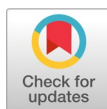



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Microcredit and Women Empowerment: A Case Study of Akhuwat Beneficiaries

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment is one of the most debated and challenging topics in empirical research. In developing countries, women face numerous challenges related to their socio-economic conditions. Microcredit is a powerful tool to empower women. Microcredit institutions provide their services to poor women. The main objective of this study is to analyze the effectiveness of microcredit in promoting women's empowerment among the borrowers of Akhuwat Islamic Microfinance Bank. Towards this end, we perform the non-parametric test and descriptive analysis based on the sample of 120 women who have taken loans from Akhuwat Islamic Microfinance in the city of Chakwal. Five dimensions of empowerment are used to arrive at an aggregate index of empowerment. These dimensions are economic empowerment, social empowerment, political empowerment, psychological empowerment, and technological empowerment. The study is unique in the sense that no one has used technological empowerment in a previous study. The data were collected through a structured questionnaire and conducted interviews to assess the complexity of the phenomenon of women's empowerment. The collected data were analyzed through SPSS v. 20 and STATA 14 by using the technique of non-parametric tests (Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test) and descriptive statistics. The findings of the study have shown that there are positive results of microcredit on women's empowerment. The most influential dimensions to empower women include economic, social, and technological empowerment. The findings suggest that microcredit plays a crucial role in shaping women's empowerment. The study concludes with recommendations for lenders to leverage microcredit.

Keywords: microcredit, political empowerment, socio-economic empowerment, technological empowerment, women's empowerment.

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Introduction

In the mid-1970s, Grameen Bank initiated microfinance by Dr. Muhammad Yunus in Bangladesh, offering credit to start their own business and providing women with various earning opportunities to become financially independent (Bateman & Chang, [2012](#); Shafique & Siddique, [2020](#)). Microcredit programs offer services to the poor, especially women in developing economies, and target the poor, nearly half of the human population worldwide (Al-Mamun et al., [2014](#)).

As it is well known, the third Millennium Development Goal is the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. In the development field, women's empowerment is among the most debated and researched topics for researchers. Within developing nations, women's empowerment is important for sustainable growth. It is essential in enhancing their families' living standards and quality of life (Nessa et al., [2012](#)). The majority of the women population around the world is unemployed and also suffers from many problems due to unequal distribution of opportunities in the workplace. To improve the living standard, men's earnings are not sufficient; therefore, the addition of women's earnings can reduce the poverty trap (Pomi, [2021](#)).

Furthermore, Al-Mamun et al. ([2014](#)) explain six attributes of women's empowerment regarding socioeconomic and political empowerment such as the involvement of women in financial decision-making, women's role over family decisions, women's economic security, women's legal awareness and women's regulations of resources, and the women who join microcredit programs lead to the improvement in all these empowerment variables. Researchers also relate psychological empowerment (Datta & Shu, [2017](#); Tariq & Sangmi, [2018](#)), economic mobility and health, child-related empowerment (Asim, [2009](#)), skills training, entrepreneurship, and marketing (Kapila et al., [2016](#); Khan et al., [2023](#)), economic security and control over resources (Al-Mamun et al., [2014](#)). In recent years, microcredit institutions have been good instruments that work for the poor and empower them socially and economically. Through these institutions, the poor can access financial services available to rich people. They expand their businesses, reduce poverty, and become financially independent by accessing microcredit services. (Chirkos, [2014](#)).

Akhuwat organization is one of the sources of raising funds through the

philosophy of brotherhood, starting from ten thousand rupees. Akhuwat implies the name of Mawakhat or brotherhood and works to eliminate poverty. Akhuwat Islamic Microfinance initiates interest-free loans against conventional microfinance institutions that charge high interest. The reason for interest-free loans is to enhance the living conditions of the poor and make them financially independent. Initially, Akhuwat extended a loan of PKR 10,000 to a woman to establish a small tailoring business at home. The loan repayment terms were structured in small monthly payments over one year. The overarching vision was to establish a society free from poverty, guided by principles of empathy and equity. Over time, Akhuwat has devoted itself to promoting women's empowerment through its impactful loan programs. The main objectives of the study are stated below:

- to analyze the impact of Akhuwat microcredit on women's economic empowerment.
- to analyze the impact of Akhuwat microcredit on women's social empowerment.
- to analyze the impact of Akhuwat microcredit on women's political empowerment.
- to analyze the impact of Akhuwat microcredit on women's psychological empowerment.
- to analyze the impact of Akhuwat microcredit on women's technological empowerment.

The hypothesis of this study is set to check the impact of microcredit on women empowerment through the borrowers of Akhuwat.

H_{A1}: There is a significant impact of Akhuwat microcredit on the economic empowerment of women.

H_{A2}: There is a significant impact of Akhuwat microcredit on the social empowerment of women.

H_{A3}: There is a significant impact of Akhuwat microcredit on the political empowerment of women.

H_{A4}: There is a significant impact of Akhuwat microcredit on the psychological empowerment of women.

H_{A5}: There is a significant impact of Akhuwat microcredit on the technological empowerment of women.

Many governments and non-governmental organizations are working to empower women. Microcredit institutions provide loans to grow small businesses and empower them socio-economically. Similarly, Akhuwat also focuses on empowering women by providing small loans. This study adds to the existing knowledge by investigating the impact of technological empowerment on women's empowerment. It is recognized that technological empowerment is not explored by researchers. The presented study was conducted in the city of Chakwal because no previous study has been conducted in this area especially on the Akhuwat Islamic microfinance of Chakwal.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This section presents valuable frameworks and theories showing the relationship between microcredit and women's empowerment from different perspectives, such as economic, social, political, psychological, and technological. Particularly, approaches such as "the women's empowerment framework" provide a theoretical base for this study. This theory presents valuable insights into the theoretical foundations of empowerment and implications for considering the impact of participation in microcredit on women's empowerment.

Women's Empowerment Framework

Longwe's ([1995](#)) women's empowerment framework considers the pursuit of women's empowerment in both economic and social sectors. Longwe's framework aims to assess the development projects and ways to support women's empowerment. The framework describes the assessment of gender (Carlier, [2021](#)). He defines Longwe's framework as "The procedure by which women come together to recognize and tackle the gender issues that hinder their progress. In a specific society, these gender issues are the practices of gender discrimination entrenched in societal custom, legal systems, and ideological beliefs."

