

Impact of Microfinance and Enterprise Development on Women's Empowerment-A Case Study of Skardu-Pakistan

Abstract

This article aims to analyze the impact of microfinance and enterprise development on women's empowerment in Skardu (Gilgit-Baltistan, Northern Pakistan). The aim of this study is to examine the effect on women's social and economic conditions as a result of Hawa Project, by Agha Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) in Skardu. Feminist theory argued and helped to analyze in this research that women are suppressed in the society mostly because of their economic interdependence and this exploitation further extended to economic, political and social injustice for women. The data was collected from 20 women entrepreneurs through questionnaire, who are having shops in Hawa market. Data analysis has shown that this Hawa project has a very positive impact on the socio-economic conditions of the local women in Skardu as capacity to be economically self-sufficient and having their own personal income help to empower the women on their own. Thus the women entrepreneurs providing a platform to household stability become a

Ms. Amber Ferdoos

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences
International Islamic University (IIU)

Mr. Muhammad Zaman

Department of Sociology,
Quaid-i-Azam University
Islamabad

Ms. Madiha Hussain

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences
International Islamic University (IIU)

Raja Jibrán Sajjad

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences
International Islamic University (IIU)

fundamental premise of the microfinance business model and ensure the success of microfinance as a strong poverty alleviation tool of the modern world.

Keywords: *Microfinance, Agha Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP), Women Empowerment, Gilgit-Baltistan*

INTRODUCTION

Due to patriarchal nature of Pakistani society, women's mobility is not facilitated at all major levels. Pakistani society is the most polarized society on the globe with lack of tolerance in day to day business, not only regarding female-male interactions but among the various fractions of the society with women being the most vulnerable objects. Lack of education and poverty are among the major contributing factors for this state of society in general and of women in particular. According to a report presented by World Bank entitled World Development Indicators 2013 clearly stated that sixty percent of Pakistan's population is living below poverty line. The international poverty line is 2 \$ a day but 21% of Pakistani's population lives below 1.25\$ a day. A society where more than half of the population lives on or below the poverty line needs revolutionary measures to bring change which is inevitable for its existence and empowering women through education and through financing their small businesses can bring a measurable change in the lives of Pakistani women. In a Pakistani context where women make up more than half of the population, women are considered to be the most vulnerable group regarding access to material resources and basic needs of life. Therefore, empowering women mean increasing their participation, control and responsibility in various facets that affect their lives. These facets may be social, economic, legal and political (Yunus, 1997). Empowering in a broader sense means overall control over material, intellectual and ideological resources (Batliwala, 1994; Mumtaz, 2007) and where people work toward helping themselves and others to achieve better quality of life (Adams, 1996). When women have more access to financial services, it can empower them to become more confident, more assertive; they can better participate in family and community decisions and can confront systemic gender inequalities more effectively (Hashemi et.al. 1996). To this end, bringing microfinance services to the door steps of women means empowering them and providing them the enabling environment to participate in socio-economic activities. According to Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2010), microfinance is the provision of a broad

range of financial services such as deposits, loans, payment services, money transfers, and insurance to poor and low-income households and, their micro enterprises. Microfinance services are provided by three types of sources, formal institutions, such as rural banks and cooperatives; semiformal institutions, such as non-governmental organizations; and informal sources such as money lenders and shopkeepers. Micro lending is growing in different countries of the world as a flexible means to widen access to financial services, both to help alleviate poverty and to encourage private-sector's activity. Microfinance programs for women are being promoted as an effective tool for poverty alleviation and women empowerment around the world (Linda, 2009). It is estimated that over 90% clients of Grameen Bank of Bangladesh are women and reports say that effects of program participation differ importantly by the gender of program participants (Pitt et. al. 1999; Pitt 2000; Pitt et. al. 2003) while women recipients of credit improved health and nutrition measures compared to men recipients (Pitt et. al. 2006).

