marriage (Kabeer, 1994, 2002; Kardam, 1991).

Baker (1996) conducted a research named "Experiences of some special credit programs in Bangladesh targeting women". Weak organizational structure and poor loan supervision, low rates of return on certain activities financed and high cost of operation were potential constraints in expanding credit to women entrepreneurs. He made some recommendations, which would minimize these constraints.

Bruntrup et al. (1997) conducted an empirical study on micro finance programs of two large NGOs viz Proshika and ASA. They found positive results of its programs in terms of increased income, savings, and school enrollment rate, reduction in infant mortality and improvement in gender relations.

Osmani (1998) wrote an article on "Impact of credit on the relative well being of women: Evidence from the Grameen Bank". He provides a mixed picture of the impact of GB credit to women. She obtained a positive impact on income decision about family planning, ownership of land and other assets and on access to food. Impact was not significant on overall decision-making access to personal affect and perceived self-interest.

Above literature reviews show that there is no comprehensive research work on SME program of BRAC Bank in relation to women development." There lies a research gap. For fulfilling the research gap the researchers selected this topic– "Impact of SME program on socio-economic development of poor women in Bangladesh: A Case Study on BRAC BANK" The availability of information and urgency of the problem inspired them to work in this field. So they found in all those the rationale of the present study.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Research Design

Research in common parlance refers to a search for knowledge. One can also define it as a scientific and systematic search for pertinent information on a specific topic (Beardsworth, 1996; Golden, 1997; Dey, 1993; Miles & Huberman 1994). Research is an academic activity and as such the term should be used in a technical sense (Kothari, 2003). Through research one may advise alternative policies and may as well examine the consequences of each alternative. Decision-making may

not be apart of research, but research certainly facilitates the decisions of the policy makers (Bloor, 1997; Cook, 1979). Government and non-government institutions chalk out programs for dealing with all the facets of a country's existence and most of these are related directly or indirectly to economic and social conditions.

A research design is the arrangement of conditions for collection and analysis of data in a manner that aims to combine relevance to the research purpose with economy in procedures. In fact, the research design is the conceptual structure within which research is conducted; it constitutes the blueprint for the collection, measurement and analysis of data. As such, the design includes an outline of what will the current research explore by constructing hypothesis and its operational implications to the final analysis of datam (Bryman, 1998; Hammersley, 1996).

Types and Sources of Data

Both primary and secondary data have been used in this study. The primary data have been collected through field survey. For this, two sets of interview schedules were used. One set for the clients and the another one for the bankers. The secondary data have been obtained from the head office, zonal office and selected branches of the study area of BRAC Bank. Moreover, various books, journals and other publications of BRAC Bank have been used for collecting secondary data.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Analysis includes processing and analysis of data. According to Seltiz, Jahoda and others, there is no difference between processing and analyzing of data (Chowdhury, 1997 cited in Sina, 2000). All data are processed through computer using excel package program. Collected data have been processed in a logical order. Several techniques of data analysis and interpretation have been applied in this study. From various statistical techniques the simple arithmetic mean, percentage, tabular presentation etc. have been used where required.

Data Analysis and Findings of the study

Profile of the clients

Age of the clients

The age of an individual client is perhaps an important factor for motivating her in accepting a new and challenging venture. The spirit and enthusiasm are also assumed higher at an early age. 18% lies within the age group 41 and above which show very low percentage of entry. The age of the respondents did not agree to take risk. In this connection, it may be relevant to note that the youngest respondents have started their respective activities more after taking financial assistance from the BRAC Bank (Ahamed, 1995).

Family structure of the clients

The family structure also has a motivational goal to the performance of the clients. From the field survey the authors found that 81.33% clients belong to nuclear families, 18.67% hailed from joint families. Thus nuclear families dominated in sample group (Ahmed, 2000).

Marital status of the clients

From the field study, the authors found that unmarried women are not in a position to conduct trade or business because they have to abide by cultural and religious practices of the society. They are restricted by social customs to go outside and undertake public activities freely (Ahmed, 1999)

Educational status of the clients

An educated client can do the entrepreneurial responsibility effectively and efficiently. Education not only helps in the acquisition of knowledge and skill for exploring the future possibilities for growth and establishing business organization but also imparts diversified knowledge in different fields. It may be pointed out in this connection that the percentage of primary level in the rural area of Bangladesh was generally high and therefore BRAC Bank was under compulsion to offer financial assistance to rural literates (Ahmed, 1986).

Use of Credit

BRAC Bank provides for a wide range of functions. It is known that investment was sanctioned for more than nine different sectors. The clients by the sample area use the following table states share of different sectors of investment (Akhtaruddin, 2000).

