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Microcredit, Food Security and Women Empowerment in Bangladesh

Author: Syeda Nadia Sharmin

Abstract

Food security is an important factor contributing to the socio-economic stabilization and development of Bangladesh. Though, the country has made a steady progress in the expansion of food production, but food insecurity is still a major problem mainly because of poverty. Various development strategies aimed at eliminating poverty are now combining the microcredit as one of the key sectors in their programs. Empirical studies provide convincing evidence that microcredit has had positive impacts on three important sectors of national development - the alleviation of poverty, the empowerment of women and the food security. This thesis scrutinizes the effectiveness and the capability of microcredit in enhancing women's livelihood and empowerment in rural areas of Bangladesh. By using Sen's Capability Approach and empirical data, this thesis represents the interaction of women's livelihood and microcredit. Collecting data from qualitative sources, this thesis tries to evaluate if the poverty alleviation capacity of microcredit helps its participant to improve food security. The findings show that microcredit can enhance women's capabilities in achieving food security by offering them diverse economic and social solution of their vulnerability. This thesis concludes that although microcredit is certainly not a magic formula for poverty alleviation, however, it can prove itself a beneficial tool in the fight against poverty and food insecurity.

Key Words: Food Security, Bangladesh, Microcredit, Poverty, Poverty Alleviation, Capability Approach.

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1. Introduction

“There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”

— *Mahatma Gandhi*

Access to food is a basic need for human beings; however, many poor people do not have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food (McMichael 2009). There are several factors related with the condition of food insecurity such as loss of job, lower level of education and employment, lack of access to land, single-parent families, unstable income level and having a poor family head. All these factors lead to the condition of poverty and the fundamental outcome is inadequate access to food (FAO 2008).

Poverty exists everywhere in the world and most prevalent in the global south, for example, in Bangladesh (McMichael 2009: 154). In past few years, the economy of Bangladesh has developed at about 6 percent per year and poverty dropped by nearly a third with economic growth (World Bank 2014). However, despite this success, Bangladesh is still at a basic phase of economic and social transformation and consider as one of the poorest nation in the world (Quibria 2010:7). Records say in 1970s, 70 percent people in Bangladesh lived under the poverty line. Forty-four years on, it is evident from the case studies that around 45 million people, almost one third of the population in Bangladesh, live below the poverty line, and a major portion of them live in extreme poverty (IFAD 2012). While Bangladesh definitely has more food than it had forty-four years back, yet a large portion of Bangladeshis are still far from being food secure (Mishra & Hossain 2005:1). Poverty becomes an overall denominator of food insecurity in the country and the greatest challenge faced by the majority of the population in Bangladesh is perhaps how to feed themselves. Such conditions of Bangladesh make it an interesting case to study.

Poverty and food security both have a woman-faced feature. It is often heard that, in most developing countries 60 to 80 percent of food are produce by women, though most of the world's poor are women (FAO 2011). The scenario is same for the case of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, women are socially and economically less privileged than men. Almost in every sphere of society, for example, education, health, employment and income opportunities, there are inequalities between men and women (Hoque & Itohara 2009:244). The restricted role in household decision-making, heavy domestic workloads, restricted mobility, limited access and power over household resources, poor knowledge and skills, and low level of individual assets, makes women less empowered. This disadvantaged condition in turn makes them poor and they become vulnerable in terms of food insecurity (Mozdalifa 2012).

Considering this reality in Bangladesh, poverty-alleviation strategies include employment creation, skills development and easy access to financial services for women. Improving access to financial services, especially microcredit, can be viewed as an important weapon to fight against poverty (Sharma 2001). Microcredit was introduced by Dr. Muhammed Yunus, the founder of the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh in the mid-1970s (Chandra 2009). Microcredit can be seen as one of the service that provides small loans for poor people, especially women, who formerly had no access to a formal bank. The Grameen Bank, the pioneering institution in the field of microfinance is now serving 2.6 million borrowers of which 95 percent are women (Latifee 2003:5). Microcredits have reached women in diverse socioeconomic environments, and provided them with a better purchasing power and enabled them to invest money in small-scale businesses such as livestock, agriculture, fisheries and poultry (Hoque & Itohara 2009). It creates opportunities for self-employment rather than waiting for employment to be created for women and liberates them from the grabs of poverty (Latifee 2003). Thus, they become more visible in generating income, educate their children and participate in household decision-making and family planning

methods (Mozdalifa 2012:8). Additionally, microcredit improve the household capability of women by enhancing the “human capital¹” through providing better nutrition, education, skill acquisition and health improvement (ibid.:12).

Previous studies have found that that access to credit by the poor women has a large positive effect on living standards and food security. Most of the studies have revealed that women in general need financial services to carry out their activities more efficiently and to improve their food security condition. And it is evident from the long history of microcredit that it can serve as a useful tool to improve women’s standard of living. Yet, it is not clear how this can be achieved because there are some insufficiencies and weaknesses in microcredit program. So, in order to justify the presence of microcredit institutions in rural Bangladesh, there is a need to address the impact of microcredit programs on poverty alleviation and food security.

1.1 Aim of Research

The main purpose of microcredit program is to alleviate poverty and empowers women. The idea of micro credit has proven to be an effective and potent tool for poverty alleviation; and the extent of success of microcredit in attaining food security depends on its poverty alleviation capacity. Thus, the aim of this paper is to see whether poor women can overcome poverty by taking different economic and social opportunities offered by microcredit program. This paper has the ambition to combine both the standard economic aspects (income, food security) of microcredit for women; and social aspects (empowerment) such as changes in women’s status. The purpose of this thesis is to scrutinize if poor women are

¹ Human capital means the standard of capabilities, knowledge, habits, social and personality qualities, which represented in the form of ability to perform labor to generate economic value (Latifee 2003).

funded and focused (i.e. get a chance to access economic and social opportunities), they can get rid of poverty and ensure food security. The ideas behind such argument are: microcredit is an efficient tool in developing women's position, and overall food security is expected to be higher when microcredit is offered to women.

1.2 Research Questions

In view of the aim of this paper, the research question sets to investigate and find the respective answers that will confirm the actual role of microcredit as an effective tool to alleviate poverty in order to ensure food security for women in Bangladesh. Therefore, the main research question is:

How can microcredit enhance women's capabilities in achieving food security in Bangladesh?

As the main purpose of microcredit program is to alleviate poverty and empowering women, thus, in order to get an answer to the main research question of this thesis, it is also important to investigate:

Sub-question one - How can poverty affect food security in Bangladesh?

Sub-question two - What are the impacts of microcredit on rural women of Bangladesh?

In order to carry this thesis it is important to mention how this paper is going to perceive the term of development, poverty and empowerment.

Development: This paper will consider development as a process of expanding real freedom (Sen 2001:36). Development can be achieved through alleviating poverty, improving income distribution, enhancing political security and empowerment.

Poverty: Additional to shortage of income, this paper will consider poverty as the deprivation of basic capabilities to reach minimal living standard (Lister

2004:16).

Empowerment: Empowerment will be defined as women's better role in household decision making, having access to financial and economic resources, having better social networks, having better bargaining power and having greater freedom of mobility (Haugen-Kossmann 2008:9).

1.3 Delimitation

This thesis mainly focuses on microcredit and its impact on women capabilities to achieve food security in Bangladesh. Although there are several other factors that can be related to poverty alleviation and food security, but the concept of microcredit became popular due to its proven capability to enhance investments, increase purchasing power, and improve economic security. In fact through microcredit women are becoming the owners of micro enterprise and a result of increased earnings their socio-economic mobility is improving. This thesis intends to analyze the role of microcredit and will make an effort to find out how women of Bangladesh achieving food security through it and does not focus on other types factors which can also play role in poverty alleviation, finance and food security.