The concept of microfinance is a relatively new idea in Pakistan. NGOs and Government sponsored rural support programs are the main providers of microfinance services. The empirical analysis in the *Khushali Bank's* micro credit program has found positive impacts on both economic and social indicators of welfare as well as income generating activities, especially for very poor participants in the program. Except *Khushali Bank* and province specific rural support programs, other governmental financial institutions such as Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF), Zarai Taraqati Bank Limited (ZTBL), and First Women Bank (FWB) also support microcredit programs for women with specific interests. Women in Baltistan are considered as an underestimated section of the community as well as society. Due to social, cultural and religious barriers their involvement in productive work is limited. A considerable number of women are now involved in income generating activities in on and off farm business sector. Women's active part in productive work is considered essential for achieving a sustainable economy as well as for the wellbeing of the society. Majority of women entrepreneurs are busy in on farm and off farm and also in supplying agricultural raw and value added products to the local market. On the other hand, a remarkable number of women are drawn in non-traditional areas of business like general, technical, and service delivery sub sector. The *Agha Khan Rural Support Programme* (AKRSP) has launched a project for involving women in productive work through business enterprise development in Skardu, Baltistan to enhance women enterprise through linkage to the market and to

provide business opportunities. A complete business place known as *Hawa Market* has been established near the Ali Chowk in Skardu city. All the activities are run by female and no male is permitted to enter the market. The linkage is developed by AKRSP with financial institutions for credit needs. For this purpose micro credit is provided by the *First Micro Finance Bank Limited*, Skardu Branch. The project (*Hawa Market*) has shown very positive impacts on the socio-economic conditions of the local women and has emerged as a major tool in women empowerment. In many spheres of life, a positive change has been observed in lives of women like decision making; say in household matters, improvement in health conditions, better education facilities for their children, increase in income at household level, increase in community activities with view of current research.

1.1 Microfinance as a tool for women empowerment:

Microfinance has been viewed as a tool for empowerment and welfare of women. Microfinance reaches 75% of all poor women in the Arab world (ILO Org, 2009) and therefore, is a great potential empowerment tool. Microfinance 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, and their countries (MCSC, 2002). Microfinance is a tool to emancipate the poor and particularly women to cross the poverty line and integrate themselves in mainstream economic and social life and thereby become equally responsible and powerful for overall development. Microfinance has not only a positive impact on women's empowerment (White 1992; Simanowitz & Walker, 2002), plays a vital role in reducing the vulnerability of the poor (Zaman, 2001) but also gives greater financial autonomy to women (Malik & Luqman, 2005). Pioneering microfinance institutions have already recognized that the twin goals of empowering women and developing poor communities are closely connected. Despite of the fact that Grameen Bank in Bangladesh gives over 90% of its micro-loans to women; with women as recipient of around 76% of all microfinance clients globally, women are still lagging behind in many key indicators of economic development (World Bank 1992). Literacy rates, for example, were found to be 61% of that of men in Africa, 52% in South Asia, 57% in the Middle East, 82% in South Asia and 94% in Latin America. Moreover, it is reported that relative to men, women in low income countries face far greater social, legal, and economic obstacles. Therefore, in addition to everything else, microfinance is and can be seen

as a road to women empowerment. There are different indicators to measure women empowerment e.g. self-sense and vision, mobility and visibility, economic security, status and decision making power within the household, ability to interact effectively in the public sphere and participation in non-family groups (Schuler and Hashemi, 1994), economic, social, political and psychological powers (Friedmann's, 1992) which are all also relevant for the present study.

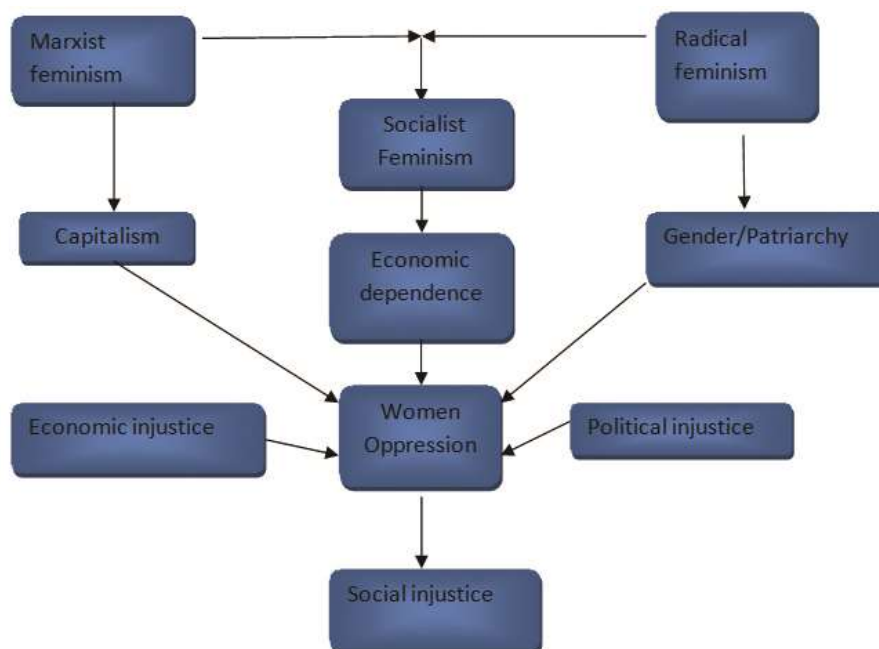
1.2 Women empowerment through microfinance and its impact on family conditions