For this study, Sara Longwe's "Women's Empowerment Framework" is used to check the effect of microcredit on women's empowerment. According to Sara Longwe, the five levels of equality are welfare, access, control, participation/mobilization, and awareness (Zulfiqar & Tabassum, [2023](#)). These dimensions indicate the extent to which women are equal to men. Longwe also suggests that it is important to address women's issues,

whether they are ignored or identified as a project objective in women's development. Women's issues are related to gender inequality in any social or economic role (King, [2001](#)).

Uniting Theory

The uniting theory entails the importance of microfinance repayment in groups. According to this theory, in the case of joint liability, all the group members are responsible if any of the members are not able to pay the loan within the given time. The system ensures that if a borrower is unable to repay the credit, the other group members step in. In case, if group members as a whole default, then they will not be eligible to get further microcredit. This theory has been exemplified by Akhuwat, which provides credit in a group, and other group members act as guarantors, making access to loans easy, and women can easily access loans, which affects their level of empowerment (Ghatak & Guinnane, [1999](#)).

Empirical Literature Review

The empirical literature on women's empowerment reveals a comprehensive picture of the multidimensional nature, including economic, social, political, psychological, and technological dimensions. Numerous studies emphasize the role of economic empowerment in enhancing women's standard of living and family well-being. For instance, Kabeer ([2005](#)) showed that women's participation in the labor market has an important role in deciding for household and other spheres of life. The study also concludes that access to financial resources enables women to make life choices. Additionally, Nawaz et al. ([2012](#)) examined the impact of microcredit on women's empowerment in four dimensions (economic, personal, family, and public/political empowerment) and found a positive and significant impact of microcredit on women's empowerment.

Moreover, Tharanga et al. ([2023](#)) analyzed the post-COVID pathway of microfinance on women's empowerment in Sri Lanka. The data was collected from 100 women clients in the Kurunegala district of Sri Lanka. The data was evaluated through correlation and multiple regression analysis and the researchers found a positive impact of micro-credit, micro-saving, and training on women's empowerment after COVID-19. Another study conducted by Mengstie ([2022](#)) examined the impact of microfinance on women's economic empowerment by using 346 women clients of microcredit. The study found a significant positive effect of independent

income, possession of assets and savings on women's economic empowerment. Moreover, the study also found a positive impact on women's development of their entrepreneurship.

However, the impact of microcredit on social empowerment can vary. For instance, Zulfiqar and Tabassum ([2023](#)) analyzed the role of Islamic microfinance (Akhuwat) in empowering women. The data was collected from fifty women borrowers who used loans in income-generating activities. There was an insignificant impact on women's ability and awareness level (right) and a significant impact on improving the material situation of women, their status, and their position in society.

On the contrary, microcredit does not always have a positive relationship with women's economic empowerment, as Asim ([2009](#)) investigated the impact of microcredit on women's empowerment in the urban slum areas of district Lahore, Pakistan. This study examined different household dimensions regarding health, social mobility, economic mobility, child-related empowerment, and major household purchasing decisions. The findings show an insignificant impact on all the indicators of empowerment. Similarly, Bateman and Chang ([2012](#)) highlighted the challenges of debt repayment and financial pressures, which led to negating the potential economic benefits.

In developing economies, microcredit has become a powerful tool for women's empowerment. Microcredit programs provide small loans to women to foster business activities and promote economic interdependence. By combining women's economic empowerment with technological empowerment, the social, political, and psychological consequences of women can be enhanced. Nowadays, microcredit and technological empowerment are growing fields of interest. Participation in microcredit facilitates greater access to technological tools and digital literacy that enable women to use technology for maximum economic and social benefits. For instance, a study by Suri and Jack ([2016](#)) demonstrated that women who used mobile money services enhanced their ability to save, invest, and manage their financial resources. Similarly, another study by Ashraf et al. ([2010](#)) illustrated that women's participation in microcredit led them to adopt new technologies in their businesses and improve the use of agriculture tools. Through microcredit women's access to and use of technologies improved, which enhanced women's technological empowerment.

In sum, the literature indicates that microcredit influences household decision-making, legal awareness, and the permission of mobility, gaining more control over resources, and economic security which helps to reduce gender inequality and empower women. The empirical results of numerous studies show a significant and positive association between micro-credit and women empowerment (Ashraf et al., [2010](#); Khan et al., [2023](#)). Some studies found that microcredit did not improve women's empowerment (Asim, [2009](#); Bateman & Chang, [2012](#)).

In the literature, most of the studies were conducted on economic empowerment, political empowerment, and social empowerment. This study adds to the existing knowledge by investigating the impact of all dimensions of empowerment: economic empowerment, social empowerment, political empowerment, psychological empowerment, and technological empowerment. This study is notable because no prior research has been conducted on the Akhuwat microcredit program to analyze women's empowerment within the district of Chakwal.

Methodology

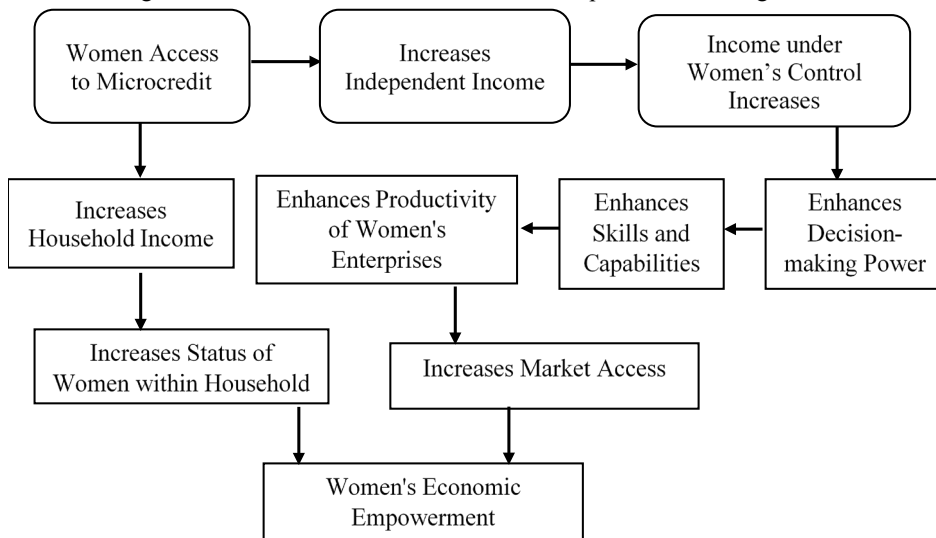
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used in this study consists of five dimensions, as shown in the Figure 1 which represents the channels through which access to microcredit leads to women's economic empowerment. The outcomes cover women's access to microcredit, increased independent income, increased income under women's control increase, increased household income, enhanced productivity of women's enterprises, enhanced skills and capabilities, enhanced decision-making power, increased status of women within the household, and increased market access. Figure. 2 represents the channel of social empowerment that covers increased income, leading to women becoming more confident and independent, their access to social services, their independence regarding mobility, social networks and improvement in family relationships as well as in social status. Similarly, Figure 3 represents the political empowerment which covers business success and income, improves decision making power, improves knowledge and skills, raises political awareness, and active political participation. On the other hand, Figure 4 represents the psychological empowerment. The outcomes cover self-confidence to manage finances and run businesses, optimism about future economic