Furthermore, this paper is aware of the problem of generalizations as it focuses on one case. However, this paper is more like a reflection of the argument if microcredit has the possibilities to enhance women's capabilities in achieving food security in Bangladesh.

Due to the short time limit, it was not possible to collect primary data by conducting direct interview and fieldwork. However, this thesis is highly concerned with the issue of authentication thus; it relied on the data presented on the authorized website (Bangladesh government, World Bank, FAO, WFS). Due to the limited scope of this research it will only focus on few micro-financing institutions such as Grameen Bank, BRAC or TMSS and does not focus on other

institutions, which are also playing vital role in the field of microcredit.

1.4 Disposition

The next section of this thesis will present a literature review focusing on the two main concepts of this paper- food security and microcredit. This review will make an effort to highlight the works of different scholars and will try to map out the ways in which different scholars understand and define food security and microcredits and analyze how these two concepts relate with each other.

It will then continue with the theoretical framework of the paper and argue that poverty is a consequence of capability inadequacy. It will further argue that if women become empowered, for example through education or employment, they can have a greater influence in the household. The methodology chapter will then provide the ontological and epistemological base of this thesis and discuss the choice of the method (case study). It will then continue with background information starting with causes and consequences of poverty and food security, and continue with the discussing the current food security condition of women. The thesis will then make an analysis of the written text and apply the chosen theoretical framework to explain the research issue. After providing the analysis of the written text the thesis will gather the main findings and will argue whether microcredit can enhance women's capabilities in achieving food security in Bangladesh, or not.

2. Literature Review

This section will provide an assessment of various literatures connected to microcredit and food security. Due to the aim and purpose of this thesis, this

section intends to analyze existing literature by looking specifically two concepts- microcredit and food security. The first part of this section will begin with the discussions of the definition of food security and the threat about food security in Bangladesh - both points will highlights the position of women. In the second part, this thesis will make an effort to discuss the aspects of microcredit. This thesis has the aim to find out, if women participants of microcredit can improve their food security by stabilizing and diversifying their income. Thus, it is important to analyze how the concepts of microcredit and food security are interrelated. Hence, this section will end up by making an effort to discuss the conceivable relationship between microcredit and food security.

2.1 Food security

At the World Food Summit (1996), food security was recognized as a circumstance where “all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. According to FAO (2006), an estimated 854 million people worldwide are still undernourished, though the world has adequate food to feed everyone. Though, improvements in agricultural productivity are necessary to increase food security, this however, is insufficient to ensure food security. The main problem is perhaps associated with lack of economic, social and physical access to food, and insufficient nutrition at national and household levels (Brown et al. 2006:11).

Patel’s position is reminiscent of Brown et al.’s arguments that, food crisis isn’t any kind of partial crisis, but rather a crisis of the entire economic and social model. However, Patel (2009:680) argued that the processes in each continent, in each country, are very different. In developing countries in South-east Asia, rural women and men play different roles in ensuring food security for their households and communities. But customary rules and practices often have restrictive effects

for women, which limit their access to important resources such as land and credit, and affect household food security and nutrition (World Bank 2012). Having a similar view, Abu-Ghaida and Klasen (2004) argued that the limitation of their (women) access to education and employment opportunities restricts their economic autonomy and weakens bargaining position within the family. This vulnerable situation of women, thus, translates into little or no voice in household decisions and the outcome is food and nutrition insecurity.

According to Brown et al. (2006:14), food security is mainly built on three pillars: food availability, food access, and food utilization². Across the world, rural women playing very important roles in attaining each of these pillars of food security; however, their roles are generally unrecognized and controlled by restrict their access to resources, services, and employment opportunities (FAO 2014). In the case of Bangladesh, in spite of having a steady progress in the expansion of food production, food insecurity is still a major problem mainly because of the limited purchasing power and thus of access to food. In Bangladesh, women are socially and economically less privileged than men, thus, the condition of food security is worse for them (Kashem & Faroque 2011:41).

2.2 Threat about food security in Bangladesh

FAO (2006) identified poverty as the major driver of food insecurity- not food availability and food security at household level is intently connected with poverty. Kashem and Faroque (2011:42) claimed that poverty and food insecurity

² According to FAO (2014),

- Food availability: sufficient quantities of food available on a consistent basis;
- Food access: sufficient resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet;
- Food utilization: appropriate use based on knowledge of basic nutrition and care, as well as adequate water and sanitation.

problems in Bangladesh are massive. About half of the population live below the poverty line, thus, lacks the resources to get adequate food. A similar perspective on the role of poverty within the food security debate is brought up by Uruguchi (2010). Uruguchi argued that women in Bangladesh are vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity. Though, the women of Bangladesh represent a large income group in rural households, it is however also women who fall below the poverty line and primarily bear the brunt of household food (Uruguchi 2010). Fuster et al. (2008) have a clear focus on the relation between gender and food security. As women in Bangladesh always are less privileged than men, they face significant difficulties in occupying economic assets, generating income and household decision-making. This condition eventually restricts their access to food.

Challenging the limitations that women are confronted with and enlarging their access to opportunities, are two essential components in the fight against hunger and food insecurity. However, removal of these limitations needs more than good 'will to improve' the condition of women. Empowerment can play a crucial role for women in decision making, at every sphere of social life, including the household, local communities and national level, and can serve as the basis for a sustainable strategy for reducing food insecurity (FAO 2014:5). It is observed in the case of Bangladesh, that rural credit projects, such as microcredit, can consider as an important tool to rise the income of the rural women, which leads to advanced food security and a improved life (Afrin et al. 2010).

2.3 The concept of Microcredit

Since 1970, microcredit became an important tool for alleviating poverty in Bangladesh. Along with immediate alleviation of poverty, microcredit also helped its participants to accumulation assets, which resulted in long-term sustainability (Chowdhury et al. 2002). The Grameen Bank started microcredit programs in

1976 as an experimental project in Bangladesh and now it is practiced by more than 3000 NGOs, commercial banks, and specialized financial institutions, and their main target group is poor rural women (Afrin et al. 2010:12). For rural and disadvantaged women in Bangladesh, microcredit programs have proven to be a convincing tool to reduce poverty through the social and economic empowerment. The main idea of microcredit is to improve the economic security of the recipients (mainly women) by providing them small loans to purchase productive assets (Cons & Paprocki 2008:2). In a study, Ahmed et al. (2011:239) found that that small amounts of credit provided to the poor can make the difference between absolute poverty³ and creating enough income opportunities to feed the family and improve housing, health and sanitation situation. Similarly, Swamy and Tulasimala's (2013:31) study observe that microcredit significantly provide full and productive employment to women particularly to those who were socially deprived.

2.4 Microcredit and Food Security

Recent literature has found an optimistic correlation between access to microcredit and food security. FAO (2013) recognize that food security in Bangladesh can be attained through increased agricultural productivity; employment and self-employment, that create income opportunities and thus allowing to buy food; social programs—including food-for-work or cash-for-work programs, other forms of productive activities within households or communities. Richard L. Meyer (2003:349-50) observe that microfinance can contribute to poverty alleviation and food security through supplying loans, providing other financial services that enhance investment, and creating employment opportunities for the participant. If microcredit is the way to achieve food security

³ Absolute poverty is a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but access to services (United Nations 1995, in Bradshaw & Mayhew 2011:23).

then Mayer certainly provide some insightful arguments about the ways by which microcredit affect food security. He mentioned three pathways -first is the poverty-alleviation path, which improves income generation. The second pathway is, access to microcredit induce changes in household assets and liabilities, improves savings and insurance service, thus, stabilize consumption. The third pathway is consumption of microcredits. Through this pathway, households attempt to use loans in immediately productive ways, thus, income and food supplies increase (Meyer 2003:350).