Various studies indicated that the effect of microfinance is not uniform among various groups of borrowers where poorest benefit the least and women in particular face more challenges in improving their income as well as status (Maclsaac 1997, Yunus 1999, Chowdhury, 2009). Grameen Bank in Bangladesh played a remarkable role in development through microfinance where women are the main beneficiaries and are considered to be empowered through such efforts supporting them to play more productive role and gain more freedom. In a Pakistani context, impact of microfinance on empowering women has a mixed result where in various groups of women from various background have various degree of empowerment which indirectly show that other related social factors have a great influence on women empowerment as well (Malik and Luqman, 2005). Therefore, women's success benefits more than one person and assisting women therefore, generate a multiplier effect that enlarges the impact of the institutions' activities. A report found that 100% increase in the volume of borrowing by women would lead to 5% increase in per capita household non-food expenditure and 1% increase in per capita household food expenditure, while 100% increase in borrowing by men would lead to just 2% increase in non-food expenditure and a negligible change in food expenditure (Pitt et. al. 2003; Pitt et.al. 1998). It indicates that serving women turns out to have stronger impact on household. Women have been shown to spend more of their income on their households; therefore, when women are helped to increase their incomes, the welfare of the family is improved.

Theoretical Framework

In this research report, another view is Marxist feminism theory, which supports the idea of the oppression of women in the society because of their economic interdependence. Socialist feminism is a branch of feminism that gave the idea of emphasizing on public and private spheres of the life of a woman and focused that women's liberation can only be achieved by controlling both economic and cultural

ways of women's oppression. Socialist feminism is based on the basic idea of Marxist Feminism capitalism, and the other idea from Radical Feminism of gender and patriarchy. But Socialist feminists rejected the idea of Radical Feminist that Patriarchy is the only reason of women's oppression in society. Social feminist focused that the main source of women oppression lies in their economic dependence in society. Women are economically dependent on men because men are the rulers in capitals mode of economy that leads to uneven concentration of wealth towards men based on gender biasness. Socialist feminism sees the women economic dependence as the main source of their oppression in society. Socialist feminist's view women's liberation is necessary in order to achieve social, economic and political justice in society.



In recent years, growing number of women in Pakistan have entered in labor force. (Hate, 1978) in her book stated that there is positive change in the political, economic and social status of middle class women especially living in large cities. Now more and more women are working outside their homes. Women employment has increased from 13.7 percent in (1999-2000) to 22.2 percent in (2010-11) stated in Pakistan Employment Trends 2011 by Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.

Pakistan can be ranked in developed countries if women empowerment can be encouraged. Government of Pakistan always encourages participation of women in all sectors and introduced different policies to make it happen in a positive way. But it is also a fact that modernization process is limited to the urban areas of Pakistan. In rural areas, women are still dependent on men especially on decisions related to their lives. The need of time is to make them economically stable in order to enhance their decision making power. (Irene Dankleman, 1982) in his book "Women and environment in third world" stated that we need to promote the standing of women in society in order to achieve sustainable development. However, there is still overall lack of serious consideration in relation to development with the failure to allocate sufficient resources for their participation and integration in society.

Pakistani society is very close to the picture presented by socialist feminism where patriarchy and capitalism leads the oppression of women in society. This oppression of women affects the justice system of society in regard to social, economic and political institutions. In Pakistan, females require the green signal from their parents or husband to take decisions of their lives. Moreover, religious values of Islam, especially value of *Parda*, restrict women entry in different organization where there is a mix male and female environment. We can witness that in different multinational organizations, females are very few in comparison to males.

