



Photo © Peter Haden

PEOPLE'S VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF
PARTICIPATING IN MICROFINANCE PROGRAMMES:
A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF QUALITATIVE
EVIDENCE

APRIL 2016

The authors of this report are:

Micah D J Peters (The Joanna Briggs Institute, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Adelaide, Australia)

Craig Lockwood (The Joanna Briggs Institute, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Adelaide, Australia)

Zachary Munn (The Joanna Briggs Institute, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Adelaide, Australia)

Sandeep Moola (The Joanna Briggs Institute, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Adelaide, Australia)

Ram Kumar Mishra (Institute of Public Enterprise, Osmania University Campus, Hyderabad, India)

Funding

This is an independent report commissioned by the South Asia Research Hub, the Department for International Development (DFID), through The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre). This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

Acknowledgments

With thanks to the EPPI-Centre, our funder, the South Asia Research Hub, DFID, peer reviewers, the researchers whose work we draw on in the review, and the advisory group members:

- Michael Harper, Emeritus Professor, Cranfield School of Management, UK
- Shahnaila Azher, Growth and PSD, DfID, Bangladesh
- Ragini Chaudhary, Private Sector Development, DfID, India
- Natarajan Jeyaseelan, CEO, Hand in Hand, India
- Sankar Datta, Azim Premji University, India

Conflicts of interest

There were no conflicts of interest in the writing of this report.

Contributions

The opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the EPPI-Centre or the funders. Responsibility for the views expressed remains solely with the authors.

Citation

Peters MDJ, Lockwood C, Munn Z, Moola S, Mishra RK (2016) People's views and experiences of participating in microfinance interventions: A systematic review of qualitative evidence. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London
ISBN: 978-1-907345-87-6

Picture Credit: Peter Haden: Microfinance in India: Women collaborate to weave ornate garlands from fresh flowers. The business was created with a microloan from Mahasemam and now employs seven family members. Madurai, India. Some rights reserved

© Copyright

Authors of the systematic reviews on the EPPI-Centre website (<http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/>) hold the copyright for the text of their reviews. The EPPI-Centre owns the copyright for all material on the website it has developed, including the contents of the databases, manuals, and keywording and data-extraction systems. The centre and authors give permission for users of the site to display and print the contents of the site for their own non-commercial use, providing that the materials are not modified, copyright and other proprietary notices contained in the materials are retained, and the source of the material is cited clearly following the citation details provided. Otherwise users are not permitted to duplicate, reproduce, re-publish, distribute, or store material from this website without express written permission.

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW SUMMARY

The best available qualitative evidence from South Asia has revealed microfinance to be a positive experience for women where programmes along with providing credit also develop women's skills and knowledge, specifically where:

- The programmes which target the most vulnerable women are empowered through access to financial services and skills to become co-contributors to their family and community
- Programmes assist women to develop skills and knowledge, and thereby raise their self-esteem, their social capital, and therefore their reputation in the wider community
- Financial and economic management experience is cumulative, and has a key role in improving beneficiaries' self-confidence, their households' level of support, and positive wider community sentiment over a longer period of association with micro-finance institutions.

Where programmes fail to integrate these themes, programme participants may be more vulnerable to negative experiences and outcomes such as loss of family/community support or social status they previously held.

ABOUT THIS SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

This systematic review funded by the Department for International Development (DfID) synthesises the best available evidence regarding peoples' experiences of participating in microfinance programmes in South Asia. Based upon the mixed conclusions of previous systematic reviews and primary research around the effectiveness of microfinance in different areas of the world, the main purpose of this qualitative systematic review is to develop a greater understanding of peoples' positive and negative experiences of participating in microfinance programmes, their motivations for participation, their motivations for non-participation, and the views and attitudes of other household and community members toward those who participate. This systematic review is intended to provide stakeholders, including policy makers, practitioners, and researchers with a clear picture of how people experience microfinance participation, and the meanings of this participation for individuals, families, and communities.

The evidence identified and included in this systematic review is deeply contextual as it is based upon the often unique experiences of individuals embedded within distinct local communities and cultures. Peoples' experiences of microfinance are complex in nature and the pathways to different experiences are a nuanced interplay between the characteristics of beneficiaries, families, communities, providers, and programmes as well as the characteristics of their social, economic, cultural, and religious contexts. While context is critical to the experiences that people have of participating in microfinance programmes, the effectiveness

of microfinance programmes in these different contexts cannot be measured using qualitative evidence and is not a focus of this review. This systematic review instead explains how programmes are experienced in different contexts which may be of interest to stakeholders considering how to implement microfinance programmes. It is important to recognise that this systematic review is not designed to provide advice on which interventions are more or less appropriate in specific contexts.

As a qualitative systematic review, the report is intended to offer readers explanations of how people experience microfinance as opposed to providing counts or frequencies of outcomes. While this review cannot offer evidence for how common particular outcomes or experiences are, this systematic review provides stakeholders with a detailed picture of how microfinance programmes are experienced in different ways by their beneficiaries and shows how people can experience a variety of both positive and negative consequences that they may understand to be due to their participation or the views and attitudes of other household and community members.

SUMMARY

This report provides a clear picture of how people experience microfinance participation, and the meanings of this participation for individuals, families, and communities. Three main themes arose from the studies included in this report to show how people experiences microfinance both positively and negatively in terms of economic, empowerment and personal and social outcomes.

SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE

This systematic review included nineteen studies (20 papers) including qualitative evidence on beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits/negative consequences of participating in microfinance programmes in South Asia. These papers constituted the best available qualitative evidence that met the inclusion criteria of this review.

It is important to recognise that within South Asia, microfinance programmes are delivered by many different institutions using a variety of models. Contemporary microfinance may be understood as firmly rooted in the poverty discourse as opposed to characterisation as a branch of the commercial banking industry. Characteristically, South Asian microfinance is also largely rural in scope (as supported by the studies in the systematic review), with the majority of beneficiaries living outside urban areas. Microfinance's focus on engaging and empowering women had significant impact throughout the South Asian region and, in India, the Self-Help Group movement can be understood to have laid the foundation for many programmes promoting empowerment of women – a number of which are reported upon in the systematic review. The studies included in the systematic review reported upon beneficiaries' experiences of participating in a range of microfinance programmes from those provided by non-government organisations to those delivered by commercial and independent banks, non-profit organisations run by activist organisations, and others.

Microcredit was the most common model offered and was delivered in the majority of studies using group-lending and self-help group models. In some studies, microcredit was offered along with additional programme elements such as educational, skills and/or training components (often referred to as microcredit-plus). Microsavings, group microsavings, microinsurance, and 'green' microcredit were also offered in a small number of included studies.

Beneficiaries were mainly women and many of their experiences were interrelated. Family support was more important to many women than community based support, yet families and communities could both be influenced by each other. If family support was strong, this was often reflected in improved community standing and status, while if family support was lacking, the women experienced lower personal resilience, and increased community pressures. Skills and knowledge that improved female beneficiaries' ability to contribute to the household was beneficial to women's self-esteem, their social capital, and therefore their reputation in the wider community.

The social and personal impact of microfinance participation was cumulative. Women who were able to persist with multiple loan cycles appeared to have increased family support, greater self-confidence, and greater capacity to repay and manage loan cycles. This suggests the social and personal impact of microfinance was tied to the economic experience and empowerment. However, the benefits were experienced most positively when microfinance was inclusive of programmes or activities that promoted learning, social engagement, and entrepreneurship. The provision of stand-alone microfinance did not appear to have the same lived impact for women, they risked being isolated or manipulated by household members or even other beneficiaries. When beneficiaries had positive experiences, these were self-reinforcing, both for the participant, their family, and the wider community. In the absence of positive experiences, beneficiaries suffered personally, not just financially.

Positive experiences of microfinance appear to be based upon three fundamental principles:

- Microfinance should enable the most vulnerable to become co-contributors to their family and community where empowerment is intrinsic to the positive experiences of women in particular.
- Microfinance programmes should aim to include strategies and requirements that assist minority groups or beneficiaries to develop social capital through the development of relevant skills and knowledge.
- Financial and economic management experience is cumulative, and has a key role in improving beneficiaries' self-confidence, their households' level of support, and positive wider community sentiment.