In the case of Bangladesh, microcredit programs generate a remarkable impact on rural women in the area of social empowerment, awareness and education, which helps them to be more socially liberated, and more economically sovereign in their families and localities (Afrin et al. 2010:10). Thus, it can be argue from different scholars' point of views that microcredit has a huge potential to strengthen food security for women by empowering and expanding socioeconomic opportunities. However, many scholars are also skeptical about the ability of microcredit to create a sustainable positive economic impact on the food security of the rural poor women of Bangladesh. Few studies argued that poverty is not reduced through microcredit and poor households become poorer through the additional burden of debt. More discussion regarding the negative impact of microcredit will dispute in section 6.5 in Chapter 6.

3. Theoretical Framework

Microcredit allows the recipients to break the vicious cycle of poverty by creating immediate self-employment and generating income, which in turn helps the participant to achieve food security for them and their family member (Latifee 2003:5). How micro-credit can improve food security may better be assumed by

understanding the concept of poverty and the mechanisms by which financial services (microcredit) can affect the lives of the poor and reduce poverty.

Generally, poverty related to shortage of income (White 2012), however, Sen (2001) claims that poverty signifies the deficiency of some basic capabilities to function. The more comprehensive idea of capability deprivations helps to recognize the broader context of poverty, and explains certain social phenomena. The main argument of this thesis is that, poverty is the major driver of food insecurity and empowerment of women can help them to get rid from poverty, thus can serve as an important tool for reducing food insecurity. Hence, the Capability Approach (CA) could be used to better explain the concept of poverty alleviation, development and empowerment of the rural Bangladeshi women. In a capability framework for poverty analysis, the standard viewpoint would come from the approach, while the specific dimensionality would be decided contextually. Therefore, in a practical way, a capability framework can contribute to the understanding of multiple deprivations within society (Hick 2012:12).

3.1 Poverty as Capability Inadequacy

The concept of poverty is related with a person's material resources, especially income, living standards and activities. One can be considered as 'poor' when he/she has both a low standard of living and a low-income level (Lister 2004:14). Sen (2001) takes a step back from both income and living standards to question why they matter. From the viewpoint of Sen, they don't matter in their own and they are simply involved to what actually matters. Sen argue that the things matter is the kind of life that a person is capable to lead and the choices and opportunities open to leading that life (Sen 2001:87).

In his CA Sen defined poverty as a multidimensional concept in terms of deprivation of basic capabilities rather than as just a lack of income. The deprivations of basic capabilities refer to the fact that people are not able to lead the lives they have reason to value (Sen 2001:87). According to Sen (2001:36), basic capabilities can be regarded as “the substantive freedoms include elementary capabilities like being able to avoid such deprivation as starvation, under-nourishment, escapable morbidity and premature mortality, as well as the freedoms that are associated with being literate and numerate, enjoying political participation and uncensored speech and so on”.

The CA rejects monetary income as the only indicator of well being (Laderchi et al. 2003:253), and claims that development requires the removal of negative freedoms such as social deprivation, domination or neglect of public facilities and the improvement of positive freedoms (capabilities) such as access to food, education and health facilities (Sen 2001:36). In addition to shortage of income, CA emphasizes the influence of surroundings and social goods on capabilities. It also considers that the significant connection between low income and low capability could vary between different communities families and individuals’ vis-à-vis gender, location, social roles, because the impact of income on capabilities is dependent and conditional (ibid.:87-88).

The dominant role of income in poverty measurement is often less privileged by the CA. Sen points to a difference between the actual opportunities or capabilities of a person and his/her income that is merely a means to such opportunities. He considers opportunities or capabilities as intrinsically important, while the significance of income is both instrumental and contingent (ibid.). This argument of Sen relates to the difference between direct and indirect ideas of poverty. The direct perception of poverty focus on situations where living standards fall under a certain level, and are an outcome of lack of resources. While indirect thoughts of

poverty focus on circumstances where resources fall under a certain point, and are an outcome of low standard of living (Hick 2012:3). However, if the basic idea (freedom) of capability approach is reversed, it perhaps means that the lack of freedom. In the case of Bangladeshi women, 'lack of freedom' is playing a huge role, which makes it even more complex and complicated to reach capability adequacy.

3.2 Capability and Functioning

In Sen's CA, capability and functioning are interdependent, that is, one affects the other and vice versa. 'Functioning's' refer to what a person actually manages to do or be; while 'capabilities' denote what a person can do or be, that is, the range of choices that are open to an individual (Lister 2004:16). Every person has freedom (capability) to value his/her life in their own way and they have the right to lead the type of life they want. If someone has the capabilities and opportunities, they can choose the various options that exist in front of them. In other words, one's capability allows him/her to function in own way (Cagatay 1998:7). Functioning involves a range from fundamental nourishment to more complex levels such as belonging to a particular community and the achievement of self-respect. Thus, every human being should have the capability or freedom and opportunity to be respected by the society in which he/she lives, be educated, work in own choice and should free to use the capacity to function the way he/she likes.

However, critical here is the freedom people enjoy to decide between different means of living that they can have reason to value (Lister 2004:16). A person may have the capability to achieve the functioning whereas other person may lacks of functioning. For example, a person may stay away from food because he/she doesn't want to eat or fasting, while other person stay away from food simply because he doesn't have the money to buy food. Thus, freedom referred to the

ability to make choices about what someone wants to be and do; and about how they utilize the resources available to them (ibid.17).

3.3 The Capability Approach to Analyzing Food Insecurity and Inequality

In recent literature, poverty can be identified as the absence of some basic capabilities to function (Cagatay 1998:7), and a person's worthy achievements are conditional on that person's capabilities of function (Gebreselassie & Haile 2013:520). CA can be seen as a useful tool to analyze inequality, particularly gender inequality. It put greater value on the concept of freedom and to the lives people have reason to value (Sen 2001:87). The main two points of CA are 'being and doing'. Unlike the predictable inequality assessment (including food security), which focuses on the market settings (income and employment), the CA permits the evaluation of inequalities in nonmarket backgrounds, such as in the household labor and workload (Robeyns 2003:66). It also identifies differences in gender, location, social roles and ethnicity in different communities', families and individuals (Gebreselassie & Haile 2013:520). In sum, CA analyzes the nature of capability deprivations and the factors related to that deprivation (Sen 2001:87).

Hence, it can be argue that the CA is relevant for evaluating issues relating to individual capabilities in achieving food security, and for analyzing the challenges that individual might confront with functioning and wellbeing (Gebreselassie & Haile 2013:520). Gender inequality in access to and control over useful means such as land, financial service and employment may limit women from producing enough food or generating considerable income to buy food. Thus, women enjoy limited freedom in practicing a desirable livelihood due to poverty and limited mobility (Sen 2001). Considering food insecurity as capability deprivation, it can be claimed that the lack of material resources and income perhaps restrict the actual freedom of individual as well as one's capabilities and functioning.

3.4 The Capability Approach to Analyzing Women Empowerment

The Human Development Index (HDI) identifies empowerment as a process of alteration by which people get the chance to acquire capability. Within the HDI framework, definitions of poverty as well as definitions of empowerment have been highly influenced by Sen's capability approach (ibid.). The CA and the empowerment concept both deal with increasing women's choices and opportunities to empower themselves. Sen highlighted that gender inequality with strong anti-female favoritism, is pre-dominant in the division of food and health care, especially in poor societies in developing countries. It is therefore important to focus on capabilities and functioning in order to understand the situations of women, which makes the multifaceted discrimination experienced by women visible and thereby brings into focus the importance of women empowerment (Sen 2001:193). While working with the empowerment of women and the CA, one crucial issue need to be taken into account, the evaluation of the quality of life. In other words, "whether a universal measure of quality of life for all men and women should be aimed for, or whether one should defer to the many different norms that traditional cultures have selected" (Haugen-Kossmann 2008:22).