Women participation in job market is increasing day by day but this is the situation of urban areas. Situation is totally opposite in tribal and rural areas. Working women are more acceptable in urban area because of modernization factor.

So, we need to focus rural areas women's in a different way and providing them a chance to financially stable keeping in mind these restrictions. Economic stability can enhance their social status in society and enable to take their life decisions.

According to the HDI, 60.3% of Pakistan's population lives on under \$2 a day. Poverty also affects the health of the people especially on women's health. Spending on health is considered as secondary. Stabling women on financial grounds can improve their health conditions and give them the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do.

Methodology:

In order to investigate on the effect of microfinance on women's empowerment, Skardu, the capital of Gilgit-Baltistan region in the north of Pakistan was selected as research area. Gilgit-Baltistan covers an area of 72,496 km with a population of about 1.6 million. Some of the important districts of the region include Diamer, Astore, Skardu, Ghanche and Chilas. Study area is important with regards to the social context like addressing the gender, poverty and social issues. The main focus of the research was in studying the impact of *Hawa Market* on women's empowerment which was located in Skardu, so it was selected as the main sample area and working women borrowers in the city as main universe. Women of this city were about 46.41% out of the total population of 2,19,229 with the total number of shops in the *Hawa Market* as 24. The enterprises are run on both sole proprietorship and on partnership basis and the total market population is 40 working women. 50% of the populations i.e. 20 women entrepreneurs were selected randomly as sample for further study. Current study was comprised of both primary as well as secondary data. Primary data was collected from women entrepreneurs of *Hawa Market* with the help of questionnaires. All the respondents were assumed to be running their own businesses and a random sampling method was used to collect appropriate information with the help of self-administrated questionnaire. The secondary data was collected from secondary sources such as *Agha Khan Rural Support Program* (AKRSP) and from the *First Microfinance Bank* in Skardu.

Researchers used pre-survey method to test the validity of the questionnaire. It was tested from 5 women, who have shops in local market. Their imperative suggestions and comments helped the researcher to improve the questionnaire.

Data Analysis:

After filling out the 20 questionnaire, which were based on open ended and close ended questions, data was analyzed in excel sheets for analysis by using statistical method such as percentage method and by drawing graphs and tables. The data was then analyzed and presented. All qualitative data are unique in their data analysis strategy.

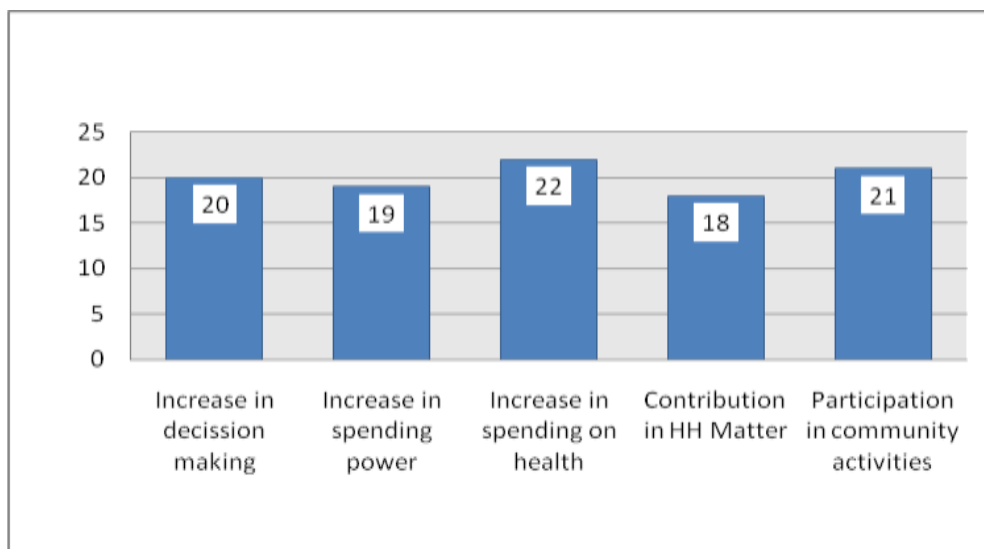
Along with the pre-testing, researchers have also counter check the data with help of content analysis in order to check the reliability and validity of the research.