Without the integration of these themes, beneficiaries may be more vulnerable to negative experiences and outcomes such as loss of family/community support or social status they previously held. The inter-relationship between these three core themes and household plus community attitudes and beliefs has been a core finding of this qualitative systematic review and synthesis.

APPROACH

Based upon an *a-priori* protocol, a comprehensive and systematic search of the international literature was conducted. Bibliographic databases and websites relevant to microfinance were searched. The reference lists of the final set of included studies as well as the reference lists of identified key papers and systematic reviews were also searched. A total of 20 relevant papers (19 studies) that included qualitative evidence which met the inclusion criteria were included. These papers were critically appraised by two independent reviewers. Qualitative data were extracted and were subjected to a thematic narrative synthesis underpinned by a framework based upon the review's focus questions.

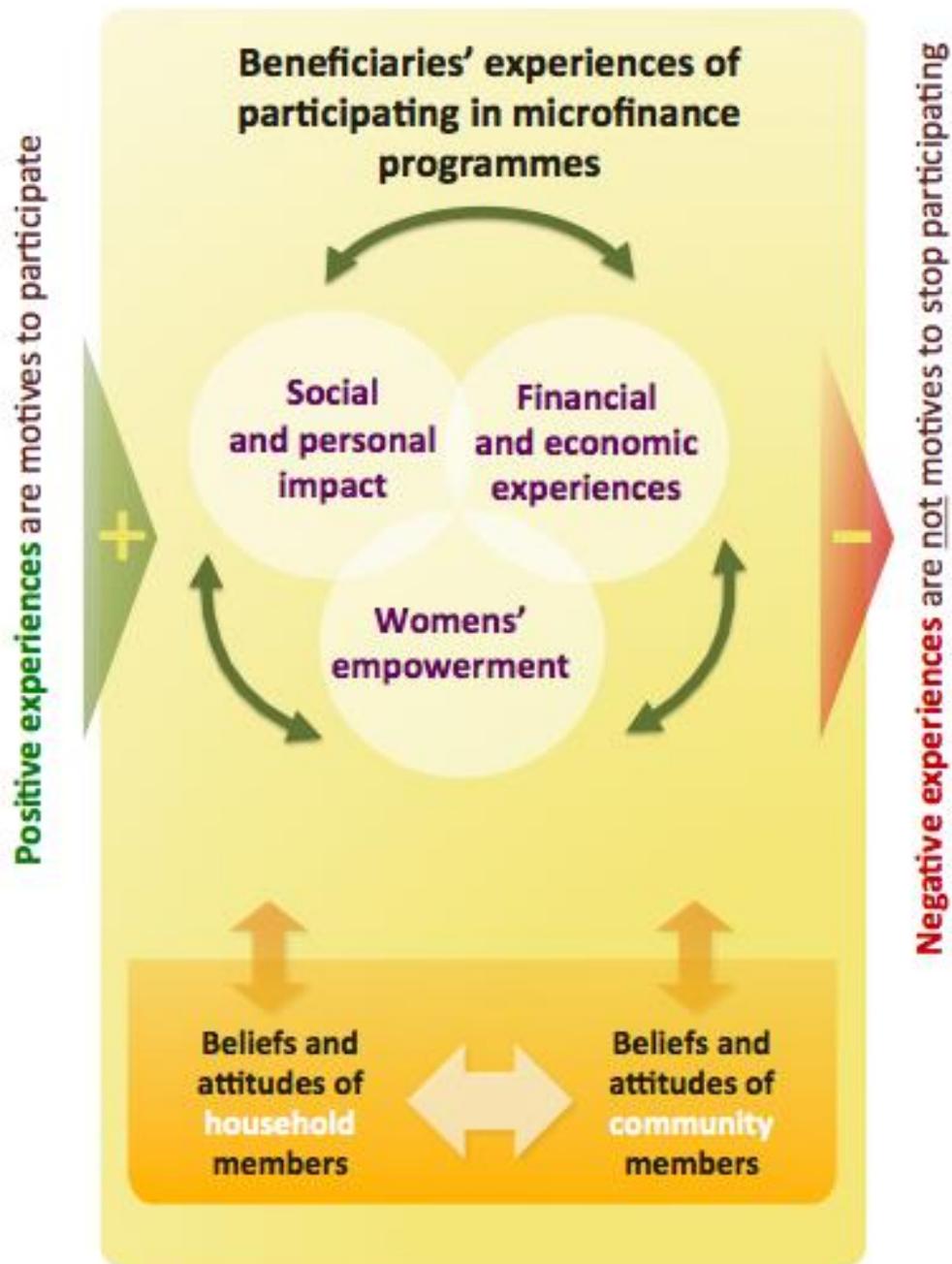
SUMMARY MAP OF EVIDENCE

A summary map of the evidence analysed by this systematic review is presented below. It illustrates the integrated nature of the major themes and how they connect with individual beneficiaries as well as household and community attitudes and beliefs. Many of the experiences female microfinance beneficiaries reported were interrelated. Family support was more important to many women than community based support, yet families and communities could both be influenced by each other. If family support was strong, this was often reflected in improved community standing and status, while if family support was lacking, the women experienced lower personal resilience, and increased community pressures. Skills and knowledge that improved female beneficiaries' ability to contribute to the household was beneficial to women's self-esteem, their social capital, and therefore their reputation in the wider community.

The social and personal impact of microfinance participation was cumulative. Women who were able to persist with multiple loan cycles appeared to have increased family support, greater self-confidence, and greater capacity to repay and manage loan cycles. This suggests the social and personal impact of microfinance was tied to the economic experience and empowerment. However, the benefits were experienced most positively when microfinance was inclusive of programs or activities that actively promoted learning, social engagement, and entrepreneurship. The provision of stand-alone microfinance did not have the same lived impact for women, they risked being isolated and manipulated. When beneficiaries had positive experiences, these were self-reinforcing, both for the participant, their family, and the wider community. In the absence of positive experiences, beneficiaries suffered socioculturally and personally, not just financially.

We therefore view the role of microfinance as being an integrated capacity building experience which should be framed upon three core fundamental principles. Microfinance should enable the most vulnerable to become co-contributors to their family and community, empowerment is intrinsic to the positive experiences of women in particular. Microfinance programs should aim to include strategies and requirements that assist minority groups or individuals to develop social capital through the development of relevant skills and knowledge. Financial and economic management experience is cumulative, and has a key role

in improving individuals' self-confidence, their households' level of support, and positive wider community sentiment. Without the integration of these themes, female beneficiaries in particular had more negative experiences, and lost what little support or status they previously held. The inter-relationship between these three core themes and household plus community attitudes and beliefs has been a core finding of this qualitative systematic review and synthesis.



Expression of the synthesis for Beneficiaries' experiences of participating in microfinance programmes.

OUTLINE OF EVIDENCE

Nineteen studies (20 papers) investigating microfinance programmes in South Asia collected qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits/negative consequences of participating in microfinance programmes. These papers constituted the best available qualitative evidence that met the inclusion criteria of this review. Seventeen studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes. Thirteen studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent negative consequences of participating in microfinance programmes.

EXPERIENCES OF FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS AND NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

Beneficiaries frequently spoke about the various financial and economic benefits that they had experienced as a result of their participation in microfinance programmes. This afforded an insight into how beneficiaries experienced one of the main aims of microfinance in general – to reduce poverty of beneficiaries and their families. The beneficiaries in the studies reported having experienced a range of benefits from short-term benefits such as the ability to stabilise family consumption patterns to the more long-term and prospective benefits of being able to invest in ongoing income generating activities such as personal and family businesses.

Beneficiaries had both positive and negative experiences due to their participation in microfinance programmes in terms of financial and economic factors. Access to micro-saving services enabled beneficiaries to plan and protect themselves and their families against future costs and crises. Investment in income generating activities also increased beneficiaries' income, and their household and community status. Through participation, assets and homes could be improved, or repaired, which was also experienced positively. Microfinance appeared to offer beneficiaries an avenue to access loans at interest rates lower than those offered by local money lenders which meant that beneficiaries were able to reduce their reliance on these sources of credit.