prospects, decreased level of stress, well-being and life satisfaction, self-confidence regarding skills and capabilities. Additionally, Figure 5 represents the technological empowerment in terms of access to technology, control over technology, and attaining digital literacy and skills.

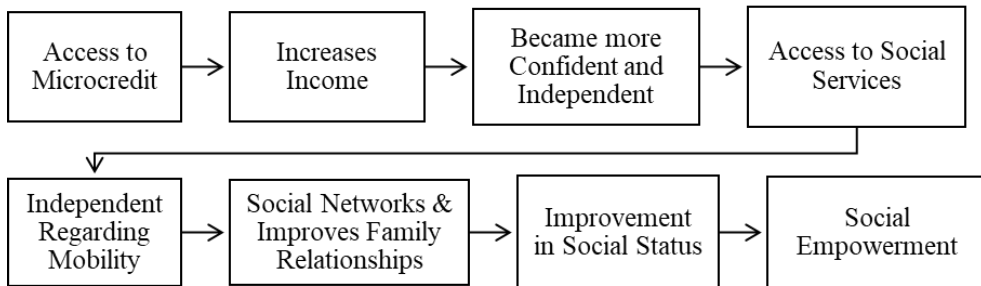
Figure 1

Framework of Women's Economic Empowerment through Microcredit

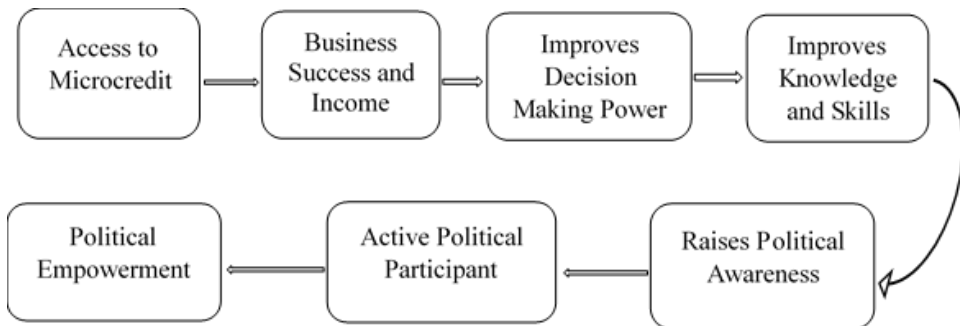


Firstly, women's economic empowerment is brought about by an increase in independent income (Asim, [2009](#)). Through the utilization of microcredit, women start or expand their businesses. This leads to women's control over income, enabling women to invest in education or training opportunities to enhance their economic skills and capabilities. This helps the women access broader markets, purchase quality inputs, or negotiate better prices for their products/services. Secondly, women's economic empowerment is brought about by increases in household income. This leads to women's increased respect and status within the household and the community (Asim, [2009](#)).

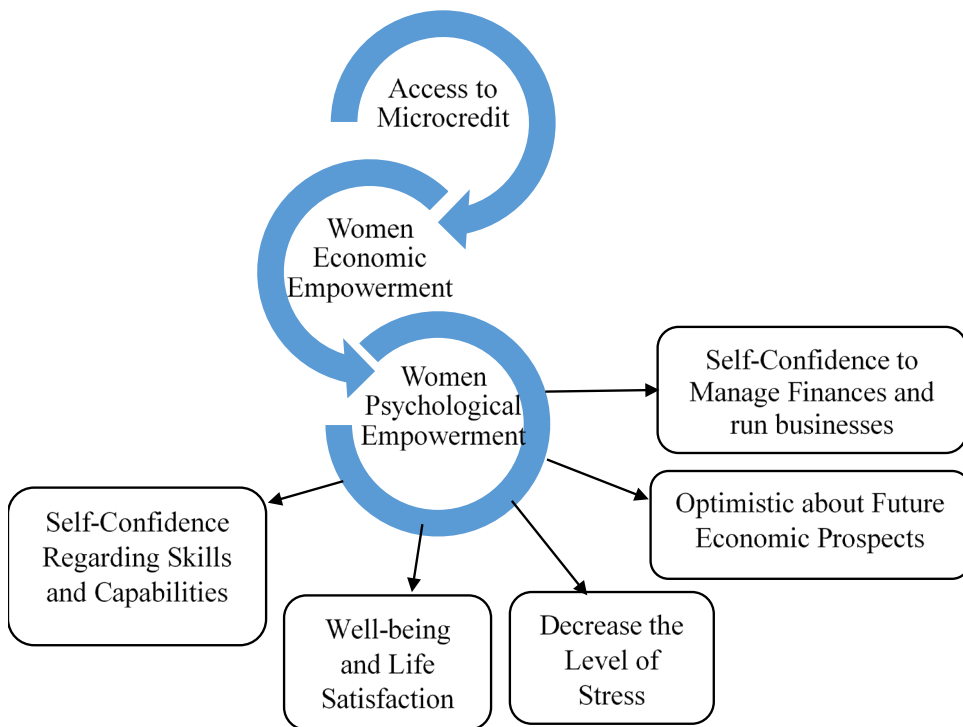
Numerous studies emphasize the role of microcredit in social empowerment. Studies indicate that microcredit leads women formulating social networks that provide information, support, and opportunities for collective action, increase their participation in community events, and make household decisions regarding education, health expenditures, and mobility in community events (Kabeer, [2005](#)).