3.5 Capability Approach and Microcredit

From the viewpoint of Sen's CA, well-being should be assessed in terms of capability and functioning. When someone is poor, his or her well-being or quality of life is low. An assessment of the impact of microcredit on poverty reduction, women empowerment and food security can be measured by its (microcredit) effect on basic capabilities. In other words, the impact of microcredit can be assessed through its abilities (functionings) to increase or decrease poor people's freedom (capabilities) (Tseng 2011).

Before considering how microcredit contributes to basic capabilities, it is important to know what are the basic capabilities (freedoms)? As it mentioned in section 3.1, basic capabilities are related with the abilities of being able to well nourished and educated, having shelter, avoid preventable disease, participating in community life and being able to appear in public with self-respect (Sen 2001:36). Thus, the evaluation of microcredit from Sen's capability perspective can be measured by considering how it can be seen as a functioning to increase or decrease people's (mainly its clients) freedoms. While arguing, for example, that food security can be achieved through the poverty alleviation capacity of microcredit, it means that microcredit can have a positive impact on poverty reduction in terms of increasing people's basic freedoms. Similarly, when the income of the microcredit clients increase as a result of utilizing loans, it will in turn enhance their freedoms to control economic resources and financial conditions.

Although microcredit (as functionings) have the potential to increase people's freedom (capabilities and chances), it can also possibly decrease their freedom (Tseng 2011:247). While going through different related articles and journals, some criticism related to microcredit point to the fact that it can also potentially decrease people's freedoms by increasing debts. There is a chance that the freedom of the client could be decreased if they are unable to pay back loans. More discussion on how microcredit can impact negatively on people's freedom will discuss in chapter 6 in section 6.5.

To get an answer to the main research question of this thesis, the assessment of the impact of microfinance on women's capabilities in achieving food security need to be measured by basic capabilities, such as in terms of income, education, employment, health, and the empowerment of women.

3.6 Criticism of Capability Approach

The CA of Sen has been criticized by Martha Nussbaum (2000), who claims that Sen never focus one definite list of valuable capabilities. According to her, list of valuable capabilities are very important if he (Sen) wants to employ the CA to social justice and gender inequality (2000:13). Underspecified characteristics of Sen's CA failed to propose a well-defined list of capabilities. Nussbaum (2000) argue that, in order to recognize important capabilities for evaluating gender inequality, it is important to include in a list of relevant capabilities. Moreover, she emphasize on taking a stand on whether to look at gender inequality in terms of functioning's or in capabilities (Robeyns 2003:67). Whereas Sen argued capabilities are people's potential functioning's (ibid.63).

Since, functioning and capability belong to individuals; hence the CA is an ethically or normatively individualistic theory. Though, CA can be seen as a normative tool, but it cannot be expected that it will provide complete answers to all normative questions (Robeyns 2003:64). However, the ethically individualistic and ontologically non-individualistic⁴ characteristics of the CA are a desirable characteristic for well-being and inequality analysis. CA does not specify which capabilities should be taken into account or how distinctive capabilities should be gathered in an overall assessment. However, it indicates how important each capability will be in an overall judgment and suggests choices of the relevant capabilities (ibid.64).

In order to evaluate how people are performing in terms of capability, it is important to determine which functioning matter for the good life and how much. Basic needs may need to be easily identified and agreed upon moral and political priorities. These 'basic capabilities' (education, health, nutrition, and shelter up to

⁴ CA is ontologically nonindividualistic as it does not assume atomistic individuals, nor that one's functionings and capabilities are independent of their concern for others or of the actions of others (Robeyns 2003:64).

minimally adequate levels), need to be taken into account while considering the issue of development (i.e. food security and poverty alleviation). Sen identified that the proper way of evaluating people's well-being is their actual opportunities and capabilities (freedoms) of doing things they have reason to value, thus development need to be seen as increasing the basic freedom that people enjoy (Tseng 2011:39)

4. Methodology and Methods

The main research question of this thesis refers to the role that microcredit played in improving women's capabilities and achieving food security in Bangladesh. It is argued before that the extent of success of microcredit in attaining food security depends on its poverty alleviation capacity. Thus, it is important to measure and assess poverty in order to evaluate the role of microcredit in improving women capabilities. In addition to the theoretical debate about the capabilities of individuals in overcoming poverty, there is a debate about the most suitable methods for assessing poverty and capabilities.

Recent studies used both qualitative and quantitative methods of assessment to investigate whether women are vulnerable, in terms of poverty, in achieving food security in Bangladesh. However, which methods are best suited for a certain research depends on the research types and the kind of the answer that the research demands. The quantitative data are mainly applied in research where statistical data formulate the basis for the research and are coded the information for many cases or observations (Halperin & Heath 2012:430). While qualitative data are preferred in a research when attitudes, values and beliefs are important for the research carried out (ibid.). This thesis is intended to look on the impact of microcredit on poor peoples (clients) freedoms, thus, related with the client's judgments, thoughts, likings, priorities, and views about the impact of microcredit

(Hayati et al. 2006:372); and does not base on the statistical analysis of data. Moreover, the answers to the thesis research questions ask for both describing and understanding the context of the research. Through a qualitative approach researcher can get description of the context of the research thus, can better identify the patterns, regularities, and further solutions (ibid.:319). This in turn helps the researcher to get an objective answer to the research question(s). Hence, this thesis intends to base on qualitative data.

Different researchers argued differently while doing a research. One who follows the positivist research paradigm believe that at an ontological level, “there is an objective reality subject to natural laws such as cause and effect and there are universal truths that can be discovered through inquiry” (Hayati et al. 2006:370). While other researchers take the side of an alternative paradigm which based on the view that “there are multiple socially constructed realities and inquiry seeks to identify limited patterns that may be culturally specific” (ibid.). At an epistemological level of a positivist paradigm, the object of study is independent of the researchers. By observing or measuring phenomena, researchers discover and verify knowledge, while facts are established by taking apart a phenomenon to observe its component parts. Researchers of classical poverty studies tried to separate the phenomena from the facts (Hayati et al. 2006:370).

In this sense, the debate is about the kind of reality researchers want to discover. Thus, along with the argument about the best suited method, it is also important to identify the extent to which the chosen method will affect the realities researchers wants to discover (ibid.:171). Thus, by taking a positivist side, this thesis will employ a case study method, collecting data from qualitative sources.

4.1. Positivism

Positivist research involves four assumptions: naturalism, empiricism, law generating and objectivism (Halperin & Heath 2012:28). Naturalist methodology supports and presumes there is a real world, independent of our experience to which access can be acquired by thinking, observing and recording our experiences carefully (Moses & Kuntsen 2007:8). Ontological assumptions of Naturalism claim that the social world is independent of our knowledge and is in no way different from the natural world. Thus, there is a systematic and lawful way of existence constructed by observable events (Halperin & Heath 2012:29). This research will analyze the role of microcredit in achieving food security by enhancing the capabilities of women in Bangladesh. By using the Naturalist approach, this research can interpret that, the opinion of different scholars regarding the case of Bangladesh is a fact that is already a part of the social world and can be measure and analyze by the observable events.

Empiricism is the view that knowledge of the world is limited to what can be perceived. Concepts apply or are derived from an experience. Empiricism believes that all knowledge originates from empirical observations (Halperin & Heath 2012:426). By evaluating the knowledge from observations of different scholars this research will analyze weather microcredit can be considered as an effective tool to alleviating poverty and ensure food sovereignty by enhancing women capabilities.

The law-generating tenet of positivism implicates that the objective of social science is to clarify and predict social phenomena by means of law. If the social world is like the natural world, then, it also must be regular, systematic and law-governed, similar to the natural world (Halperin & Heath 2012:29). This thesis attempts to analyze the CA, which can be assumed as a tool to explain social law

and by which it can be predicted that capabilities of women can help them to advance their life status to become close to achieve food security.