Lack of household support for beneficiaries appeared to contribute to beneficiaries' negative experiences of microfinance participation in terms of making repayments as well as loss of status and respect within households. Debt to microfinance organisations, especially due to failed, stolen or poor investments, also led to many negative experiences. Loan repayment policies could also be inflexible and not suited to beneficiaries' circumstances. Some beneficiaries also experienced domination from other members of their family who took loans or savings for themselves.

EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND DISEMPOWERMENT

While microfinance is largely focussed on contributing to the empowerment of women, microfinance participation could also lead to negative experiences and consequences for women in terms of their opportunities for empowerment. Beneficiaries had both positive and negative experiences due to their participation in microfinance programmes in terms of women's empowerment. Female beneficiaries appeared to often experience greater mobility and independence as a result of participating in microfinance programmes. Program participation meant women were more able to leave their household and move about in the community. While this could be dangerous for some women, especially where women's mobility and microfinance participation was seen as improper, for many women this increased independence and mobility was positive. Financial, business, vocational and social skills were lauded by many women as positive benefits of microfinance participation. Improvements in these skills led to improved status, respect, self-worth and feelings of making valuable contributions to the household economy. When other family members were supportive of their participation, these skills were also valued by husbands and other relatives. Many women also experienced positive benefits in terms of their ability to participate in decision making at the individual, household and business level. Domestic violence and abuse appeared to be variably affected by women's participation in microfinance programmes in that some women experienced increased violence and abuse from householders and husbands, while others experienced less. Microfinance participation appeared to be a way for women to access greater social support and solidarity from other women, and while not all programme beneficiaries felt this benefit, when programme groups met frequently and facilitated group reciprocity and mutual identification, the positive benefits to women were great.

EXPERIENCES OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SOCIAL AND PERSONAL IMPACT

The experiences described in this section were rather less richly supported by participant voice and were also generally not the focus of the included papers. That being said, these experiences were no less valid or important than any other, and each may be highly beneficial for people who participated in microfinance programmes. Beneficiaries spoke of improved diets and the ability to invest in the future of their children. They also remarked upon their improved knowledge of and access to health services. Microfinance was also a way for people who otherwise may lack a strong voice in community matters to be heard by more powerful community members and decision makers. Finally, Green Microcredit, an emerging sub-set of microfinance, was a way for people to learn how to utilise local natural resources more sustainably to benefit their families.

Beneficiaries had both positive and negative experiences due to their participation in microfinance programmes in terms of social and personal impact. Beneficiaries' diets could improve as a result of participation as well as their ability to invest in their children's education and future. Access to health services and knowledge about health and health services also appeared to be improved. Participation in microfinance programmes afforded members a social space for their voices to be heard regarding issues that were important to them, and

green microfinance appeared to increase beneficiaries' knowledge of sustainable natural resource use.

Poor treatment by microfinance staff as well as negative experiences related to various unsupportive practices and processes were also reported. It is also important to consider the impact of the obligations of participation in microfinance programmes on aspects of beneficiaries' lives, as reduced time spent on income generating activities may be experienced negatively. In Islamic cultures it also may be relevant to recognise that taking loans with interest may be viewed as sinful and lead to perceived negative experiences for beneficiaries.

MOTIVATIONS OR REASONS TO PARTICIPATE IN MICROFINANCE PROGRAMMES

The key motivations or reasons to participate identified in the included studies included: male domination; the desire to escape poverty and cycles of debt; to dominate others and hold a position of power; to be able to provide for their family and particularly their children; and to access health insurance. It was found that some beneficiaries preferred microcredit over other forms of finance.

MOTIVATIONS OR REASONS TO NOT PARTICIPATE IN MICROFINANCE PROGRAMMES

Key motivations or reasons to not participate in microfinance programmes included: the desire to avoid conflict and objections in the home; religious beliefs whereby loans with interest were seen as sinful; problems with microfinance organisations and difficulties related to their operations, products, and in keeping obligations; and reduced employment and household status.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MICROFINANCE PROGRAMMES

Central to any microfinance programme is the need for it to be well managed and not exploitative. Some women have found group meetings empowering and others have found them an unattractive obligation to participate or adopt leadership responsibilities; or even damaging, when other women hold sway over decisions. Management needs to include an awareness of how community hierarchies can play out in decision-making processes within the programme, and good processes adopted for transparent and fair collective decision making.

Given the wide range of motives for participating, microfinance programmes need to advertise positive reasons for participating, such as a means to escape poverty, generating and saving income to benefit their children's health and education, access to health insurance (where this is integral to the programme), and ease of access and lower rates of interest compared with other sources of credit. At the same time, programmes need to be aware that beneficiaries may arrive with less positive motivations: encouraged by domineering by men in their family who seek financial benefits directly for themselves, to exercise their own power within a community of women, or to manage unsustainable and damaging cycles of debt. Women may choose to avoid microfinance where it: creates conflict within their family or religious community, particularly interest-bearing loans; or leaves them with unmanageable

payment schedules and forces them into low status employment. In any of these situations, offering microfinance may be counterproductive. Joining a programme is better done after thinking through the full range of possible outcomes, even if the likelihood of these cannot be predicted.

The design of microfinance products needs to suit women's various circumstances. Women working in agriculture, being vulnerable to seasons and weather, may need different payment schedules or value micro-insurance, with or without micro-credit, particularly highly. Women earning their education need products that do not force them into full time paid employment. Alternative products to micro-credit may be required where religious belief does not tolerate loans with interest payments. Implications for policy and practice specific to each of the main areas focussed upon in the systematic review are described below:

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC EXPERIENCES

Microfinance organisations should consider microfinance as a way of benefiting members psychosocially by empowering and facilitating personal growth and development. The value of non-productive assets to a women's sociocultural experience should not be overlooked. For example, among very poor women living in either a rural or urban environments investing in home improvements may benefit individuals and households by enhancing social standing and respect in the community and improve feelings of self-worth and confidence. Quality of life, social mobility, and self-esteem were experienced with the autonomy to make purchasing decisions even in the absence of a direct financial return.

Decision making around the administration of loan terms and conditions should be informed by the understanding that women who had flexibility around how they used loans and income generated from microenterprise were better able to manage household and business finances. Punitive or coercive strategies to enforce loan repayments can increase rural and village living women's vulnerability, negatively impact upon status, and disenfranchise them from the key relationships within the household and community, leading to further financial and economic disempowerment. Repayment strategies should be designed with an understanding of beneficiaries' context and circumstances and explicitly address and minimise damaging loan repayment enforcement techniques. Increased focus on training in financial literacy and investment, ensuring that individual beneficiaries have adequate skills to successfully use and repay their loans may help beneficiaries to improve their capacity as loan-users.

Microfinance organisations could consider offering education and information that highlights the potential financial and economic risks and responsibilities of participating in microfinance programmes. This sort of information may particularly benefit women rural living women prior to joining and help them to understand the possible experiences that they may encounter.

Unforeseen crises such as natural disasters or family emergencies have been found to negate the potential benefits of financial and economic security associated with microfinance and lead to amplified poverty, particularly in rural areas. Strategies should be considered to

provide savings protection, short-term flexibility on loan repayments, and timely access to microinsurance for the poor to very poor, particularly in rural environments who are beneficiaries. Microfinance organisations may consider implementing programmes that provide social security services such as food rations in times when the very poor are the most vulnerable and tend to use their loans and savings to cover basic needs or emergency costs.

Microfinance organisations should consider developing policies that encourage and enable support and engagement, especially from male household members as female beneficiaries may face negative experiences relating to other household members when managing loans and repayments. By encouraging and supporting attitudes of shared responsibility among household members, microfinance organisations may be able to help women avoid negative experiences around lack of household support. Identifying the degree of household support for women during loan applications as a mechanism for understanding women's needs and ability to repay loans should be considered as a strategy to ensure that women with low literacy, working in subsistence agriculture as not disadvantaged by their own, or other household members attitudes and actions..

The dynamics and operation of self-help and group-lending groups can be affected by power imbalances where some women experience domination by more powerful or wealthy members; this experience may relate to caste and/or social standing, and significantly influenced the lives of very poor women from low caste groups. Organisations administering such groups should monitor and ensure that groups have equitable sociocultural and financial balance for all members.