3. Results and discussion

During the data collection from the working women from *Hawa Market*, various questions were asked and responses were collected. In addition to collecting and recording responses against various questions defined in the questionnaire, short interviews and discussions were also carried out to explore the background of the responses in order to verify the accuracy of the information collected. Following were the major questions against which responses were collected:

- a) Impact of enterprise development on women’s social status
- b) Impact of business on economic conditions
- c) Impact due to the productive role of women
- d) Women’s empowerment and its effects on health conditions
- e) Women’s empowerment and its effect on decision making
- f) Impact of *Hawa Market* on women’s empowerment

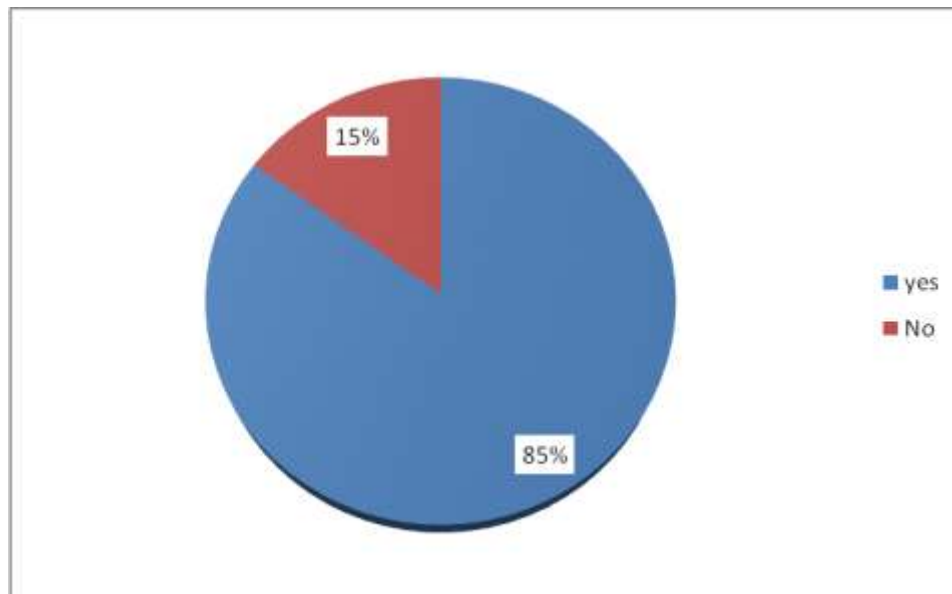
Figure 1: Impact of enterprise development on women’s social status



Source: Field survey (2011)

Figure 1 shows the response of women in *Hawa Market* about their empowerment where most of the respondents expressed their views that enterprise development played a positive impact on their social status. Most of the women (20%) responded that after the establishment of enterprise their decision making power increased in household as well as in the society. Some women were of the view that their spending power from the earned income increased. As can be seen from the above graph that about 22% women were of the view that they enjoy better health facilities and can spend more on their health and of the welfare of their family while about 18% women showed active contribution in household matters. Furthermore, about 21% women were of the view that their participation in community activities increased. Above results are more or less in accordance with the earlier study (Jeffrey and Lisa, 2001), where it was reported that through women's empowerment programs, women experience an increase in their decision making roles in the areas of family planning, children's marriage, buying and selling property, and sending their daughters to school, the areas of decision making which traditionally dominated by men.

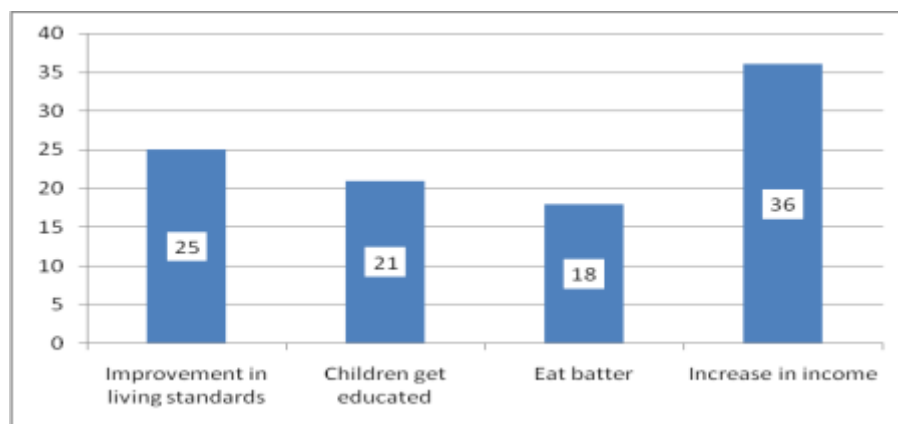
Figure 2: Impact of business on economic conditions