Figure 2*Framework of Women's Social Empowerment through Microcredit*

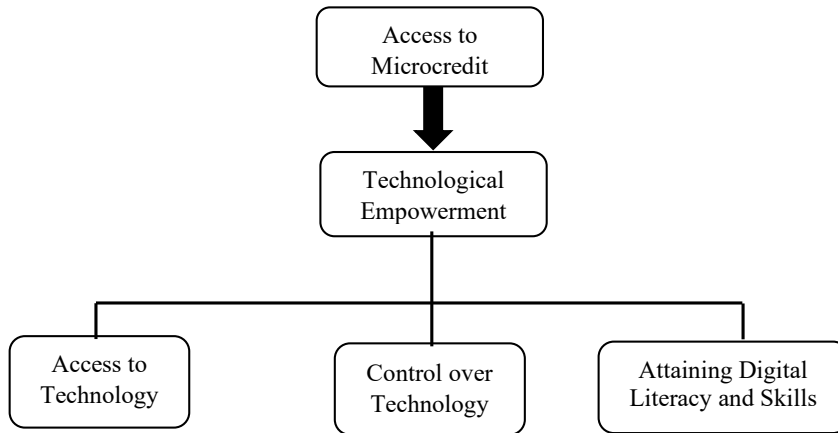
From the literature, the concept of women's social empowerment can be explained through their involvement in the community decision-making process, improvement in social services such as household, health, education, and other household facilities, and independence of women regarding mobility in the community.

Figure 3*Framework of Women's Political Empowerment through Microcredit*

The empirical literature highlights that political empowerment which means awareness and access to the political system through obtaining necessary resources (Mokomane, [2012](#); Siwal, [2009](#)). Political participation empowers women by enabling them to participate in local election for electing a leader who may possess capacities to reduce gender inequalities and solve their problems, access to resources or training opportunities related to political leadership influences women's ability to advocate for their rights and interests in political forums or public spaces, leading to involvement in issues such as gender inequality, poverty alleviation, or community development.

Figure 4*Framework of Women's Psychological Empowerment through Microcredit*

Psychological empowerment is also an important dimension of women's empowerment. A study by Thomas and Velthouse (1990), used meaningfulness, competence, impact, and self-determination to represent psychological empowerment. Another study by Hansen (2015) used the increase in personal control beliefs and social network size as indicators of psychological empowerment. Additionally Kim et al. (2007) used the term “power within” as an alternative to psychological empowerment. For the present study, women’s psychological empowerment embraces (i) self-confidence in their abilities to manage finances and run businesses, (ii) becoming optimistic about future economic prospects and opportunities, (iii) a decrease in the level of stress or anxiety related to financial matters, (iv) increase in their overall well-being and life satisfaction, (v) increased self-confidence regarding skills and capabilities.

Figure 5*Women's Technological Empowerment & Microcredit*

At present, microcredit and technological empowerment are growing fields of interest. Participation in microcredit enables technological empowerment through greater access to technological tools and digital literacy that improves business practices, and market expansion, and enables women to enhance productivity and economic growth. This indicates that integrating technology into businesses transforms lives and communities, and promotes a sense of achievement and empowerment. Participation in microcredit leads women to adopt new technologies (i.e., mobile money services) in their business, which enhances their ability to invest, and achieve economic and social outcomes (Ashraf et al., [2010](#); Suri & Jack, [2016](#)). Based on the empirical studies for the present analysis technological empowerment comprises access to technology, attaining digital literacy and skills, usage of technology (i.e., use of cell phone, laptop), and access to technological resources that impact their daily life and business. In this study, Cronbach's Alpha test is used by employing all the variables represented in these dimensions which show the positive results.

Data

The primary data for this study was collected from 120 women from Chakwal. A smaller sample size was selected due to time constraint and since the study was being conducted at undergraduate level. The survey was carried out to gather firsthand information from a diverse group of women on the stratification of age from 20-60 years who had taken microcredit

from Akhuwat. Information was assembled to examine the impact of microcredit on various aspects of women's lives, including decision-making power, economic independence, use of facilities, access to technology, etc. The primary data set was obtained in the native tongue, most often Urdu and Punjabi because most of the respondents were illiterate and had primary or secondary education. If some of them did not answer all the questions, the interviewers addressed the missing data using previous data entries from the same participants to complete the dataset. The questionnaire incorporates both closed and open-ended queries.

There were nine main sections in the questionnaire. Section A comprised information related to the borrower's age, marital status, family type, the total number of family members, number of dependents in the household, number of earners in a household, level of education, area, etc.

Section B covered information related to credit i.e., the purpose of credit, amount of credit applied, and loan amount received by the borrowers, period of the loan, interest rate, duration of repayment of the loan, installment amount, the mode of repayment, and the other credit information. Section C was regarding the income and assets of the borrowers. It included questions related to women's earnings, possessions, and expenses before and after taking the credit. Section D enclosed the information regarding the use of microcredit including questions related to the type of business, nature of business, etc. Women empowerment was measured through 5 main dimensions, these five dimensions (sub-divided into different questions) estimate the level of women empowerment on a numerical scale (i.e., 1 to 5) for each question.

Section E contained information regarding women's economic empowerment, it included 23 questions related to economic empowerment. The section F contained 17 questions regarding the social empowerment of women. Section G enclosed information regarding women's political empowerment through 7 questions; it included women's awareness of political issues, women's ability to advocate for their rights and interests in political forums or public spaces, etc. Section H explored women's psychological empowerment through 13 questions. In the last section, information regarding technology empowerment was collected. It included information regarding access to technology, changes in digital skills and training, more control over technology, etc.

Survey Description and Sample Criterion

To ensure data validity, and the reliability of the instruments the questionnaire was distributed among a small group of participants especially women, before conducting the final survey. After making the necessary adjustments, the primary data was obtained randomly by using a simple random sampling technique through survey-based interviews. Consistency was maintained through regular check-ins, and supervision was directed to address any issue. For the present study, data was collected from 120 women borrowers who are the clients of the Akhuwat microcredit program. The study collected information about the clients (women borrowers) from the year 2020, which was taken from the Akhuwat organization.