EXPERIENCES OF EMPOWERMENT AND DISEMPOWERMENT

Loan policies and requirements that are sensitive to the experiences and context of low-caste beneficiaries and the very poor can contribute to activities that enable women beneficiaries to experience increased personal liberty, particularly where microfinance includes opportunities or requirements for participatory group processes and engagement. Microfinance organisations may be able to support more widespread empowerment for women in South Asian communities and could consider developing strategies that involve women in discussions around women's rights, community, political, and common household problems to facilitate solidarity and a sense of community among women.

Women gain confidence and skill in financial management as they participate over a series of loan cycles. Low self-confidence which may impact early loan performance should not rule out future loan considerations. Capacity for group-learning in areas of financial, business, vocational, and social skills within microfinance programmes should be considered by microfinance organisations as a way to assist women to transition toward greater self-empowerment. Policies specific to the needs of female participants that encourage group participatory processes for individual, household, business, and community decision-making should be considered. Microfinance organisations should offer programs for developing women's skill and knowledge to assist women toward improving their independence and

mobility within the community, in particular for low caste women, as they tend to experience greater constraints on their physical mobility.

Microfinance organisations should examine ways to raise the awareness of staff of domestic violence facing low caste women so that programme membership may capitalise on its potential to protect women from the potentially increased risk of domestic violence and abuse. To help reduce domestic violence as a result of microfinance participation, male household and community members who are supportive and positive regarding women's empowerment and may be identified and targeted by microfinance organisations as local 'champions' to assist in motivating other less supportive men of the benefits of women participating in microfinance. Further, microfinance organisations may promote the benefits of microfinance as experienced by all household members as a strategy to reducing domestic violence and abuse. Unsupervised contact with male staff may put women beneficiaries at risk of damaging rumours and gossip in the community. Microfinance organisations may consider employing women working at the community level in sociocultural contexts where it may be inappropriate for women beneficiaries' to have unsupervised contact with a mostly male staff.

EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL AND PERSONAL IMPACT

To support the involvement of and benefit to adolescent girls and young women from rural or village backgrounds. Microfinance organisations should consider developing policies that support and address adolescent girls' need for recreation within their cultural context that enhances normative development and diversity of social interactions. Current microfinance policies should be reviewed to address and expand the culturally embedded notion of a traditional woman's role and to empower women to participate more fully within their family and the wider community. Women could be encouraged by microfinance organisations to identify and reflect on their personal growth, including interpersonal skills, and knowledge arising from their participation in microfinance.

Participation in microfinance may improve peoples' awareness of health issues and services in the local area. Microfinance organisations should explore methods for improving beneficiaries' access to and knowledge about health and healthcare services.

The actions and behaviour of staff members can have a considerable impact upon the experiences of beneficiaries. Microfinance organisations should closely monitor the behaviour and actions of field staff to ensure that practices that adversely affect beneficiaries do not occur and are not being tacitly supported by unhelpful policies such as enforcing unrealistically high collection targets. Microfinance organisations should minimise staff-beneficiary power differentials to engender and sustain members' feelings of being supported.

While still an emerging sub-area of microfinance, organisations involved in 'Green microfinance' may examine ways of providing training to beneficiaries tailored to local circumstances and seasonal conditions.

MOTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION

Participation in microfinance programmes may be based upon complex socioeconomic needs; no single need was consistently identified as being of greater significance than others. Participation in microfinance programmes may be motivated (or conflicted) by family pressures, religious beliefs, perceived benefits, and hopes for the future. In terms of continuing to participate in microfinance programmes, being able to contribute to children's education was a powerful motivator.

MOTIVES FOR NON-PARTICIPATION

Microfinance organisations should understand that non-participation may be due to religious beliefs or existing socioeconomic pressures and does not reflect an individual's capacity for change; particularly for women in rural environments. Programs seeking to support women's involvement in microfinance should consider addressing the concerns of male household members.

POSITIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF HOUSEHOLDERS

Microfinance organisations should explore ways to value and nurture the support of household members for successful microfinance programme participation. Programmes that have been developed for improving women beneficiaries' knowledge and skill acquisition specific to household management may enable women to become valued knowledge brokers within their households.

POSITIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Household and community beliefs and attitudes interact, therefore policies that target and reshape negative stereotypes of women in the home and or community are recommended. Policies to address culturally embedded notions of woman's roles should be developed to empower women to participate more fully in both family life and the wider community. People who are especially vulnerable, such as the very poor, women, and lower-caste people may suffer more from negative beliefs and attitudes from other community members, thus policies should be designed to protect vulnerable groups from loss of face and respect in the community. Microfinance organisations can foster positive community attitudes toward beneficiaries by avoiding shaming strategies to coerce repayments. Policies should be developed that facilitate socially valued engagement between adolescent girls, and between adolescent girls and their community. Practical knowledge and skills are commodities that are valued by poor communities. Microfinance programmes should equip women with this knowledge to positively influence community views.

NEGATIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF HOUSEHOLDS

Screening prospective beneficiaries' applications for the level of family support and implementing strategies that help vulnerable women become socially connected with other women should be considered by microfinance organisations as a way of identifying beneficiaries who may suffer as a result of the negative beliefs and attitudes of other

household members. Household members may not value women's participation in microfinance programmes if they do not appreciate or understand the intended application or practical benefit of the skills they learn through participation. Microfinance organisations should ensure that beneficiaries learn practical and applicable knowledge and skills as knowledge viewed as tokenistic reinforces negative stereotypes of microfinance and women. Women who face a persistent lack of support from within the home could be offered resilience training provided by microfinance organisations.

NEGATIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF COMMUNITIES

Microfinance organisations should consider ways of building family engagement as a strategy to promote supportive community beliefs and attitudes. Because community-based hostility is often targeted at microfinance beneficiaries' character, microfinance policies that are sensitive to sociocultural norms and the vulnerable place of women within communities can help reduce the manipulation and abuse that some women are subject to.

RESEARCH GAPS

While the present review is concerned with people's positive and negative experiences of participating in microfinance programmes, as well as with the motives for their participation, non-participation and other household and community member attitudes and beliefs toward beneficiaries, the scope of the paper included in this review did not explicitly focus upon any of these phenomena of interest. Instead papers were largely concerned with topics such as examining masculinity, domination, problematising empowerment, and building social capital. As such, this review was limited by the fact that primary research seldom appears to attempt to answer the specific question of "what are people's experiences of participating in microfinance programmes?". The review was therefore limited to studies that contained - but did not necessarily focus upon - particular phenomena of interest and clear qualitative data collection and analysis around women's empowerment, the financial and economic experiences of microfinance participation, and the personal and social experiences of microfinance participation. We may therefore have limited data to aid in understanding what factors fully contribute to people's positive and negative experiences of microfinance, their motives for participation/non-participation, and other household/community members' beliefs and attitudes toward beneficiaries. Thus, discussions on this topic may require further more focussed evidence from primary research to build a clearer picture of people's experiences of their involvement in microfinance programmes. Some further gaps and limitations within the primary research were also identified.

- The problems generated by the concept of empowerment indicate that measuring women's empowerment may not be a viable candidate for assessing the success/failure of microcredit programs in terms of women's empowerment. Simply evaluating the short-term changes in the lives of beneficiaries may not usefully or effectively determine whether microfinance achieves its goal of women's empowerment. By assessing the impact of microfinance on beneficiaries and their families in terms of

generational and inter-generational differences may be more effective and show more accurate results.

- Beneficiaries and local community members may be usefully and effectively included in the development and conduct of research regarding the implementation and impact of microfinance programmes. By focussing on the ways that beneficiaries and communities engage with interventions new ways to both understand and work beyond them may be provided.
- High repayment rates may indicate social pressures that compel women to access credit for others in the household. Evaluation of the success/failure of microfinance programmes may look to ranking success in terms of how the microcredit loans have been used and whether the source of repayment corresponds with beneficiaries' loan use.
- Past evaluations appear to frequently rely on outcomes alone to measure the impact of microcredit on women's empowerment. This may be insufficient and misleading as outcome measurement tends to ignore context including existing gender relations so central to women's well-being and empowerment. Linkages between microfinance and empowerment may be more appropriately and effectively examined by focusing upon processes around how beneficiaries use microfinance programmes.
- While conflicts, rivalries, and competition between women appear to be common, primary studies may usefully examine women beneficiaries' preferences, goals, and the constraints they face in terms of empowerment across diverse contexts. This may aid researchers to establish what motivates women to cooperate in terms of things like collective action and mutual benefit.
- Primary research explicitly examining people's experiences of participation in microfinance programmes in terms of their experiences of the positive benefits and negative consequences of participation would be useful to more precisely and comprehensively answer the questions posed by this review.
- Primary research explicitly examining why people choose to participate in, not participate in, and drop out of microfinance programmes, including their motives for doing so would be useful to more precisely and comprehensively answer the questions posed by this review.
- Primary research explicitly examining the attitudes and beliefs of other household members and community members would be useful to more precisely and comprehensively answer the questions posed by this review.