Positivist research tries to be objective, however, sometimes it is hard to handle an objective study due to the personal assessment of the researcher (ibid.:30). For example, when this thesis will take an argument of a person who is directly connected with the distribution of microcredit, it may be difficult to do an objective study. It is, thus, noted that this thesis is not taking a side for or against of microcredit programs and their good or bad impact on the capabilities of Bangladeshi women, as it would be impossible to make a definite conception. By analyzing different points of views this thesis will make an attempt to analyze of the impact of microcredit on the life of Bangladeshi women by focusing especially on its poverty alleviation capacity, which in turn helps the women get rid of food insecurity.

4.2 Method: Case Study

This research question asks for both a strong theoretical base and empirical proof, which can best be provided by choosing a case study. This approach is motivated by the following arguments: first, a case study deals with a specific case that explains a larger theoretical framework; second, it is theory confirming (Moses & Knutsen 2007:132). It seeks to clarify the point made, that individual might confront with challenges in altering resources to a valuable functioning and wellbeing (Gebreselassie & Haile 2013:520). The case study of this thesis strives to test the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 3, which highlights poverty as a multidimensional concept in terms of deprivation of basic capabilities.

The case, microcredit and its impact on women, is internally valid as it outlines the causal relationship between the three main variables- microcredit, poverty alleviation and food security, within and through the capability framework (Yin

2009). With regards to external validity, or generalizability (ibid), this case study of microcredit and its impact on Bangladeshi women explains something more general and might be applicable to other contexts and other cases. The criteria of case study provide explanations that are externally valid; increase knowledge about other similar cases around the world and leaves room for improvement (Hollis & Smith 1991:61).

4.2.1 Delimitations of Case Study Method

Due to the limited space of this research paper, single case study has been chosen. However, this chosen method has some limitation by including some data and excludes other facts. Such as, the external validity of the case study could be improved by analyzing a second case, which also deals with the same consequences (Halperin & Heath 2012:172). As this thesis presents the impact of microcredit in Bangladesh, it would be more valid if one other case also were presented that deals with the impact of microcredit in any other country of the world. By choosing a single case for this study, the results of the analysis of chosen case are generalized. Although, the case study of Bangladesh can be regard as an appropriate and objective case to study, as it is the pioneer country of microcredit. There is still a chance that every data of this case not always relate to other cases having similar consequence. However, it is also impossible to cover facts and data of different cases. Thus, it is better to choose the most appropriate one, which can best represent all the other similar cases and cover most of the data that match other similar cases (ibid.:172-173). Hence, while making the generalization of the case, it is easy to get valid analysis. Moreover, due to short time limit of this research, it can only rely upon secondary interpretations of this phenomenon, which might make the accuracy of the result contestable.

4.3 Research Strategy

This research problem follows a deductive approach as its theoretical framework refers to the more general idea of capability of individual (women). The advantage of deductive approach is, it constructs on accepted claims, beginning its inquiry from a theory and general claim, following a set of defined rules of reasoning in order to explain a single event (Moses & Knutsen, 2007:22). Since this thesis is a case study, where the empirical material is based on existing theory, thus, it follows deductive approach. This thesis applying the capability approach to the case of “the impact of microcredit on Bangladeshi women” to verify the claim made at the beginning of this thesis- microcredit can be regard as an effective tool to fight against poverty and improves women capabilities. It will then draw out the meaning or implications for explaining the chosen case (Halperin & Heath 2012:31).

4.4 Data Collection

To answer the research questions the thesis relies on secondary data collection method. This method includes data collection from secondary sources such as journals and articles. Many of them collected from Lund University search system- LUBsearch and Lovisa. Therefore, the qualitative data collected from these sources mainly will be secondary. The collection of qualitative data also include the data from the World Bank, FAO, Bangladesh Food Security Portal, The Grameen Bank website, Bangladesh National websites and other official websites. This thesis also relies on secondary academic sources and quality newspaper articles to include related data. It also includes qualitative data relating to people’s judgments, thoughts, likings, priorities, and views about the impact of microcredit (Hayati et al. 2006:372).

This method of collecting data from secondary data sources in turn has its own advantages and disadvantages. Researcher can enter into a rather easy and elaborate collection of data with comparatively less time. Using existing data as well broaden the scope of the study beyond that of generating it for oneself. Such a collection of data is valuable for evaluations, or finding important data across time (Halperin & Heath 2012:177). While on the other hand researcher has to rely on data primarily collected by others, which could affect the originality of the research.

4.5 Source criticism

Source criticism relates to the issue of validity and reliability. While doing a research it is very important to find out if the sources are being used for collecting data are reliable, relevant, real and solid. It is thus separates the researcher from rumor, hearsay and anecdotes (Halperin & Heath 2012:14). The credibility of collected data can be confirmed if several autonomous sources give or emphasize similar argument. The articles, books and journals collected from Lund University database and from library can be considered as reliable as these has been cited many times in the field of development, poverty and microcredit. The qualitative data regarding various issues of microcredit, food security and poverty alleviation written by different well-known authors are connected and related with each other. This actually point to the fact that these data are reliable because they are showing the same argument. The data collected from the different web sources can also be considered as valid because all data are obtained from authorized or governmental web sources. Such as the data collected from the World Bank, FAO, Bangladesh Food Security Portal, The Gremeen Bank website, Bangladesh national websites and other official websites, enhance comparability and validity of the collected data.

5. Background of the Case

The issue of inadequate access to food can be regarded fundamentally as an outcome of poverty (FAO 2008). Although, poverty has traditionally been defined in income or expenditure terms, this paper is following Sen's CA, and considers poverty as the deprivation of basic capabilities (Sen 2001). The perspective of capability poverty thus involves lack of food, education, health, nutrition, and shelter up to minimally adequate levels. It may be mainly beneficial in evaluating the extent and nature of poverty in developing countries (ibid.). People living in poverty find it very hard to arrange nutritious food for themselves and their families. This is not just a temporary problem that is solved at the end of the day by arranging a piece of bread. When children are constantly malnourished, or 'diminutive', it can affect their future income and can push them in poverty and hunger (WFP 2014).

The following figure (figure 1) illustrates that, as a consequence of poverty, people confront with food insecurity, malnutrition and hunger. This makes them weaker and less capable to earn the money that would help them escape poverty and hunger. In short, the poor are hungry and their hunger traps them in poverty (ibid).

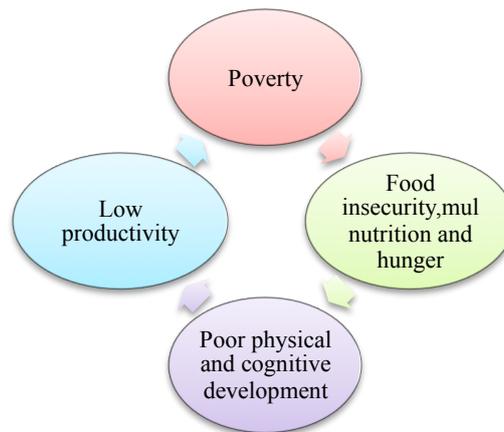


Figure 1: Poverty Trap (FAO 2008:3)

5.1 Poverty and Food Security: Causes and Consequences For Each Other

Poverty and food security are complicated and multidimensional in nature. Poverty involves lack of education, employment, land access, income differences, intra household inequalities and gender biases, and all these factors are responsible for vulnerability to access in food security (Mozdalifa 2012:3). Poverty limit poor people's access to food thus they face under nutrition and food insecurity (Sharma 2012). According to the World Bank report (2014), 31.5 percent of the people in Bangladesh live below the national poverty line. Especially the people in rural areas are spinning around in miserable poverty, illiteracy, ill health, unemployment, low quality of life and so on. On the one hand, food insecurity causes poverty, vulnerability and insecure livelihoods, while on the other hand it is a result of these conditions (Sharma 2012). Another important issue related to poverty and food security in Bangladesh is higher food prices. After the food crisis in 2007, the food prices in Bangladesh become high. It has had a negative impact on the real incomes and access to food (Hossain 2013). The income level of Bangladeshi people perhaps increases slowly; however, people with lower income still find it very hard to adjust with high prices. As a result the

amount of food insecure population has been increasing. According to the report of World Food Program (WFP), 65.3 million people, nearly 45 percent of the total population of the country is now food insecure (WFP 2012).