Source: Field survey (2011)

The impact of women's involvement in business on their overall economic conditions is shown in the above graph (Figure 2), which shows that about 85% women have improved their economic conditions after starting their own business whereas about 15% women entrepreneurs see no marked effect on their economic condition. Women who responded that there is no improvement their economic conditions were of the view that there were also other social factors influencing their economic conditions resulting in minimizing the overall effect of their own business in their social life.

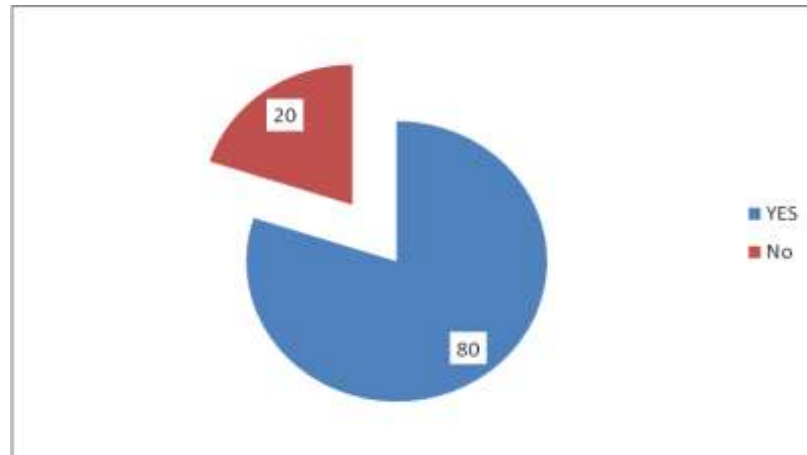
Figure 3: Results of improved economic conditions



Source: Field survey (2011)

About 25% women responded that there was improvement their standard of living, 21% women replied that they could get better opportunity to send their children to school, about 18% were those who thought that they could afford to eat better food, while an increase in the income level of about 36% of the women could also be seen. Above results are in accordance with the earlier studies conducted by Bank Rakyat Indonesia which showed that microfinance services have a positive impact on specific socio-economic variables such as children's schooling, household nutrition status, and women's empowerment (Bank Rakyat Indonesia, 1990; Sugiarto, 1998).

Figure 4: Productive role of women



Source: Field survey (2011)

It can be seen from the figure 4 that about 80% of the women agreed that their involvement in productive work is good for them and has positive effect on their lives while about 20% working women considered it a burden on their lives. We have again surveyed and studied to verify the responses and found that there are other social problems associated with certain working women such as patriarchal system prevailing in the area, domestic responsibilities, physical and social obstacles in reaching the market, which diminish the impact of their productive role on their daily life.

Table 1: Impact due to the productive role of women

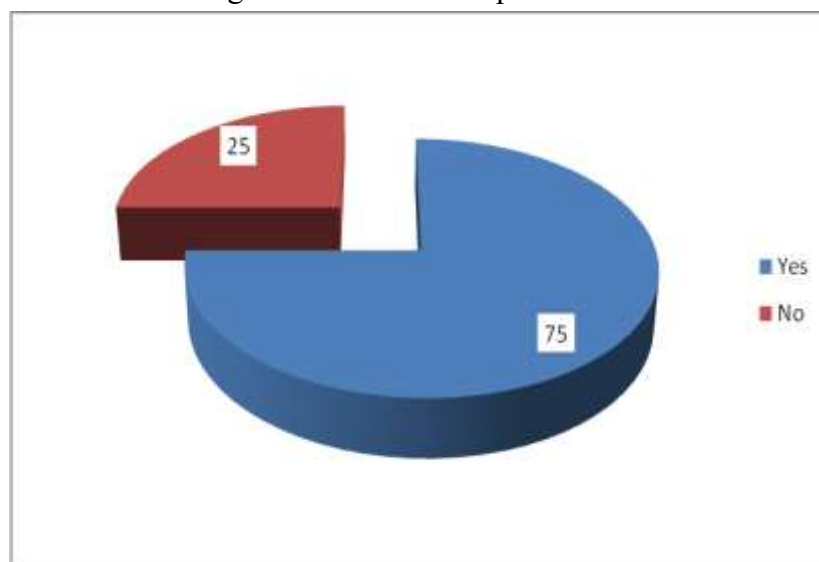
Impact	Percentage
Get more confidence	28
Aware about economic condition	32
Society independent	21
More choices and mobility	19