CONTENTS

1. Background

2. Methods

3. Identifying and describing studies: results

4. In-depth review and synthesis

5. Summary and discussion

6. Conclusions and recommendations

7. References

Appendix 1.1 Authorship of this review

Appendix 2.1: Search strategy

Appendix 2.2: Exclusion criteria

Appendix 2.3: Coding framework

Appendix 2.4: Critical-appraisal checklist for assessment of methodological quality

Appendix 2.5: Characteristics of included studies (objectives and conclusions of the included studies)

Appendix 2.6: Characteristics of included studies (characteristics of the microfinance programmes in included studies)

Appendix 2.7: Characteristics of included studies (participants of the microfinance programmes in included studies)

Appendix 2.8: Characteristics of included studies (Identification of participants and data-collection and analysis methods)

Appendix 2.9: Methodological quality of included studies

Appendix 2.10: Study findings by phenomena of interest, theme, subtheme and category

Appendix 2.11: Findings from included papers

1 BACKGROUND

1.1 AIMS AND RATIONALE FOR CURRENT REVIEW

Despite the growth and current popularity of microfinance, there is mixed evidence regarding its impact (Armendáriz de Aghion and Morduch 2010, Van Rooyen et al. 2012). A number of recent systematic reviews have highlighted the fact that, although there are anecdotal evidence and inspiring stories, rigorously performed quantitative evidence demonstrating a strong, positive impact of microfinance is still absent (Stewart et al. 2010, 2012; Duvendack et al. 2011). Indeed, recent evidence seems to indicate that microfinance may, in fact, be doing harm in some contexts (Stewart et al. 2010).

While some have argued that single interventions such as microfinance are significantly less effective than mixed interventions that combine microfinance with health education (Lipton 1996), past work has also attempted to understand the complex nature of the impact of microfinance interventions, and findings are separated into three main groups (Makina and Malobola 2004):

1. Positive impacts, such as improvements to income stability and growth, employment, nutrition, health, education, social networks and women's empowerment, and reduced income inequality and vulnerability (see, for example, Afrane 2002, Barnes 1996, Barnes and Keogh 1999, Beck et al. 2004, Hietalahti and Linden 2006, Hossain and Knight 2008, Khandker 2001, Schuler et al. 1997, UNICEF 1997 and Wright 2000).
2. Negative impacts, such as the exploitation of women, unchanged poverty levels, increased income inequality, heavy workloads, barriers to sustainable economic and social situations, and dependency created by interest rates and loan repayments (see, for example, Adams and Von Pischke 1992, Bateman and Chang 2009, Buckley 1997, Copestake 2002, Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996, Kabeer 1998 and Rogaly 1996).
3. Mixed impacts, such as benefits for the poor more generally, but not for the poorest (see, for example, Copestake et al. 2002, Hulme and Mosley 1996, Morduch 1998, Mosley and Hulme 1998 and Zaman 2001), or helping poor people to manage their money more effectively (Rutherford 1996, p 2) without directly or sufficiently increasing income or empowering women (see, for example, Husain et al. 2010, Mayoux 1999, Rahman 1998).

A recent systematic review has identified impact evaluations of microfinance interventions as often methodologically weak and inadequate for reliably ascertaining the actual effects of microfinance (Duvendack et al. 2011). The differences between the settings where various microfinance interventions have been implemented has also been cited as a possible reason why past research and evaluations have provided mixed conclusions regarding effectiveness (Stewart et al. 2010, Van Rooyen et al. 2012). By focusing on the experiences and views of people within a single regional context — in this instance, South Asia — it is hoped that more cohesive and accurate conclusions can be drawn.

Complex cultural settings may act to confound research that seeks to investigate effectiveness, due to the many variations within and across cultures, which may influence the outcomes of interest. Factors that influence the outcomes of interest may bias the results in study designs where objectivity and control are crucial to internal validity. With these limitations of traditional quantitative research in mind, research that is able to cross cultural and/or ethnic boundaries is important. Cross cultural/ethnicity studies may provide better recognition of both expressed and intuited cultural or ethnic factors, while also being cognizant of the significant influence of local socio-cultural and environmental factors (Iwata and Buka 2002).

Research that recognises the tensions between the rigorous and standardised requirements of methodology and the variations and influences of culture, ethnicity and socio-cultural and environmental factors, and how they vary, is better able to compensate for these, even where compensation simply means recognising that diversity exists and presents challenges to the conduct of traditional western conceptualisations of research (Henry 2003).

In terms of ethnic structures, while India is just one South Asian country, it illustrates how the complexity of interactions between culture, ethnicity and socio-cultural and environmental factors influences research. In cross-national studies, ethnic fractionalisation is a useful measure of ethnic diversity. The literature refers not only to measures of ethnic diversity such as this, but also to more ingrained conceptualisations of ethnic structure that reflect socio-political dominance in relation to a population-based majority or minority presence within or across a sub-culture or ethnicity. India presents this depth of complexity, with its highly fragmented set of ethnic minorities, meaning researchers have difficulty with methods that seek to standardise and generalise (Fearson 2003).

These cultural complexities fundamentally affect policy and, therefore, practice.

1.2 DEFINITIONAL AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

This section defines the important terms pertaining to this systematic review, and thereby outlines the scope of the review.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this review is based upon the view that microfinance interventions are, in fact, embedded within the notions of culture, ethnicity, and socio-cultural and environmental constructs that affect how people experience them (Karim 2008, Shahnaz and Karim 2008, Lyby 2006, Rashid and Makuwira 2014, Sanyal 2009, Schuler et al. 1997, Uddin 2012). Therefore, microfinance interventions of any kind that ignore these notions are not likely to be successful or sustainable. The concept of sustainability, therefore, underpins considerations of microfinance provision, and significantly impacts the experiences of beneficiaries of microfinance interventions. Sustainable livelihood is at the heart of studies that seek to acknowledge the culture, ethnicity, and socio-cultural and environmental factors that influence people's experiences and perceptions. With sustainable livelihood as a

conceptual basis, microfinance interventions are intentionally aspirational, seeking to help the very poor move beyond purely subsistence living. This conceptual framework thereby acknowledges sustainability as a key attribute of experiences and perceptions; however, this review does not seek to anticipate how the concept will be expressed through the included studies. Rather, it aims to create a very broad framework for understanding how people engage with microfinance as a 'phenomenon of interest'.

We posit that the line of thought represented in this proposal is fundamentally underpinned by the notion of sustainable livelihood. This is the notion that reducing poverty has relevance to both urban and rural or remote peoples, and is necessarily inclusive of sustainability and practical livelihood strategies, and does not constitute simply a poverty-reduction plan (Ellis 1999). Central to the notion of sustainable livelihood is diversification, and we contend that microfinance that has the characteristics of diversity and sustainability is situated within this framework. The protocol and subsequent scoping review, while sensitive to the traditional perspectives of sustainable livelihood, did not include an a priori framework on which findings could be mapped. The intention in this review is to allow the findings arising from the analysis of studies and data to emerge and become the framework within which a subsequent, detailed thematic analysis may be undertaken.

Focusing upon a particular regional context, such as that of South Asia, is, therefore, necessary to investigating people's and communities' views and experiences of delivering and participating in microfinance interventions.

Primary qualitative studies of the impact of microfinance have contributed significantly to important areas that quantitative research designs may struggle to measure; for example, women's empowerment has been explored, with suggestions that microfinance can increase their involvement in household and community decision making, as they gain amplified control over resources (Todd 1996 in Duvendack et al. 2011). Further analysis of qualitative research on this topic will help provide insight into what participants perceive to be the benefits and negative consequences of microfinance for themselves, their families and their communities. These qualitative studies may also provide valuable information regarding what these people consider and did not consider motivations to participate in, or drop out of, programmes. Detailed analysis of such research in the appropriate context will also allow for a comparison with time periods and situations prior to microfinance interventions, or a comparison with similar contexts, both geographical and political, that do not include access to microfinance (Duvendack et al. 2011).