Regional differences in Bangladesh have major impacts on poverty and food security. The high rate of poverty in the northwest or the coastal belt area apparently shows the production pattern in this region, which indicates that poverty affect food insecurity. Since most of the rural people have lack access to land ownership and they do small farming or simply day labor. These situations create a gap between demand sides of production or supply part in the issue of food security (Mozdalifa 2012:3). Poverty estimates at the National and Division Levels are presented below:

Table 1: Poverty Headcount rates in 2010

Source: Bangladesh Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2010.

Poverty Headcount rates in 2010 (Upper poverty Lines)									
National	Urban	Rural	Barisal	Chittagong	Dhaka	Khulna	Rangpur	Rajsahi	Sylhet
31.5%	21.3%	35.2%	39.4%	26.2%	30.5%	32.1%	42.3%	29.7%	28.1%

The data of Table 1 shows the poverty rates at the National and Division levels. The upper poverty line⁵ links to the moderately poor households whose food spending is at the level of the food poverty line. This means that, these households have minimum amount of money to purchase some basic-needs food items and nothing more. The poverty headcount rate is highest at Rangpur (in northern Bangladesh) 42.3 percent, while Chittagong (in southern Bangladesh) has the

⁵ The poverty line states the level of consumption (or income) required for a household to escape poverty. A poverty line indicates an individual “turning point” in the welfare function. By moving from just below (lower poverty line) to just above (upper poverty line) the poverty line means the changing position of households from significant misery to a minimum amount of well-being (World Bank 2005:43).

lowest poverty rate, 26.2 percent.

5.2 Current Food security situation in Bangladesh

Food security in Bangladesh has long been identical with attaining self-sufficiency in rice, the main staple food. The economy of Bangladesh has made good progress in rice by rising production from 11 million tonnes to 33 million in between the year of 1971-2012. Moreover, Bangladesh used to receive substantial quantities of wheat, the secondary staple food, as food aid from developed countries (Hossain 2013). Bangladesh has still far to achieve complete food security that solves the problems of insufficient food consumption and chronic malnutrition among poor people

However, there are a number of factors in Bangladesh that restrict poor households or individuals from accessing food even when total food supplies are adequate. It is very difficult for the lower income people to purchase the necessary foods at prevailing market prices. A major portion of rural people in Bangladesh may not have access to own land for cultivation or may lack the required assets or access to credit to overcome difficult times (WFP 2014). Availability of food and household access to food are not enough to assure food security. It is also critical the consumption pattern of household members (ibid.). The level of consumption of food items hardly meets the requirement for balance diet. Specially, women, children, the elderly and the disabled often experience discriminations in food distribution within a household; often eat last and minimum. Imbalanced diets of women during pregnancy lead them to give birth to undernourished child (Hossain 2013). Child malnutrition rates in Bangladesh are 48 percent, which is the second highest rate in the world. This condition is tied to the low social status of women in Bangladeshi society (WFP 2012).

Table 2: Consumption (gram/person/day) of different food items, 1984 to 2010

Source: Hossain 2013

Food item	Norm for balanced nutrition	Rural area				Urban area			
		1984	2000	2005	2010	1984	2000	2005	2010
Rice	390	421	479	477	442	351	377	389	343
Wheat	100	65	24	12	38	79	47	28	51
Vegetable & potatoes	225	140	196	218	221	179	196	228	241
Pulses	30	26	15	13	13	22	19	19	17
Fruits	50	17	26	33	43	21	27	33	50
Fish	45	29	38	40	46	39	41	50	60
Meat & eggs	34	10	15	18	20	22	31	31	42
Milk	50	22	29	31	32	34	33	37	39
Total	934	741	899	986	1005	761	841	999	983

The data of Table 2 indicate the consumption of different food items (in gram) per person per day. It can be noted from Table 2 that both in rural and urban areas per person consumption of rice and wheat has been decrease in 2010, while the consumption of vegetables, fruits and fish and meat from has been increase in 2010. However, the consumption level of other food items, such as pulses, oil, and livestock products, hardly meets the necessity for balance diet according to the National Nutrition Council and FAO (Hossain 2013).

Moreover, since Bangladesh is agriculture-based country and most of the rural people are depends on agriculture, thus, when seeds price hike it significantly lowers the real income of poor households. This higher seeds price discourages the subsistence farmer to invest in agriculture. This volatile nature of food and grain price becomes an issue for achieving seasonal and temporal stability in food security (WFP 2014).

5.3 Nutritional Status of Women in Bangladesh

Gender constitutes the most profound discriminating division in Bangladesh (Sharma 2012). It is not only about the unequal rate of poverty among men and women but also both cause and effect of poverty is deeply varied among them. It is mentioned before that women face a greater risk of poverty than men and the gender inequality is most visible among female- headed households (Hoque & Itohara 2009). Due to the unequal distributions of food in Bangladesh, poor women and girls are more likely to suffer from malnutrition, especially pregnant women and adolescent girls. Sometimes customs such as mothers and wives have to take food at last prevent them to get enough food in rural Bangladesh (Titumir & Rahman 2011:15). All these factors make women largely food insecure. Nevertheless, wealth quintile⁶ plays a crucial role in nutritional status of women. Rich women are much less malnourished than the poor (Mozdalifa 2012:13). Therefore, the poor situation of women is significantly determining nutritional aspects of women.

6. Analysis

This chapter will analyze the role of microcredit on poverty alleviation and food security for women in Bangladesh, by looking at three main issues. First, the role of microcredit issues in approaching poverty alleviation and food security. Second, the role of microcredit in women empowerment and third, the criticism that microcredit received so far. In order to answer the research questions investigating the impact of microcredit in poverty alleviation and food security, this chapter will look at what microcredit actually does in order to alleviate poverty and ensuring food security in Bangladesh. This thesis argues that within the development structure, a clear poverty alleviation-to-food security interaction

⁶ Wealth quintiles referred to a poverty line based on a national percentile distribution of households by economic status (Mozdalifa 2012).

can be witnessed. In rural male-dominated society of Bangladesh the pattern is empowerment-poverty alleviation-food security, and in the wellbeing structure empowerment-food security-good nutritional status. Even though every structure is characterized by different interactions between those different factors, this thesis argues that, all those patterns have in common is the ultimate conclusion that an actor's attainment to the structure may change the life of that actor.

As it mentioned before, microcredit can be considered as a functioning to decreases or increases people's basic freedoms. In order to find a credible answer to the main research question, the assessment of the impact of microcredit on poverty reduction and food security need to be measured not only by income, but also by basic capabilities such as in terms of income, education, employment, health, agricultural productivity and the empowerment of women.