Table I. Use of Credit by the Clients

Activities	No. of respondents	In percentage
Production of crops	24	18.46%
Agriculture and irrigation	23	17.69%
Livestock	10	7.69%
Poultry	35	26.92%
Fisheries	20	15.38%
Rickshaw Van	7	5.38%
Construction Material of House	11	8.46%
Total	130	100%

Source: Field survey by authors

The table shows that poultry occupied the top position, which was 26.92%. Next comes production of crops, which was 18.46%, Agriculture, and irrigation 17.69%, fisheries 15.38%, construction material purchased 8.46%, livestock 7.69% and Rickshaw Van 5.38%. Therefore, it is evident from the above table that poultry, production of crops, agriculture and irrigation and fisheries activities play a dominant role for socio-economic development of poor women by using SME in the study area.

Repayment of Investments

It is found from the field survey that clients were found to be very much sound in exercising investment repayment culture. In respect of BRAC Bank, most of the group showed satisfactory investment repayment culture. The above data provides an indication that BRAC Bank played a positive role on financial investment strengthening the credit repayment ability of the clients through a marked improvement in their income (Albee, 1996).

Changes that have taken place before and after taking investments

The following table indicates the own occupation of the clients before and after being members of BRAC Bank

Table II. Client's Own Occupation before and after Bank Finance

Occupation	Before joining BRAC BANK	Percentage	After joining BRAC BANK	%
Housewife	100	76.92%	10	7.69%
Self employed	5	3.85%	10	7.69%
Employed	20	15.38%	25	19.23%
Housewife and self employed	5	3.85%	85	65.38%
Total	130	100	130	100

Source: Field survey by authors

After bank financing, the occupational structure has undergone significant changes. Now housewife and self-employed is the major occupation, which account for 65.38% which was 3.85% before joining in BRAC Bank.

Educational level

Table III. Increase of the Level of Education of the Clients

Opinion	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	80	61.54%
No	50	38.46%
Total	130	100

Source: Field survey by authors

The above-mentioned table indicates that more than 50% of the clients are able to increase their level of education after being involved in BRAC Bank.

Table IV. Condition of Dwelling House

Nature of the house	Before joining in BRAC Bank	Percentage	After joining BRAC Bank	Percentage
Kacha	70	53.85%	14	10.77%
Semi pacca	31	28.46%	62	47.69%
Pacca	29	22.31%	54	41.54%
Total	130	100	130	100%

Source: Field survey by authors

This implies that the condition of dwelling house of the respondents showed a marked improvement owing to rise of income level of the concerned clients.

Sources of drinking water

Table V. The Sources of Dirking Water of the Clients before and after the Use of BRAC Bank Investment

Sources of drinking water	Before joining BRAC Bank	Percentage BRAC Bank	After joining	Percentage
Shallow tube well	75	57.69%	15	11.54%
Deep tube well	55	42.3%	115	88.46%
Total	130	100	130	100

Source: Field survey by authors

The above table reveals that among the respondents after using BRAC Bank investment the users of shallow tube well got reduced from 57.69% to 11.54% and the users of deep tube well increased from 42.3% to 88.46%.

Table VI. Nature of Latrine

Nature of latrine used	Before joining BRAC Bank	Percentage BRAC Bank	After joining	Percentage
Unhygienic latrine	30	23.08%	9	6.92%
Sanitary latrine	100	76.92%	121	93.08%
Total	130	100	130	100

Source: Field survey by authors

In order to facilitate healthy living standard the use of scientific latrine is indispensable. People use sanitary latrine when their health consciousness increases along with an improvement in their financial position.

Income level

Table VII. Families' Annual Income before and after Using Bank Investment

Income (Taka)	Before joining	Percentage	After joining	Percentage
Up to 2000	15	11.54%	9	6.92%
20001-30000	25	19.23%	6	4.62%
30001-50000	30	23.07%	40	30.77%
50001-70000	31	23.84%	29	22.31%
70001-100000	20	15.38%	30	23.08%
100001 and above	9	6.92%	16	12.3%
Total	130	100	130	100

Source: Field survey by authors

The above table shows that the credit operation of BRAC Bank has made a favorable impact on the income level of clients (Begum, 1993). As their income increases the purchasing power of client's increases too, which certainly improves their living standard?

Table VIII. Yearly Expenditure

Yearly expenditure	Before joining	Percentage	After joining	Percentage
Up to 25000	18	13.33%	10	7.69%
25001-40000	32	28.00%	18	13.85%
40001-60000	49	35.33%	40	30.77%
60001-100000	11	10.67%	30	23.07%
100001 above	20	12.67%	32	24.62%
Total	130	100.00	130	100.00

Source: Field survey by authors

The above table indicates that the respondents' purchasing power has increased enormously. The findings reveal that all the measures relating to economic and financial development of the respondents have been showing positive changes after taking support from BRAC Bank.

PROBLEMS OF SME PROGRAM OF BRAC BANK

Problems Faced by the Personnel of BRAC Bank

The researchers collect data relating to the problems concerned with the bank personnel. The perceived problems are presented

Lack of Proper Transportation

Working area of a field officer is not so little. They are provided bicycle to run 50 to 100 kilometers everyday. It is hard as well as time consuming. 90% of the respondents were of the opinion that it was a great problem.

Maintenance of Huge Documents

For providing investment, field officers have to maintain a lot of formalities and huge documents. As a result, they can perform comparatively less works. 90% of the respondents said that it was a major problem.