Description of the Variables

Table 1

List of Variables

Name of the Variable	Variable Notation	Variable Description
Social Empowerment		
Participation in microcredit increases your independence and makes you more actively involved in the community decision-making process.	I & CDM	
Participation in microcredit improves your access to social services such as education for your children and your other family members.	Edu	The respondents ranked themselves correspond to the statements on the Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents the response of very often, 2 represents often, 3 corresponds to sometimes, 4 represents rarely, and 5 stands for never.
Participation in microcredit improves your access to social services such as health for your children and your other family members.	HLTH	
Participation in microcredit improves the independence of women regarding mobility in the community.	MOB	
Participation in microcredit	QoW	

Name of the Variable	Variable Notation	Variable Description
improves the quality of water.		
Economic Empowerment		
Participation in microcredit leads to an increase in the income of women participants.	WI	Economic empowerment describes income, expenditures, decision-making power, economic skills, and capabilities, and assesses the market more effectively. The respondents ranked themselves on the Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents the response of very often, 2 represents often, 3 corresponds to sometimes, 4 represents rarely, and 5 stands for never.
Participation in microcredit leads to an increase in expenditures on house repair.	E/HR	
Participation in microcredit leads to improvement in decision-making.	DM	
Participation in microcredit enabled women to invest in education or training opportunities to enhance their economic skills and capabilities.	ES & C	
Participation in microcredit leads to accessing markets more effectively or negotiating better prices for their product/services.	NPP	
Political Empowerment		
Participation in microcredit increases women’s awareness of political issues.	API	Political empowerment is measured on a scale of 1-5 where 1 represents the response of very often, 2 represents often, 3 corresponds to sometimes, 4 represents rarely, and 5 stands for never.
Participation in microcredit leads women to participate in local elections compared to non-participants.	LE	
Participation in microcredit enabled women to access resources or training opportunities related to political leadership or advocacy.	ARPF	
Participation in microcredit influenced women’s ability to advocate for their rights and interests in political forums or public spaces.	AR & T	

Name of the Variable	Variable Notation	Variable Description
Participation in microcredit leads to involvement in public discussions or advocacy initiatives related to issues such as gender equality, poverty alleviation, or community development.	AIPD/AI	
Psychological Empowerment		
Participation in microcredit increased women's self-confidence in their abilities to manage finances and run businesses.	SCE	Psychological empowerment describes self-esteem, self-confidence regarding skills and managing finances and running businesses, decision-making in business, well-being and life satisfaction, optimism about future economic prospects and opportunities, and reduction in stress and anxiety. It is measured on a scale of 1-5 where 1 represents the response of very often, 2 represents often, 3 corresponds to sometimes, 4 represents rarely, and 5 stands for never.
Participation in microcredit leads to becoming more optimistic about future economic prospects and opportunities.	EP/O	
Participation in microcredit leads to a decrease the stress and anxiety.	S & A	
Participation in microcredit leads to an increase in their overall well-being and life satisfaction.	WB & LS	
Participation in microcredit leads to increased self-confidence regarding skills and capabilities.	SCS	
Technological Empowerment		
Participation in microcredit increased in the access to technology.	AT	Technological Empowerment describes access to technology, control of technology, digital literacy and skills, and the impact of technological resources on daily life and business. It is measured on a scale of
Participation in microcredit leads to an increase in digital literacy and skills.	DS & T	
Participation in microcredit leads women to have more control over technology.	CT	

Name of the Variable	Variable Notation	Variable Description
Participation in microcredit increased the access to technological resources that impacted your daily life.	TCD	1-5 where 1 represents the response of very often, 2 represents often, 3 corresponds to sometimes, 4 represents rarely, and 5 stands for never.
Participation in microcredit increased the access to technological resources that impacted your business.	TCB	

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Analysis

This section illustrates the demographic characteristics of the respondents by using frequency distribution. It encompasses a range of attributes including age, marital status, family type, area, education level of borrowers, loan purpose, applied and received the loan, loan installments, and business type, etc.

Figure 6

Distribution of Respondents Regarding the Purpose of the Loan

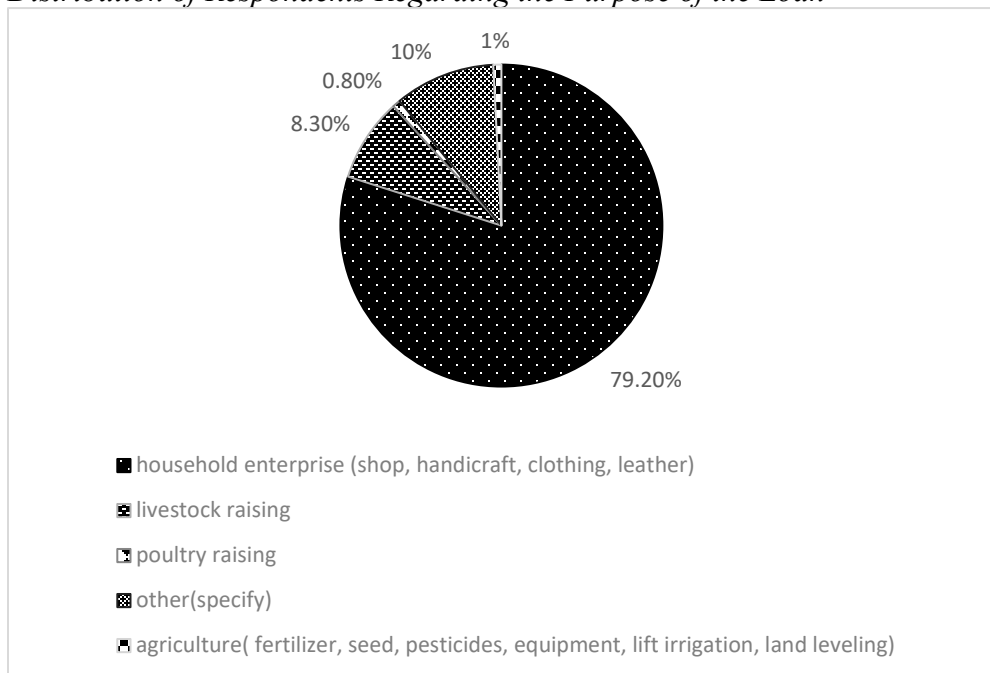


Figure 6 represents the purpose of a loan in terms of household business. The data demonstrates that about 79.20% of respondents financed household enterprises like shops, handicrafts, clothing, and leather. Although, 8.30% of the respondents invested in livestock raising. On the other hand, 0.80% of borrowers invested in raising the poultry business. About 1% of the respondents invested in agriculture inputs (fertilizer, seed, pesticides, equipment, lift irrigation, land leveling) and 10% of the borrowers invested in other income-generating activities.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 2. It comprises a range of attributes including age, marital status, family type, area, and education level of borrowers. Age can influence financial decisions and loan utilization, particularly for women. Microcredit programs consider the age of women who apply for loans because women's age impacts their ability to repay loan amounts (Johnson & Rogaly, 1997). According to Shah et al. (2015), most borrowers between the age of 25 to 50 years run the business. Similarly, according to the present study findings, the highest number of borrowers fall into the age group of 40-50 years (48 women borrowers), followed by the age group of 30-40 years (39 women borrowers). Only 1 respondent was less than the age of 20 years, 15 respondents were between the age group of 20-30 years, and 17 respondents were between the age group of 50-60 years.