6.1 Assessment of the Role of Microcredit – Poverty and Food Security

Various development strategies aimed at eradicating poverty and ensuring food security are now invariably including microcredit as one of the key parts in their programs (Gobezie 2004). It is evident through empirical studies that it have had positive effects on two vital areas of national development – poverty and food security. Microcredit has created significant hope and expectations among academics, government policymakers, multi-lateral and bilateral donors, NGO leaders, and other development advocates in Bangladesh (Datta 56). Recent studies uses income and consumption as dependent variables for evaluation of the impact of microcredit programs' and conclude that it can have positive impacts on combating poverty as well as smoothing consumption (especially food). Linking this back to Sen's CA, the viewpoint of capability-poverty does not deny the importance of income in poverty alleviation. Sen acknowledge that lack of income can be a major reason for a person's capability deficiency (Sen 1999:87 in

Lister 2004:18). From CA the relationship between income and capabilities/functionings depends in part on how individuals converted income into capabilities or functionings.

The Grameen Bank and BRAC are the two most visible institutions who deal with the issue of microcredit. Both institutions provide a great number of loans that result in lower rate of poverty for all program participants (Develtere & Huybrechts 2005:169). For example, in the Grameen Bank microcredit program, 76 percent of participants who have taken only one loan are below the poverty line, compared with only 57 percent of those who have taken five or more loans, and cross the poverty line. According to the findings of Khandker (2005), for every 100 Taka lent to a female member of BRAC, household consumption increases by 18 Taka and for men consumption increases by 11 Taka. These results point to the fact that poverty decreases and food security increase; and women are more benefited than men.

However, this rate of poverty reduction appears to decline with duration of membership. When borrowers of BRAC have a loan for up to three years the poverty rate falls by around 15 percent for the moderate poor⁷ and by 25 percent for the ultra-poor⁸. Nearly the same outcome observed for the Grameen Bank (Latifee 2003:8). The borrowers of the Grameen Bank are steadily moving out of poverty with the rate of 5 percent per year. Few studies conducted on a household survey reveal the fact that, about 50 percent of the rural households have crossed the poverty line in such areas where the Grameen Bank has been operating for more than a decade. Another 25 percent were very close to cross the poverty line and the rest of the household was struggling because of different reasons (ibid.).

Thus, the reduction of the level of poverty decreases with the course of time,

According to the World Bank (2005)

⁷ The term 'moderate poor' used to define a family living on income that barely sufficient to meet family's minimum needs for food, clothing, shelter and health cares.

⁸ Ultra-poor is a technical term used to define a family living on an income of less than \$1 a day.

women, however, seem to score better than their male counterparts (Develtere & Huybrechts 2005:169). Furthermore, many households working in the agricultural sector have to deal with seasonality in consumption. Although, at harvest time, they have good income, in other periods they have almost nothing. The programs of the Grameen Bank and BRAC help to smooth their consumption pattern of the participant by offering diverse income options (Hoque & Itohara 2009).

Table 3: Effect of microcredit program on participate households (USD)

Source: Mallick (2012:6)

Status	Participate households		Change	Non-participate Households		Change
	1988	2008		1988	2008	
Household Income	497	701	204	640	792	152
Per Capita Income	99	138	39	121	151	30

The data of Table 3 shows the effect of microfinance on household income has been positive over time (1988-2008). It shows that the household income of the microcredit participants changed up to 204 (USD), where same of the non-participants changed up to 152(USD). The per capita income of the microcredit participants changed up to 39(USD), where same of the non-participants changed only up to 30(USD). Thus, all the factors had changed with respect to time, and the changes were positive for the microcredit participant (Mallick 2012:6).

For a program to be successful, it is important to alleviate the poverty of its participants and achieve a long-term sustainability of the benefits. It come out from the previous studies that it takes almost five years for a poor member to cross the poverty line, and nearly after eight years the member is able to function independently from the microcredit institution (Develtere & Huybrechts 2005:169). Though the short run effect of microcredit has been generally recognized, the issues are raised about its long run sustainability and collective

impacts. Even though microcredit programs are widespread and successful, however, in a country like Bangladesh, high poverty rate can negatively impact the outcome of microcredit or can result in the failure of micro-credit movement. Though, there are some doubts with the positive impacts and effectiveness of micro-credit programs, nevertheless, the fact can not be ignored that it helps the poor participants to overcome their poverty and help them to ensure their food security (Latifee 2003:6).

6.2 Diverse Positive Impact of Microcredit

Microcredit can be consider as an effective tool in the field of poverty finance that is now serving 99 million borrowers of which 93 percent are women. All the participants of microcredit were among the poorest at the time of their first loans. Having access to credit give them an inspiring environment to struggle for better a life and cross poverty line (Leikem 2012:7). The freedom (social and economic) that the clients acquired allow them to make choices about what they want to do and how they utilize the resources available to them.

6.2.1 Impact on Employment and Productivity

By creating employment opportunities microcredit programs can indicate a reduction of the poverty rate and smooth the level of consumption. The Grameen Bank and BRAC have been successful in expanding the chances of self-employment for their clients (Develtere & Huybrechts 2005:170). Before joining microcredit programs, 31 percent of the participant claimed themselves as unemployed. A World Bank study found that borrowers consumption has increased by 18 percent per year as a result of using profits from Grameen-financed businesses (Latifee 2003:8).

6.2.2 Impact on health status

Good health is directly connected to individual's capability and his/her

functioning in society. It is impossible for someone to function well with ill health. Grameen provides its female member a platform, a network where they are organized into groups and joined into seminars. They learn about hygiene and how to take care of the health of their family. Moreover, some studies found that infant mortality among Grameen families has reduced by 34 percent, and the implementation of family planning among them is double the national average for Bangladesh (ibid.).

6.2.3 Savings

Microcredit can be seen as a tool to provide economic stability through consumption smoothing effects, and it can be achieved by savings. Microcredit institutions encourage borrowers to store or save extra money until a time when it is needed (Leikem 2012:16). To motivate participants to save money can be seen as one of microfinance's most encouraging contributions to reducing the vulnerability of the poor.

6.2.4 Impact on Agricultural Productivity

The agricultural economy of Bangladesh is mainly comprised of small and marginal farmers. Informal credit sources like local moneylenders and wealthier community members often charge high interest rates while lending money to small and marginal farmers. As a result, the landless poor in rural Bangladesh are facing problems that severely affect their economic security as well as food and agricultural productivity. In such case, microcredit institutions provide their loaning to those who own less than half an acre of land. Small-scale loans help the poor farmers apply expensive inputs to their lands and get benefited by increased production. Thus, it can be argued that sufficient and sustainable microcredit for agriculture can rise food production in Bangladesh and create a favorable condition of food security (Mozdalifa 2012:11).

Although, it is hard to reach female members in rural Bangladesh, it is important

to engage them in development projects as they confronted with poverty more than a man. Women can take part in household decision-making and develop their status significantly if they contribute to family income (Develtere & Huybrechts 2005:176).

6.3 Microcredit and Women empowerment

Poverty and food security is gendered to the disadvantage of women. According to CA, it is important to focus on capabilities and functioning in order to understand the situations of women, which put lights on the discrimination experienced by women, and thereby focus into the importance of women empowerment (Sen 2001:193). Empowerment of women entails not only access and control of material resources, but also challenging culturally established ideology and practices; and improved living standard (Leikem 2012:29). Capability and functioning is associated to the standard of living. A low standard of living, meaning deprivation in basic capabilities and what a person actually cannot manages to lead a life that they can have reason to value (Lister 2004:16). Advocates of microfinance argue that standard of living increases among female borrowers in terms of net worth and per capita consumption (Leikem 2012:29). According to Nallari and Griffith (2011) “access to finance and credit empowers women. This empowerment is manifest in the form of increased earning capacity and control of household assets, resulting in greater autonomy and decision making within the household” (Nallari and Griffith 2011 in Leikem 2012:30).

The following table shows the difference between the status of women empowerment between NGO and Non-NGO client.

Table 4: Status of women empowerment among the respondent women.