While a number of recent systematic reviews have engaged with questions concerning the impact of microfinance, few have thoroughly examined the sources of qualitative data to describe and investigate people's views and experiences of delivering and participating in microfinance interventions. The systematic review by Pande et al. (2012) includes a number of descriptive and qualitative studies in order to inform process and provide a background for the authors' review project, but these studies are not incorporated into their in-depth review. Similarly, Duvendack et al. (2011) seek to include qualitative studies, but only in order to scope the literature in the area; this has allowed the review authors to compile a database for future

research. The systematic review of impact evaluations by Stewart et al. (2012) sought out only comparative studies that set out to measure impact; the authors did, however, extract and synthesise qualitative data from included evaluations, but original qualitative research investigating people's experiences of participation in microfinance interventions is not included. Rather than a reliance upon solely institutional reviews and research reports that may draw largely upon quantitative data (Rahman 2004), it has been proposed that qualitative research methods such as long-term ethnographic studies may be especially useful for examining microfinance, as they provide in-depth, contextualised understanding of personal experiences of direct involvement with microfinance interventions (Kurlanska 2011). Livelihood studies, when combined with ethnographic methods, can also prove to be a useful approach for examining people's experiences of participation in microfinance schemes. Such studies enquire into the activities of individuals in relation to their resources and opportunities, and how households manage these resources in a bid to improve their living conditions (Kurlanska 2011).

Some recent systematic reviews have sought to include qualitative evidence as a part of mixed-methods review that incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data. For example, in a 2010 review by Stewart et al. impact evaluations of microfinance interventions in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are examined for quantitative outcomes, as well as qualitative findings concerning whether or not microcredit or micro-savings are having positive effects on the lives of participants. Thematic narrative synthesis was conducted on qualitative study findings from 15 included studies (four randomised controlled trials [RCTs], two non-randomised controlled trials, and nine case-control studies). Past systematic reviews that have included qualitative data in a mixed-methods analysis have indicated a number of limitations to the quality of the evidence base, of which future reviewers should be mindful, including the following points: impact and programme evaluations, in the past, have not always been conducted on the full range of microfinance models; inconsistent reporting and lack of sufficient detail may compromise reporting on interventions; and outcomes are often reported on using inconsistent measures, interfering with effective synthesis (Stewart et al. 2010).

Recent systematic reviews have not specifically targeted understanding of the perspectives of people who deliver microfinance interventions among their population of interest. Stewart et al., in their systematic review (2012), restrict their population-inclusion criteria to beneficiaries of microfinance interventions. Likewise, the study by Pande et al. (2012) concentrates on low-income households — again, the beneficiaries of microfinance interventions.

This systematic review will address gaps in relation to experiences of microfinance, ensuring that all stakeholders' perspectives are identified and synthesised within a South Asian context.

MICROFINANCE

This review aims to focus upon four of the most common microfinance interventions: microcredit, micro-leasing, micro-savings and micro-insurance, and will consider each in isolation, as well as in combination.

The operating definition of microfinance used in this systematic review is summarised by Stewart et al. (2010, p 10), following Brau and Woller (2004) and Hossain (2002). This definition recognises that the terms 'microfinance' and 'microcredit' tend to be used interchangeably and specifies that, while microfinance generally encompasses microcredit, micro-savings, micro-insurance and money transfers for the poor, microcredit (as part of microfinance) entails the delivery of small, collateral-free loans to often unsalaried beneficiaries, or members of cooperatives who otherwise could not access the services (Stewart et al. 2010). Another definition of microfinance is the delivery of financial services to self-employed, low-income, very poor to poor people, and can include the provision of savings, credit, insurance and payment services (Legerwood 1999, Otero 1999, Schreiner 2001).

Microfinance can include any of a range of financial tools that are designed to deliver banking services to those who are unable to access financial services through normal means. This may include the provision of small cash loans (microcredit), leasing of productive assets (micro-leasing), saving facilities (micro-savings), and also insurance policies (micro-insurance) (Stewart et al. 2012). Microcredit, micro-leasing and micro-savings may be provided separately or in combination. They can also often be provided in combination with other financial interventions, including micro-insurance.

The term 'microcredit' entered into use in the 1970s, and was used to describe the endowment of small loans to poor people to fund income-raising ventures. 'Microfinance' entered common parlance in the late 1990s, in response to a refocusing of credit theory and policy upon the customer, as opposed to the product. While microfinance initially arose in Asia in the 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s were characterised by significantly accelerated growth, both in the number of microfinance institutions (MFIs) and their reach (Robinson 2001). As microfinance has evolved, so, too, have its components, and now some non-financial services, such as training in financial literacy and skills-development programmes, are included (Armendáriz de Aghion and Morduch 2010). These non-financial services are not, however, the focus of this review.

While, in the past, microcredit has most commonly been offered using a group-lending model with shared collateral, loans are now increasingly offered to individual borrowers (Stewart et al. 2012). This review includes both approaches.

Micro-leasing can be understood as a contractual relationship between two parties, where one loans a productive asset, for example farm equipment, to another, and receives payment in return. The asset may eventually be paid off and acquired by the lessee (financial leasing), or may be returned to the lessor, as in operational leasing (Stewart et al. 2012).

Micro-savings commonly refers to financial-deposit services (Stewart et al. 2012). Micro-savings may be offered as a stand-alone savings account, but are most frequently linked to microcredit. In linked cases, micro-savings are either a compulsory condition of the loan, or part of a combined group intervention, where members may borrow from their pooled savings. Micro-savings services may function as financial protection to guard against the

impact of financial shocks, or as a promotional mechanism for beneficiaries to build an asset base.

Micro-insurance is a relatively recent microfinance intervention that provides beneficiaries with a form of risk protection and management against certain risks (Churchill and Matul 2006). It is designed to reduce the vulnerability of low-income beneficiaries.

It is critical to appreciate that microfinance is understood and practised differently, depending upon the context. For example, in Bangladesh, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are the most common microfinance operators, while, in India, for-profit non-banking finance companies (NBFCs) are the standard. Likewise, in Bangladesh, savings facilities can be offered by microfinance operators, but they do not occur in India. Stephens and Tazi (2006) explain the differences in breadth, depth and growth of outreach, financial structure, performance, efficiency and productivity within and between a number of South Asian nations, and note distinctions such as one national Bangladeshi institution's serving just as many borrowers as the combined figures of several large regional MFIs in India. Differences in context also impact the nature of the services that are provided, and can also be expected to influence how microfinance services — and their impacts — are experienced by both beneficiaries and those who administer them. Stewart et al. (2010) note, for instance, that, on average, in SSA microfinance performs more poorly than in other regions, and that enterprises in SSA complain more frequently about lack of finance than those in any other region.

EXPERIENCES

When communicating about experiences within the context of qualitative synthesis, we refer to the diverse ontological and epistemological positions that have contributed to the critical and interpretive methodologies that commonly seek to illuminate the individual or group understanding of phenomena of interest. Experiences are captured in literature through thematic-analysis processes in qualitative inquiry and expressed as themes, metaphors and illustrations that convey the meaning attributable to the phenomena.

'Experience' relates to the conscious perspective reported by qualitative-research participants who unfold meaning through narrative processes of qualitative inquiry. It is broader than lived experience (which, for some, is limited to phenomenological inquiry), and, therefore, is inclusive of a wide range of methodologies and methods.

PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF MICROFINANCE, ITS OPERATION AND ITS OUTCOMES

One of the broad purposes of microfinance is to reduce poverty. The income of those receiving microfinance interventions is, therefore, often examined in order to measure quantitatively the impact of microfinance (Johnson and Rogaly 1997 quoted in Makina and Malobola 2004, p 802). This and the results of other quantitative measures, however, do not provide the full story, as qualitative data that more fully draw upon the complex livelihoods and perspectives of those involved in microfinance interventions are likely to facilitate much-needed insight into how, why and the extent to which microfinance is effective in its aims. To correctly

interpret how people experience microfinance interventions, it is important to understand how microfinance interventions are intended to work, as well as which outcomes they are designed to have.