Source: Field survey (2011)

Furthermore, we can see (table 1) that about 28% women feel confidence in their behavior after involving in productive work; about 32% feel that they are now more aware about their economic situation; about 21% of the women feel social

independence while 19% were of the view that they now have more choices and mobility in their lives. Above results clearly show that women particularly benefit from microfinance services which lead to women’s empowerment by positively influencing women’s decision-making power and enhancing their overall socio-economic status.

Figure 5: Women’s empowerment



Source: Field survey (2011)

From Figure 5 we can see that about 75% of the respondents feel that their independent work through enterprise development directly and positively influenced their decision making power while only 25% of the respondents do not feel such influence which could again be associated with and influenced by other family specific social norms.

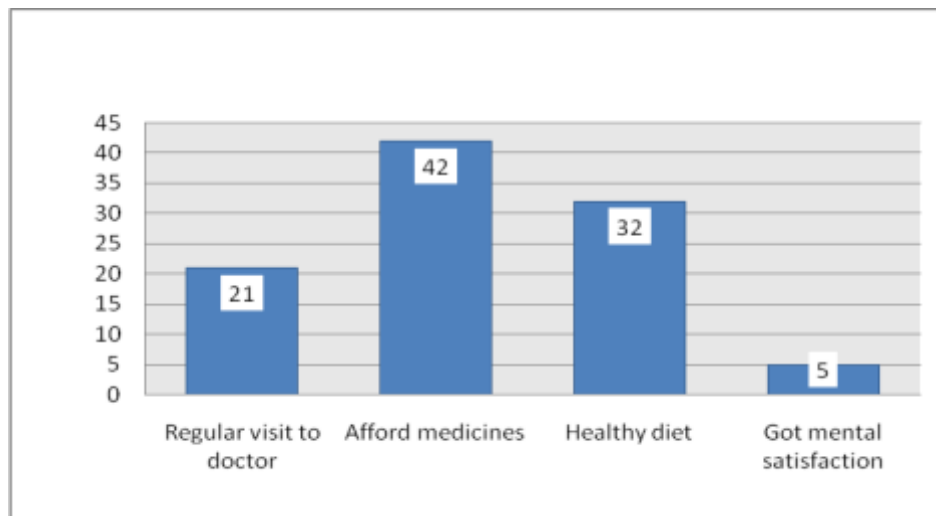
Table 2: Women’s empowerment and its effect on decision making

Effect on decision making	Percentage
Income spending	27
Contribution in HH matters	25
Children education	22
Health care	27

Source: Field survey (2011)

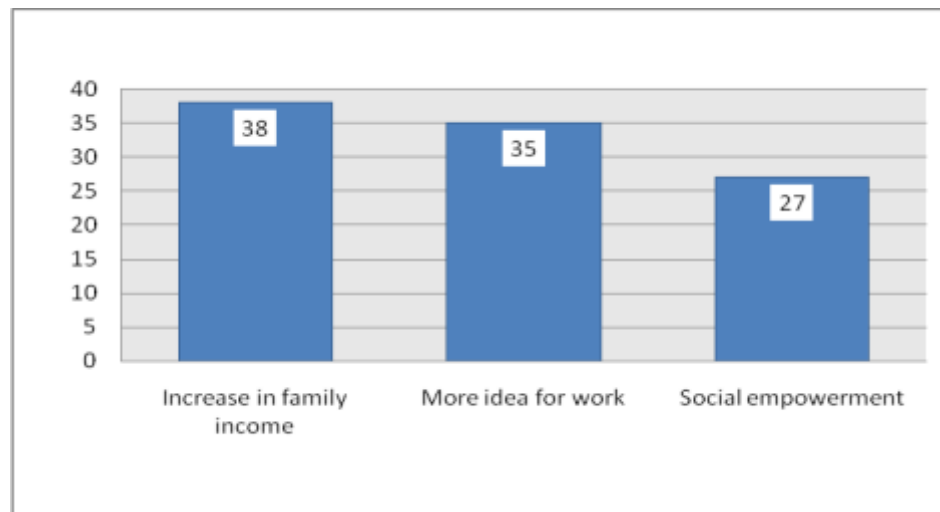
Table 2 shows the effect of women's empowerment on their participation in decision making. Results shows that about 27% of the respondents see an improvement in their decisions on how and where to spend their income, whereas about 25% of the respondents viewed improvement in their household matters while about 22% of the respondents responded that they can now decide about the education of their children independently. Above results are in accordance with the earlier findings on the in-depth interviews of 13 respondents which report that about 34% of the respondents experienced an increase in their ability to control or influence business decisions, 38% had similar experiences at family level, 38% in their community while 54% in their Churches (Cheston and Kuhn, 2002).