Source: Hoque & Itohara (2009:248)

Types of Women	Group	Total Number	Empowerment Rate Among Different NGOs	Total Empowerment Rate	Empowerment Rate Among NGO Women	Empowerment Rate Among Non-NGO Women
NGO Women	Grameen Bank	90	40.00%	21%	69%	30%
	BRAC		23.33%			
	TMSS		23.33%			
Non-NGO Women	Individual Housewife	90				
All Women		180				

The data from Table 4 reveal that, among the respondent women only 21 percent are empowered. While, 69 percent of the empowered women are active members of microcredit programs of selected three NGOs and only 30 percent are individual housewives. Moreover, among the mentioned NGOs, 40 percent of women members of The Grameen Bank are empowered, and 23 percent members of both TMSS and BRAC have achieved empowerment. Reason behind the gap between the percentage of the Grameen Bank and the other two NGOs is perhaps the long (more than two decades) operating time of the Grameen Bank with microcredit program. While the other two are comparatively new compared to the Grameen Bank (ibid.:247). This increasing empowerment rate of participant gives them a standard living. Empowerment has a lot of impact on a person's functioning and capabilities because it gives chance to carry out many activities that can make him/her independent for survival.

6.4 Wider Impact of Microcredit

Microcredit offers education to poor and deprived women. It as well promotes the education of their children and enabling them to provide better healthcare for themselves and their families. According to a survey of United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), most of the women who dealt with microfinance institutions got health education services (Leikem 2012:32). *Larger involvement of women in important family decisions* is another important indicator of women's empowerment. By engaging with microcredit program, the wife is now consider as a source of income rather than as a liability, her status rise, and so her decision-making power. Moreover, in the male-controlled Bengali society, domestic violence against women is a serious problem, and this happen due the lack of alternative earning options. *Microcredit attributed to the strengthening of the women's economic role within the household* (Develtere & Huybrechts 2005:177).

6.5 Negative Evaluation of Microcredit

Although, it is evident that microcredit have impact on poverty alleviation and food security, not everyone shares the optimism described above. While going through different journals and articles, some negative evolutions of microcredit have been identified. Some studies recognize that microcredits can contribute to poverty reduction and food security, but only if the poor people have reached a certain economic level (Develtere & Huybrechts 2005:171). Many argue that the extreme poor are mostly excluded and thus, get little benefit from it. However, a study of World Bank in Bangladesh comes with encouraging results, which confirms that for the very poor borrowers and also for the local economy microcredit matters a lot (Latiffee 2003:7). It is required to repay microcredit loans in small but frequent installments. Borrowers of Grameen Bank and BRAC required to repaid their loans in 46 and 48 installments in a year and the first installment should repay by little more than one week after the loan is executed.

This feature has turned out to be a severe problem and burden for those borrowers who get income generation from the investment after longer time (Jahiruddin et al. 2011:1115). Thus, in order to repay loans, the clients can face the prospect of asset depletion, or reduction in consumption. Poverty can be worsened among the borrowers when they suffer losses in the preliminary phase of their businesses due to of lack of efficiency, low demand for their product, lack of management and technological skill (ibid.).

In many cases, microcredit lending programs have strengthened traditional gender structures in spite of shifting economic relationships within households. Women often are playing the role of rational economic actors while still maintaining their traditional role in the household (Leikem 2012:35). Conversely, some studies have argued that improved income level does not always lead to the improvement of women's bargaining power within the household. Evidence from Bangladesh points to the fact that, increased income of women by using microcredit does not increase women's bargaining power entirely. On average women borrowers generally rely on their husband while taking the investment decisions and more worryingly, over 90 percent of the earnings from their investments are controlled by their husbands (Fofana n.d:8).

Another issue that needs to be focused is if microcredits reduce vulnerability and create sustainable food security condition. However, in a scenario where the credit-financed investment does not make a noteworthy profit then it can be assumed that poverty will not be reduced. A short-term decrease in poverty can also noticed if credit is used for noninvestment purposes such as repaying existing debt, improving housing or social obligations, though, borrowers have to sacrifice future consumption in order to meet repayment obligations (Zaman 1999:23).

6.6 Findings

The discussion in Chapter 6 illustrated that micro-credit programs are contributing to poverty alleviation and women empowerment in rural Bangladesh result in increased levels of food security. Studies show that microcredit programs have created significant positive differences in the socioeconomic status of the rural women and have a notable impact on the social and economic security of the lives of rural women. Increased income indirectly develops the level of education of the borrowers and creates awareness about consumption and sanitation needs. The improvement of education among the rural female borrowers helps to increase awareness about their own health and the future of the next generation.

Although, according to Sen's CA, only financial income is not the best sign of economic security, however, he acknowledges that low income is clearly a major factor in poverty and can be a main reason for a person's capability inadequacy (Lister 2004:16). The data presented in table 3 indicate that, the household income of microcredit client has increased over time, where some of the non-participants were decreased over time. Moreover, Sen (2001) argued that, food security could be considered as capability deprivation and lack of material resource and income perhaps restrict the actual freedom (capabilities) of individual. By studying the data of Table 3, it can be argue that the income level among the member of microcredit significantly increased. Thus microfinance can account for increased income as well as reducing poverty in rural Bangladesh. It is argued in chapter 5 that, poverty and food security are cause and consequence of each other, thus the positive impact of microcredit on income and poverty can reduce food insecurity in the rural Bangladesh.

Though, the information in different tables show that the overall status of women client is not very high, however, the status of empowerment of the women who are actively involved with microcredit programs are relatively better than the individual housewives. The data from Table 4 show the fact that microcredit programs have significant influence in empowering the women in rural

Bangladesh. The women who participate in micro financing institution are more empowered than the women who do not participate in such institutions. Furthermore, women can generate better outcome from microcredit programs than men.

In order to be developed, society need to remove negative freedoms such as social deprivation, domination or neglect of public facilities and have to improve the positive freedoms (capabilities) such as access to food, education and health facilities (Sen 2001:36). Microcredit borrowers experience deprivation of most of the necessities of daily life due to their poverty. Though, the poorest are the least likely to benefit from microfinance, however, important benefits have been identified such as consumption smoothing and the establishment of other social facilities.

Thus, from the above discussion it can be argued that *microcredit can enhance women's capabilities in achieving food security in Bangladesh by offering them increased and diversified income, better living standard, employment and savings opportunities*, increased involvement in family decisions, expanding knowledge, awareness, and an improved condition for children.

7. Conclusion

To conclude this thesis, this chapter will try to summarize the research findings in order to provide a comprehensive answer to the questions asked in the beginning of this thesis.

The main objective of the microcredit program in Bangladesh (and elsewhere) is to reduce poverty and empower women. Though, poverty related to disempowerment and vulnerability regardless of gender, however, sociocultural

norms and lack of social mobility serve to additional disempowerment of poor rural women in Bangladesh. The analysis carried out in this paper does suggest that microcredit borrowing is associated with a welfare-oriented financial program to benefit the poor women by offering them diversify economic and social solution of their vulnerability. This improved capability of women as microcredit borrower helps them to achieve food security for them and their family. The analysis presented in this paper provides some evidence that microcredit services have noticeable impacts on the improvements of food security, income generation and socioeconomic livelihoods of rural women. The study observes that microcredit strengthening women's position in society particularly of those women who were socially deprived. It provides employment for women. Therefore, it can argue that microcredit program assists the rural poor women to be economically autonomous and financially solvent in their society.

Despite this positive impact of microcredit, there are still arguments in the development economics practitioners regarding the effect of microcredit on poverty. By getting small loans, clients may raise them out of poverty for a short period of time but when the money is finished or in case of investment loss they have the chance to fall back into poverty. Data from different tables of this thesis reveal that microcredit has provided important contributions to the development of Bangladesh. Although microcredit is definitely not a panacea for poverty, it can prove itself a beneficial tool in the fight against poverty and food insecurity.

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