Previous studies have offered suggestions regarding the way we might best define and measure the impact of microfinance on its beneficiaries in terms of potential outcome variables (Brau and Woller 2004, Kabeer 2003). These different variables could also be fruitfully examined qualitatively. Particular elements to examine may include experiences of consumption, income stability and/or growth, changes in inequalities, health and education outcomes, nutrition, employment, empowerment indicators, vulnerability to financial shocks/unexpected challenges, social networks, and local economic and social development.

Microfinance interventions may also have different impacts upon different groups; for example, women. Accordingly, it is important to understand the variation in people's experiences of their involvement in microfinance.

1.3 POLICY AND PRACTICE BACKGROUND

The attention paid to microfinance by academics, policy-makers and donors has sought (as is the case with many policy initiatives) to improve the well-being of the poor, by endowing them with additional financial assets. Financial assets are intended to enable individuals to improve their well-being or to increase income sustainability over time (Barrett et al. 2001).

However, while current policies are supportive of microfinance across a range of sectors and interventions, the accrual of a body of evidence appears to be focused on establishment and facilitation. For example, a recent review of microfinance in relation to tuberculosis (TB) control comprehensively evaluated the benefits and policy implications, yet concluded that policy recommendations could not be generated from the evidence, while recommending that further microfinance programmes be established to better inform future TB policy control (Boccia et al. 2011).

While broad support for microfinance is evident, a range of factors influence the effectiveness in terms of outcomes. Policy decisions can be affected in countries and communities that are vulnerable due to poverty, as well as natural and man-made crises and conflicts. Some evidence suggests that, in spite of attempts to be responsive to broader, population-level issues, it is the poorest of the poor who are most affected by a lack of robust policy frameworks that can sustain sources of financing while concurrently addressing the wider issues. Therefore, it has been asserted, vulnerability can be perpetuated if microfinance programmes are not underpinned by robust policy (Skoufias 2003). In spite of these challenges, the literature remains firmly entrenched in the notion espoused by Woolcock and Narayan (2000) that microfinance is a particularly useful strategy and should be policy-driven, and this has clear policy implications.

The contemporary microfinance movement began in South Asia in the 1970s, in response to poverty affecting the rural population of Bangladesh. The microfinance movement grew

exponentially during the 1990s, as institutions expanded to offer services to an increasing number of beneficiaries. At this time, a great number of low-income families in Bangladesh were served by microfinance providers. This expansion in Bangladesh continued to grow through the turn of the century, while, in India, a microfinance system based on self-help groups (SHGs) began to gain momentum. Within the South Asian region, other countries were slower to join the microfinance movement, but there are now established and active microfinance segments in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. In microfinance, as with many fields, context has been a significant factor in determining the specific and distinctive characteristics of policy and practice. In South Asia, modern microfinance began at a time when poverty was being extensively researched. South Asian microfinance is, therefore, firmly rooted in the poverty discourse, as opposed to a branch of the commercial banking industry. South Asian microfinance has also been characteristically rural in scope, with the majority of beneficiaries living outside urban areas. Microfinance coverage has been particularly remarkable in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, where MFIs have reached a large proportion of the country's poor. The focus on engaging and empowering women has also had significant impact throughout the South Asian region. For example, in India, the SHG movement has laid the foundation for programmes promoting empowerment of women. Likewise, in Afghanistan, microfinance has accorded women more explicit recognition as economic actors. In Bangladesh, microfinance has become a strong basis for microenterprise, as well as targeting the 'ultra-poor' with specific programmes. Legal frameworks are now arising in Pakistan and Nepal, as the potential of microfinance in other South Asian contexts is being demonstrated and recognised.

1.4 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

At the time of writing, no systematic reviews of people's views and experiences of interventions that are or could be delivered in South Asia had been completed. However, a recent systematic review has examined the views and experiences of girls and women in low- and lower-middle-income countries, where participation in asset-building and/or protection programmes has been inconsistent and insecure. (Dickson and Bangpan 2012). One other associated quantitative review is underway, funded by the EPPI-Centre (protocol currently under development). This associated systematic review will identify and examine experimental and quasi-experimental studies evaluating microfinance interventions on well-being in the South Asian context, to answer the question:

What is the impact of 'microfinance' on the 'well-being' of the poor, and what are the conditions for making microfinance work for the poor in South Asia?

The present systematic review will examine qualitative and mixed-methods evidence.

Past studies have sought to examine and measure the impact of microfinance interventions within and across a variety of contexts. Broadly, three main methodological approaches have been used (Hulme 2000, in Stewart et al. 2010, p 13):

1. The positivistic approach, which is reliant upon experimental and quasi-experimental designs to establish quantitative, statistically valid measures of impact.
2. The interpretive approach, based upon the research traditions of the humanities, which seek to interpret, as opposed to proving impact.
3. The critical approach, including participatory learning and action, which uses participatory qualitative-research tools to allow participants to identify and monitor change and impact.

The last two approaches are the most commonly used by those involved in improvement of microfinance practice, while the first is generally concerned with establishing the existence and magnitude of impact. In recent years, there has been a movement to integrate these approaches to facilitate an emphasis on improvement of microfinance practice, based upon monitoring and learning from impact to design more appropriate and better-managed interventions (Stewart et al. 2010).

While literature reviews on the impact of a number of microfinance interventions do exist (see, for example, Brau and Woller 2004, Devaney 2006, Karlan 2008, Matin et al. 1999 and Woller 2004), these are not focused on the South Asia context. This systematic review does not seek to present an analysis of the challenges associated with conducting research. An informed and detailed presentation of primary research challenges would be a research project in itself, and is outside the scope of this project.

1.5 AUTHORS, FUNDERS AND OTHER USERS OF THE REVIEW

This review aims to synthesise the evidence on people's views and experiences of microfinance interventions that have been delivered in South Asia.

As stated in Section 1.1, recent systematic reviews on microfinance have demonstrated mixed evidence of the effects of microfinance on the social and economic well-being of poor people (Stewart et al. 2010, 2012; Duvendack et al. 2011). It has been proposed that a possible reason for this could be the inclusion of a broad range of interventions implemented in different contexts around the world (Stewart et al. 2012). Insufficient evaluation designs have also been cited as reasons (Stewart et al. 2012). An in-depth focus on the South Asia context is needed to explore opportunities in, and possible challenges to, designing and implementing microfinance programmes in this context. Developing an in-depth understanding of people's experiences of their involvement in microfinance interventions is necessary to identify issues that might influence the delivery and impact of microfinance in South Asia.

The synthesis aims to draw upon systematic reviews, as well as primary studies (qualitative and mixed-methods studies and those quantitative studies that analyse and report upon qualitative data) that meet the inclusion, exclusion and quality-appraisal criteria.

It is anticipated that this review will be of use to other agencies that are considering or evaluating support to microfinance programmes. These agencies may include government bodies — particularly in South Asia.

Furthermore, this review will be of interest to academics, researchers, organisations and accountability bodies that have interests in disseminating and communicating the results on microfinance in order to inform evidence-based policy-making and practice.

The most immediate users of this review are those within the funding body who are directly or indirectly involved in the funding and management of the Joanna Briggs Institute's (JBI) review of microfinance. This includes staff within the EPPI-Centre, DFID-SARH, advisers based in countries where microfinance interventions are implemented, and staff and consultants working with partner NGOs and government agencies that are considering developing, amending or becoming involved in microfinance programmes.

1.6 REVIEW QUESTIONS

Prior to undertaking the full systematic review, a scoping review was conducted to address the following broad question:

What are people's views and experiences of delivering and participating in microfinance interventions?

The scoping review developed a clear picture of which questions existing research syntheses have addressed. This scoping review sought to examine people's views and experiences of delivering or participating in microfinance interventions, aiming to develop a greater understanding of why past systematic reviews have shown mixed evidence on the effects of microfinance. The scoping exercise was also conducted to clarify and define how this question would be more specifically addressed by the full systematic review. The scoping review has underpinned the present systematic review, which examines a specific question regarding people's views and experiences as beneficiaries and/or providers of microfinance interventions.