Figure 6: Women's empowerment and its effects on health conditions



Source: Field survey (2011)

Above results shows the effects of women's empowerment on their health conditions. It is evident from the results that with more access to financial resources, women find themselves in a better position to avail health facilities which ultimately played a significant change in their health conditions. We see that about 21% women regularly visit doctors, about 42% of the women are able to afford expensive medicines, about 32% of the women started taking healthy diet while about 5% of the working women are now mentally satisfied. Above results clearly show that microfinance supported women for establishing their own businesses and due to their own business and its associated assets and savings, women's access to health services increased which is a positive move towards healthy and harmonized society

Figure 7: Impact of *Hawa Market* on women's empowerment

Source: Field survey (2011)

Figure 7 shows the impact of *Hawa Market* on the empowerment of local women and the data collected showed a remarkable impact on working women of the area. Data collected from the respondents showed that almost 100% of the women were of the view that they have been positively benefited from the *Hawa Market*. Furthermore, about 38% of the respondents showed an increase in their income, about 35% of the respondents feel that they are now better in generating their own ideas for future business, while 27% of the respondents agreed that they have better social empowerment due to their decision making power, participation in community work and standard of living. Our results are again in accordance with the earlier findings which showed that microfinance and enterprise development empower women in many areas such as socio-economic opportunity, property rights, political representation, social equality, personal right, family development, market development, and community development (Sathiabama, 2010)

It is evident from the above results that due to the involvement of income generating activities, working women improved their overall social status in the society which is associated with *Hawa Market* with a 100% of positive remarks from the respondents. Furthermore, although the project of enterprise development through microfinance is totally a new idea for the women of the area, its intervention has a remarkable effect which empowered the local women. Due to the empowerment of working women of the area and their involvement in income generating activities, their overall decision making power effected positively. It shows the effectiveness of

the economic principle of diminishing marginal returns to capital where lower investments are more productive than that of higher investment. The working women in *Hawa Market* get high profit on their investment and they enjoy a better life style. Finally, the above results depict that microfinance impact positively on the socio-economic development of the working women with many fold socio-economic benefits and such credit projects can be considered generally superior to other types of income-generating initiatives (Buvinic and Yedelman, 1989). Therefore, microfinance projects like the one presented in this study should be encouraged to support the marginalized fraction of the Pakistani society, in particularly women in the rural areas.

Conclusion:

Microfinance has the potential to have a powerful impact on women's empowerment. We have seen that in the present case microfinance did not empower all women; most women did experience some degree of empowerment as a result of *Hawa Market*. Since empowerment is a complex process of change that is experienced by all individuals somewhat differently, we have seen that in the cases where less degree of empowerment was found, it was due to related social norms associated with particular respondents. Due to the patriarchal nature of Pakistani society, women in Pakistan are the one who are the most marginalized, they are the one who need and want profit from credit and other financial services. If we strengthen their financial base through projects like the one in the present study, we can empower them. The project *Hawa Market* has overall very positive impact on the socio-economic conditions of the local women where in many spheres of life a tangible change has been observed. Improvement in decision making, say in household matters, improvement in health conditions, better education facilities for the children, increase in income at household level, increase in community activities are some of the areas where we have seen a dramatic change. To conclude, microfinance and enterprise development has played an important role in empowering the local women of Skardu and such projects should be replicated in other parts of the country to see a change in a broader perspective and at a national level.

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