The further survey indicates the marital status of the respondents, 10% of respondents were single, and 73.3% of the respondents were married, living with their husbands. While 10% were widows and 6.7% were divorced. The findings indicate that most female borrowers were married and supporting their families. Similarly, Shah et al. (2015) explain that most borrowers were married and had to empower themselves and their families.

Moreover, a person's family structure can influence the borrower's attitude toward repayment capacity, stability, and flexibility in managing loans (Kiros, 2023). According to the statistics, 69.2% of the respondents belong to a nuclear family, 25% from joint families, 0.8% from an extended family, and the remaining 5% belong to a single-headed family. These findings reflect that microcredit helps women manage their own house and live financially independently. These women borrowers are economically empowered by making decisions in their homes regarding resource allocation. Furthermore, statistics indicate that 30.8% of the respondents resided in rural areas, whereas 69.2% of the respondents belong to urban

areas.

Education plays an essential role in all phases of development. Education enhances awareness regarding microcredit utilization benefits. Educated individuals can manage and allocate resources efficiently. Families with higher levels of education can utilize microcredit more effectively (Ameh & Lee, 2022). Statistics of the present study also show the educational background of the borrowers. The total number of borrowers is 120. Results on the distribution of education levels show that a significant portion i.e., 25% of the respondents are illiterate, a small group of the borrowers had received only primary education, comprising about 1.2% of the total, and about 24.2% of the respondents had received middle education. A notable portion i.e., 17.5% of the respondents had received secondary education, and similar to those with middle education 24.2% of the borrowers had completed higher secondary education. Only 7.5% of the borrowers with tertiary education made up 7.5% of the total. This reflects the presence of a small group of borrowers with advanced education.

The overall results on the distribution of education levels reveal that a substantial portion of borrowers are illiterate and a considerable portion of borrowers have completed their secondary and above education.

Table 2

The Demographic Characteristics of the Borrowers

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
<20	1	.8
20-30	15	12.5
30-40	39	32.5
40-50	48	40.0
50-60	17	14.2
Marital Status		
Single	12	10.0
Married	88	73.3
Widow	12	10.0
Divorced	8	6.7
Family Type		
Nuclear	83	69.2
Joint	30	25.0

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Extended	1	0.8
Single-headed family	6	5.0
Area		
Rural	37	30.8
Urban	83	69.2
Education Level of the		
Borrowers		
Illiterate	30	25
Primary	2	1.7
Middle	29	24.2
Secondary	21	17.5
Higher Secondary	29	24.2
Tertiary	9	7.5
Total	120	100

Inclusively, the demographic profile postulates that most female borrowers in our sample are 40-50 years old and are married. In addition, most of the women borrowers belong to nuclear families and live in urban areas. Finally, the majority of women borrowers had a primary level of education. The women between the age of 30-40, married, lived in a nuclear family, and belonged to urban areas are more empowered than others.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Loan

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Amount of a loan applied		
10000-30000	10	8.3
30000-50000	79	65.8
50000-70000	11	9.2
>70000	20	16.7
Amount of loan received		
10000-30000	23	19.2
30000-50000	86	71.7
50000-70000	0	0
>70000	11	9.2
Installment amount		
1000-5000	111	92.5
5000-10000	5	4.2

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
10000-15000	3	2.5
15000-20000	0	0
20000-25000	1	0.8
Reason for taking a loan		
Simple procedure	11	9.2
Quick processing of a loan	12	10.0
No interest	95	79.2
Lump-sum amount	1	0.8
Other	1	0.8
Amount of loan used for a specified purpose		
Yes	119	99.2
No	1	0.8
Did this loan help you to increase your income permanently?		
Yes	113	94.2
No	7	5.8
Would you like to obtain a loan from Akhuwat again?		
Yes	95	79.2
No	25	20.8
The idea of taking a loan from Akhuwat		
Yourself	38	31.7
Friends	35	29.2
Community Organization	37	30.8
NGO	0	0
Bank	0	0
Other	10	8.3

Table 3 indicates the descriptive statistics of loans such as the amount that the respondents applied for, the amount of loan they received, the installment they paid every month, the reason for taking a loan, the amount of loan used for a specified purpose, whether this loan helped them to increase their income permanently, would they like to obtain a loan from Akhuwat again, and the idea of taking a loan from Akhuwat. The statistics show that 8.3% of the respondents applied for a 10000-30000 amount of loan and 65.8% of the respondents applied for a 30000-50000 amount of loan. Only 9.2% of the respondents applied for the 50000-70000 amount of the loan while 16.7% used for greater than 70000 loan. In addition, 19.2%

of the respondents received a loan from 10000-30000, and 71.7% received the amount of loans 30000-50000, they are more empowered by taken loan due to not having interest on it. Nobody received the loan between 50000-70000. And 9.2% of borrowers received greater than 70000. Regarding monthly installments, the majority of the respondents pay 1000-5000 monthly installments, 4.2% of the respondents pay 5000-10000 monthly installments, 2.5% of the respondents pay 10000-15000 monthly installments, and only 0.8% pay 20000-25000 monthly installments.

Table 3 also indicates that 79.2% of the respondents take credit due to no interest rate on Akhuwat loans, 10% and 9.2% of the respondents take credit due to the quick processing of loans and simple procedure respectively, and 0.8% of the respondents take credit due lump-sum amount and others. Furthermore, almost all respondents (99.2%) of Akhuwat use credit for the specified purpose due to its monitoring process. In comparison, 0.8% of the respondents did not use loans for specified purposes due to different emergencies. Table 3 also indicates that after using the loan facility, 94.2% of women had increased their income, while 5.8% of borrowers reported that their income did not increase due to their family emergencies. 79.2% of the respondents would like to obtain a loan from Akhuwat due to no interest and 20.8% do not want to take a loan from Akhuwat due to a lack of need.