Difficulty in Maintaining Purdah

92 percent clients are women (Annual Report, 2006) but 100% of the field officers are male. Because of social culture and religious barrier, the male employees cannot discuss with the female clients frequently and freely at the time of service. Similarly, they face similar kinds of problems during the time of investment recovery. So, shariah purdah is not maintained. 30% of the respondents said that this was a serious problem.

Problems Faced by the Clients

The respondents were not highly educated. Most of them are of primary education level. They expressed some problems while questioning to the researcher. The problems they faced are given below:

Excessive Formalities and Huge Signatures

Most of the customers of rural development scheme are illiterate. To take investment from BRAC Bank, they have to face huge formalities and sign 18 times for single investment. These illiterate clients feel uneasy for huge formalities and signing many times. 60% of them exposed this problem.

Insufficient amount of Credit

Insufficient amount of money usually cannot meet the demand of all types of business conducting clients. The bank at first sanctions taka eight thousand as investment and then it increases year to year. It is a great problem according to the 78% of clients.

Existing Socio Cultural Problems

A bad concept exists in our society regarding NGO's activities. Still now, many people are of the view that women cannot operate business or firm. They feel shy while conducting business. 50% of the total respondents suffer from such type of problem.

Repayment before Earning Profit

Repayment starts after a week and the installments are to be paid in a week. It is hard to earn profit by starting business after a week. So, starting repayment of installment money after a week is a problem for the clients. 70% of the respondents suffered due to this problem.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research study shows that BRAC Bank's SME Program has a positive impact. But the researcher identified some problems that created obstacles on optimal development using SME loan. To overcome the problems, researchers have given the following recommendations:

- It is observed from the study that about 80% clients have been suffering from paucity of capital and so having problems to expand their business activities. The amount of investment given by BRAC Bank was not sufficient to meet their 5 needs in most of the cases. So, their requirements should be assessed properly and then the required amount of investment need be provided.
- From the survey, the researcher has found that the clients need to put in a large number of signatures to obtain credit. Two or three only may reduce these signatures. Thus the unnecessary workload of field officers may be reduced.
- Natural calamities like draughts, flood, and famine etc. occur every year in Bangladesh. As a result, poor rural people face problems seriously because of these natural calamities. To save the poor clients from them they should be provided special training. They should be instructed to make some extra savings so that they can easily face the problems arising from these unforeseen problems.
- From the field survey, it is further observed that many clients were not able to provide higher education to their sons and daughters for shortage of sufficient money. Most of them are deprived of primary education. As a result, many children of clients are remaining illiterate. In this situation, BRAC Bank can establish free primary education center and arrange scholarship to ensure higher education for the children of clients.
- The volume of works in each branch of the bank has gradually been increasing. But the new field officers are not being appointed according to increasing volume of works. In such situations, the number of the field officers should be increased to cope with the increasing volume of works. This will help them render effective and efficient services for socioeconomic development in rural areas.
- It is again observed from the field survey that some clients are taken from different institutions. But BRAC Bank offers investments only to those who do not take loan from other institutions. In this respect, however, the possibility of over lapping of taking loans from both BRAC Bank and other institutions cannot be ruled out. To overcome such type of overlapping

problems, Bangladesh Bank has to develop central data bank that should be available in the online so that SME providing institutions like BRAC BANK can easily examine the profile of the loan seeker and take initiative for corrective measures.

- An effective initiative should be taken by the Government to improve the infrastructural facilities such as communication, electricity, utility services, fuel, gas etc. Above all, law and order situation should be developed. This will certainly help to improve socio economic conditions of the rural people.

CONCLUSION

It is assumed even in the recent past that the curses of poverty and underdevelopment equally affect men, women, children and all the members of the family. Bangladesh is one of the low-income developing countries of the world having per capita income of $470 (economic survey, 2003) with agro-based economy. At present there is a global emphasis on the rural development through SME. The Government of Bangladesh has also recognized that most of the problems the economy of Bangladesh is facing are unemployment and underemployment of the people as well as the most abundant resources of the country. 50% of the population live (BES, 2006) and most proximate cause of poverty in high incident of unemployment and under employment. Socio economic development as a strategy for overall economic development of a country is well recognized. The underlying reason behind this context is that it plays the key role in economic growth process and particularly in socioeconomic development.

It is said, "Bangladesh is rich country inhabited by the poor". The people of this country are rich in terms of natural resources but poor in terms of the per capita income. The main reason for this state of affairs is that the big part of the population is unemployed. In this case SME can play an important role to engage this huge number of unemployed people including men and women by financing a little investment to produce various kinds of crops and necessary things. It is therefore true that for socioeconomic development of Bangladesh, industrial development both small and large scale are essential and SME is a vital one.

Researcher found some problems and for playing sustainable role by BRAC Bank on socioeconomic development the researcher suggests some recommendations. If the decision maker as well as proper authority of BRAC Bank takes it into consideration and corrective action the socio economic development of Bangladesh will be achieved at an optimum level.

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