Overall, the summary statistics of loans reveal that a maximum number of females (79 respondents) applied for 30000-50000 loan amounts whereas 86 respondents received this loan amount. Out of 120 respondents, 111 paid 1000-5000 monthly installments and 119 respondents used the amount of loan for specified purposes. After participation in loan 113, women's permanent income increased. This postulates that by participating in microcredit, poor women can empower themselves economically and socially. Finally, the statistics regarding individuals who prefer to take loans from Akhuwat microfinance institutions illustrate that the largest group, 31.7% prefers to take loans their selves. A significant portion of 29.2% of respondents take the idea of loans through their friends, indicating a strong reliance on social networks. Nearly, 30.8% of respondents take the idea of loans from community organizations. No one embraces the concept of loans from NGOs and banks. A small group, of 8.3% of borrowers take the idea of a loan from other methods.

Non-parametric Technique

The present section will discuss the results derived from non-parametric techniques applied in the study including the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Sum test. Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test (known as the Mann-Whitney U test) shows that each hypothesis has a test statistic and an associated probability value that measures whether the observed differences are statistically significant between the two attributes.

Table 4

Comparison between Economic Empowerment among Businesses

Hypothesis	Results				
	WI	E/HR	DM	ES & C	NP
H ₀ : No change in the economic empowerment of borrowers who participated in household enterprises or livestock businesses.	-1.075 (0.283)	-1.789 (0.074)*	-.953 (0.340)	-2.102 (0.036)**	-1.193 (0.233)
H ₀ : There has been no change in the economic empowerment of respondents working in household enterprises and other businesses.	-1.863 (0.062)*	-.410 (0.682)	-.946 (0.344)	-2.032 (0.042)**	-.253 (0.800)

Note. The significance level of the estimate is: ***, **, and * represent 1, 5, and 10 percent significant levels, respectively.

Table 4 represents the results of the Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test. The first hypothesis is that there is no progress in the economic empowerment of borrowers who participated in household enterprises or livestock businesses, however, the test statistic is -2.102, with a *p*-value of 0.036 (significant at the 5% level). According to the statistics results, the *p*-value is under 0.05, which indicates a significant change in education and training for respondents involved in household enterprises or livestock businesses. The results show that those who participated in household enterprises are more empowered. For instance, Kabeer ([2005](#)) showed that women's

participation in the labor market has an important role in deciding for household and other spheres of life. The study also concludes that access to financial resources enables women to make life choices. The statistics also indicate that there is no significant change in income, expenditures on household repairs, decision-making, and market access.

The second hypothesis is that there is no difference in the economic empowerment of borrowers engaged in household enterprises and other businesses. The results confirm that the p-value falls below 0.05, so we discard the null hypothesis, which indicates a significant change in education and training for respondents involved in household enterprises or other businesses. Similar results are found by Badri (2013). The study revealed that microcredit had a noteworthy impact on household economic decisions, expanding social networks. The statistics also indicate that there is no significant change in expenditures on household repairs, decision-making, and market access. The p-value of the income of women participants is 0.062 showing a trend toward change but is not significant at the 5% probability level.

Table 5

Comparison between Social Empowerment among Businesses

Hypothesis	Results				
	I & CDM	Edu	HLTH	MOB	QoW
H ₀ : There has been no change in the social empowerment of borrowers involved in agriculture or other businesses.	-1.303 (0.193)	-1.718 (0.086)*	-1.363 (0.173)	-1.124 (0.261)	-.507 (0.612)
H ₀ : There has been no change in the social empowerment of borrowers involved in livestock or other businesses.	-.521 (0.602)	-1.847 (0.065)*	-.088 (0.930)	-.997 (0.319)	-.684 (0.494)

Note. The significance level of the estimate is: ***, **, and * represent 1, 5, and 10 percent significant levels, respectively.

Table 5 represents the comparison between social empowerment among businesses. The first hypothesis is that there is no change in the social empowerment of borrowers involved in agriculture or other businesses. The

analysis demonstrates that the p -value is above the threshold of 0.05, which indicates no significant change in community decision-making, education and health for children, and other family members, mobility, and quality of water for borrowers involved in agriculture or other businesses. The statistics also indicate that the p -value of the education is 0.086 showing a trend toward change but is not significant at the 0.05 significance level.

The second hypothesis is that there is no change in the social empowerment of borrowers engaged in livestock and other businesses. The statistics indicate that there is no significant progress in community decision-making, education for children and other family members, health, mobility, and quality of water for borrowers engaged in livestock and other businesses. The p -value of the education is 0.065 showing a trend toward change but is not statistically meeting the 0.05 significance criterion. Finally, the participants were empowered in the education sector after participating in the agriculture, livestock, and other businesses.

Table 6

Comparison between Political Empowerment among Businesses

Hypothesis	Results				
	API	LE	ARPF	AR & T	AIPD/AI
H ₀ : There has been no change in the political empowerment of borrowers engaged in household enterprises or other businesses.	-2.456 (0.014)**	-.547 (0.585)	-1.676 (0.094)*	-2.331 (0.020)**	-2.612 (0.009)***
H ₀ : There has been no change in the political empowerment of borrowers involved in livestock or other businesses.	-1.687 (0.092)*	-.223 (0.823)	-1.866 (0.062)	-2.062 (.039)**	-1.962 (.050)**

Note. The significance level of the estimate is: ***, **, and * represent 1, 5, and 10 percent significant levels, respectively.

Table 6 represents the comparison concerning political empowerment among businesses. The first hypothesis is that there is no change in the political empowerment of borrowers involved in household enterprises or other businesses, however, the test statistics of women's awareness regarding political issues is -2.456, with a p -value of 0.014 (significant at the 5% level). The results indicate a significant change in awareness regarding political issues for borrowers involved in household enterprises or other businesses (e.g. rickshaws, beauty parlors, etc.). The test statistics of women's ability to advocate for their rights in public spaces is -2.331, with a p -value of 0.02 (significant at the 5% level). The statistical results show a significant change in women's ability to advocate for their rights in public spaces involved in household enterprises or other businesses (e.g. rickshaws, beauty parlors, etc.). The test statistics of women's involvement in public discussions for gender equality is -2.612, with a p -value of 0.009 (significant at the 1% level). Since the p -value falls below the standard significant level of 0.05, so we invalidate the null hypothesis, which indicates a significant change in women's involvement in public discussions for gender equality in household enterprises or other businesses (e.g. rickshaws, beauty parlors, etc.).

The overall results indicate that there is a significant change in women's awareness in regards to political issues, women's ability to advocate for their rights in public spaces, and women's involvement in public discussions for gender equality, poverty alleviation, and community development. However, there is no significant improvement in women's participation in local elections while women access resources or training opportunities related to political leadership showing a trend toward change but it is not statistically significant at 5% level. After taking a loan women who participate in household enterprises were politically empowered in different ways such as awareness regarding political issues, advocate their rights in public spaces.

The second hypothesis represents no change has taken place in the political empowerment of borrowers involved in livestock or other businesses, however, the test statistics of women's ability to advocate for their rights in public spaces is -2.062 (p -value is 0.039). Given that the p -value is less than the accepted significance level (0.05), we discard the null hypothesis, which indicates a significant variation in the women's ability to advocate for their rights in public spaces involved in livestock or other

businesses (e.g. rickshaws, beauty parlors, etc.). The test statistics of women's involvement in public discussions for gender equality is -1.962, associated with a p-value of 0.050. We will reject the null hypothesis because the p-value is equal to 0.05, which indicates a significant change in women's involvement in public discussions for gender equality in household enterprises or other businesses (e.g. rickshaws, beauty parlors, etc.). As Khan et al. (2023) demonstrated a positive impact on social, economic, political, and psychological empowerment.

The overall results indicate there is a significant change in women's ability to advocate for their rights in public spaces, and women's involvement in public discussions for gender equality, poverty alleviation, and community development. However, there is no significant change in women's awareness regarding political issues, women's contribution to local elections, and women's access to resources or training opportunities related to political leadership. Though, the p-value of women's access to essential resources or training opportunities related to political leadership shows a trend toward change but is not statistically significant.

Table 7

Comparison between Psychological Empowerment among Businesses

Hypothesis	Results				
	SCE	EP/O	S & A	WB & LS	SCS
H ₀ : There has been no change in the psychological empowerment of borrowers engaged in household enterprises or agriculture businesses.	-1.460 (0.144)	-2.001 (0.045)**	-.420 (0.675)	-.719 (0.472)	-.306 (0.760)

Note. The estimates: ***, **, and * represent 1, 5, and 10 percent significant levels, respectively.

Table 7 represents the comparison concerning psychological empowerment among businesses. The hypothesis is that there has been no variation in the psychological empowerment of borrowers involved in household enterprises or agriculture businesses, however, the test statistics of women's confidence about future economic prospects and opportunities is -2.001, with a p-value of 0.045 (significant at the 5% level). The results

reveal that the p-value is below 0.05, accordingly, we reject the null hypothesis, which indicates a significant change in women's confidence about future economic prospects and opportunities involved in household enterprises or agriculture businesses. However, the results indicate that women's self-confidence in managing finances and running businesses, decrease in stress and anxiety, overall well-being and life satisfaction, and self-confidence regarding skills and capabilities have no significant differences among household enterprises or agriculture businesses. The participants were also empowered by contributing in future economic prospects and opportunities.

Table 8

Comparison between Technological Empowerment among Businesses

Hypothesis	Results				
	AT	DS & T	CT	TCD	TCB
H ₀ : There has been no change in the technological empowerment of borrowers engaged in household enterprises and other businesses.	-1.497 (0.134)	-2.203 (0.028)**	-2.158 (0.031)**	-2.001 (0.045)**	-2.276 (0.023)**

Note. The significance level of the estimate is: **, representing 5 percent significant levels.

Table 8 represents the comparison between technological empowerment among businesses. The hypothesis is that there is no change in the technological empowerment of borrowers engaged in household enterprises or other businesses, however, the test statistics of digital literacy and skills is -2.203, with a probability of 0.028 (significant at the 5% level). The findings indicate a significant change in the digital literacy and skills of borrowers involved in household enterprises or other businesses. The test statistics of women's control over technology is -2.158, with a p-value of 0.031 (significant at the 5% level). The results illustrate that the p-value is not more than 0.05, therefore we reject the null hypothesis, which indicates a significant change in women's control over technology involved in

household enterprises or other businesses. The results show that women were empowered to be digitally literate and skilled, and had more control over it.

The test statistics of access to technological resources that impacted daily life activities is -2.001, with a p-value of 0.045 (significant at the 5% level). The findings show that the p-value is below a significant level (0.05), which indicates a significant change in women's access to technological resources that impacted daily life activities involved in household enterprises or other businesses. Similarly, the test statistics of access to technological resources that impacted business is -2.276, with a probability value of 0.023 (significant at the 5% level). The results indicate a significant change in women's access to technological resources that impacted their businesses involved in household enterprises or other businesses. However, the results indicate that women's access to technology has no significant differences among household enterprises or agriculture businesses.

Conclusion

The research findings indicate that the majority of women are empowered socio-economically, psychologically, and technologically which indicates a positive effect of microcredit on women's empowerment. The findings reveal that demographic characteristics have a significant relationship with economic, social, psychological, and technological empowerment. While the respondents were not empowered politically due low amount of loans and cultural effects which prohibits women to get involved in political matters. Women do not participate in politics because they do not have access to a support system, such as mentorship, networking opportunities, to facilitate the political landscape. This is because traditional gender stereotypes continue to dominate, restricting women's political empowerment. This reflects a long-term cultural transformation, and capacity building programs required for both genders, along with the institutionalization of microfinance. Furthermore, for those who have access to microcredit, their empowerment improves in terms of independence, income, mobility, awareness about political issues, self-confidence, and access/control over technology. Overall, results show that borrowers actively participate in microcredit and use the loan effectively, which improves their empowerment.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the results, some policy measures are recommended to improve the empowerment of women. The diversification of loans based on stages of business can also be a better action to improve the empowerment of women economically, socially, and technologically, while providing loan counseling or a session for the borrower's immediate family to promote women's empowerment in all areas.

Limitations

It is important to recognize the limitations of a study that analyzes small amounts of loan based on a small sample size. Further research with diverse institutions and larger sample is needed to improve the generalizability of findings.

Author Contribution

Humaima Perveen: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft, visualization. **Wajeelha Sajjad:** data curation, investigation, supervision, validation, writing – review & editing. **Afshan Iram:** project administration, resources, writing – review & editing, software. **Maria Mazhar:** data curation, methodology, investigation, validation, writing – original draft.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest that would affect the interpretation of the results or the trustworthiness of this study.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

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