Questions that were initially put forward for consideration were:

- What are the processes, beliefs and strategies of participation?
- What are the perceived or apparent benefits/negative consequences of participating in a microfinance programme?
- Which factors explain the differential benefits accrued to different participants?
- Are there any supporting factor(s), such as organisational practices, staff behaviour and investment in capacity building on financial services, which may explain the success or failure of the programme?
- What are the beliefs and attitudes of other members of the households and community towards the participants in microfinance programmes?
- What makes an individual decide to participate or not participate, and how to participate?

- What makes participants drop out of existing programmes?
- In the view of participants and non-participants, what are the potential and realised benefits?

The findings of the scoping review were discussed with the Expert Advisory Group, DFID-SARH and the EPPI-SG, and informed the choice of questions addressed by this systematic review. Based upon the availability of evidence from primary research studies included by the scoping exercise, the following primary question was agreed upon:

What are the perceived or apparent benefits/negative consequences of participating in a microfinance programme?

Two sub-questions were also decided upon, based upon the availability of evidence from primary research included by the scoping exercise:

What are people's motivations for deciding to participate/not participate, or drop out of a microfinance programme?

And:

What are the beliefs and attitudes of other household and community members towards microfinance-programme participants?

Based upon the results of the scoping review, as well as consultation with the Expert Advisory Group, DFID-SARH, and the EPPI-SG, it was decided that the remaining questions in the initial list could not be adequately answered, owing to a lack of sufficient evidence, both in terms of quantity and quality.

2 METHODS

This section outlines the methodologies that were employed for this review. The first section describes the most immediate, as well as the anticipated users of this review, and how they were involved in the review processes. This is followed by the strategies for searching, including (and excluding) and reviewing the literature that was used.

2.1 USER INVOLVEMENT

APPROACH AND METHODS USED

The review has been informed by the commissioners and relevant policy-makers at DFID, and our Expert Advisory Group of substantive topic experts in the field of microfinance in the South Asian region (see Appendix 1.1 for details). They have played an integral role in informing the development of the present systematic review at four key points:

- i. Protocol development: The EPPI-SG/DFID-SARH/JBI formed a consultative group, composed of relevant personnel who played a key role in providing direction to the review team in assessing the scope of the review, developing the conceptual framework, search strategy, and inclusion and exclusion criteria.
- ii. Searching: The consultative group was asked to identify any research or ongoing projects that it considered relevant to the present review and to distribute information about the review on its websites and networks, as appropriate.
- iii. Question development and focus: The consultative group considered the results of the scoping review and the advice of the Expert Advisory Group in deciding upon the focus of the systematic review, as well as the specific questions that the review would address.
- iv. Interim findings to consider:
 - (a) how the conceptual framework has been applied to answer the specific review question(s) and whether we have presented the findings in a way that is useful to those seeking to understand people's experiences of microfinance programmes in South Asia;
 - (b) the policy and practice implications, including whether we have addressed what is most relevant to those seeking to understand people's experiences of microfinance programmes in South Asia;
 - (c) whether the recommendations for future research are relevant and appropriate to the review topic. The feedback and recommendations from the advisory group have been incorporated into this report.

USER INVOLVEMENT IN DESIGNING THE REVIEW

In designing this review, the review team sought to incorporate the perspectives of four particular groups of potential users in this project:

- South Asia microfinance policy-makers, who are likely to be the primary audience for this review, specifically within DFID, which commissioned it.
- South Asia microfinance service providers, so that our review is relevant and our findings accessible to them.
- South Asia microfinance researchers, to ensure that our review findings contribute to the existing evidence in the region.
- South Asia microfinance users, so they understand how microfinance services are experienced.

We sought to identify and select individuals in the following ways:

- We liaised with DFID-SARH's policy lead for recommendations on other individuals who may have an interest in this field.
- One review-team member, Professor Ram Kumar Mishra, is a microfinance expert based in India, who utilised his network of contacts who provide and research microfinance across the region.
- We also sought to identify individuals and organisations from the authors' networks who provide and/or research microfinance services in South Asia.

In addition to external experts, the EPPI-SG and DFID-SARH provided feedback on the protocol, scoping review and report.

USER INVOLVEMENT IN THE PROCESS OF CONDUCTING THE REVIEW

All stakeholders were engaged in the conduct of the present review by agreeing to the prescribed methodology and methods. Regular project meetings were used not only to report on progress on the overall approach to the systematic review, synthesis and analysis, but also to obtain expert perspectives and advice from the EPPI-SG and the Expert Advisory Group on processes within the review methods.

USER INVOLVEMENT IN INTERPRETING THE REVIEW RESULTS

By presenting the review results iteratively, the results of the scoping review conducted in the first phase were used to guide the subsequent questions posed by the present review. This process of engagement was undertaken through routine teleconferences and meetings, to ensure that all identified stakeholders were engaged in the emerging results, and how they relate to the South Asian context. The results of the literature review are presented in such a way as to inform stakeholders of the experiences reported, including from which perspectives the observations were made. Translating this into a contextually relevant description of the findings has required all stakeholders to participate in discussion and development of the interpretation of the results.

2.2 IDENTIFYING AND DESCRIBING STUDIES

DEFINING RELEVANT STUDIES: INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Studies were included and excluded from our review according to pre-specified criteria. A two-stage approach was followed. The first stage was a scoping review to locate any available evidence that fitted the inclusion criteria described below. The scoping review aimed both to ensure the identification of potentially relevant studies undertaken on interventions implemented in South Asia and other relevant contexts, and to provide the reviewers with enough information to establish which specific questions could be asked and addressed by the available evidence.

At the second stage of the review, studies located through the scoping review were screened to identify those that fitted the criteria for inclusion in the full review and pertained to the review's specific question.

The criteria were:

Date: Studies published since January 1990 were sought out, as this commonly marks the period when MFIs burgeoned and the publication of peer-reviewed articles on the topic significantly increased (Brau and Woller 2004, p 4).

Region: There were no geographic limits placed on the search in the scoping phase of this project. The resulting systematic review specifically focused upon the South Asian context, as it provided sufficient quantity and quality of evidence; however, for the purposes of the scoping exercise, the search included all contexts potentially relevant to South Asia. For the purposes of this review, South Asia included the following countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, British Indian Ocean Territory, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Research that included countries from both South Asia AND other regions was eligible for inclusion in the review.

Study design: Eligible study types included qualitative and mixed-methods systematic reviews and primary research. Relevant systematic reviews were sought because they may have contained evidence or other primary studies pertinent to the present review. Study types sought out included, but were not be limited to, mixed-methods studies with qualitative evidence, phenomenological studies, qualitative-descriptive studies, ethnographic studies, grounded-theory studies, action-research studies and feminist-research studies.

Studies with no explicitly stated qualitative approach, but which report on qualitative data (for example, mixed-methods studies that report the results of both experimental and quasi-experimental research designs, as well as the results of interviews or open-ended surveys) were also sought by the scoping review.

Process evaluations were eligible for inclusion in this review if they contained relevant qualitative data.

Studies that did not report upon people's experiences or views on their involvement in the delivery or receipt of microfinance interventions were excluded from the review. In order to

include the best available evidence in the full systematic review, studies that did not state or adequately describe their approach to qualitative analysis of data were excluded from the scoping review and subsequent systematic review.

Phenomena of interest: Eligible phenomena of interest were the expressed and recorded views and experiences of receiving or delivering microfinance interventions and of the impacts of microfinance interventions at any stage, from initially becoming involved in the receipt and/or delivery of the intervention, to its conclusion.

Participants who have been involved (as beneficiaries or providers) solely in non-financial microfinance interventions, such as training or financial-literacy interventions, were excluded from this review.

If systematic reviews were located, the phenomena of interest were the synthesised findings developed from the primary data within the systematic review.

Population: Eligible participants were any person, of any age, gender or nationality, involved in the delivery (such as development-aid workers) or receipt (such as business owners or individuals) of microfinance interventions.

Language: We sought to include and synthesise literature accessible in the English language. Potentially relevant literature in the Hindi language (identified from title and abstract, where available) is listed in the appendices.

IDENTIFICATION OF POTENTIAL STUDIES: SEARCH STRATEGY

This review followed a two-stage approach. The first stage was a scoping review that included a search to locate all the available evidence that may fit the inclusion criteria described in section 2.2.1. The purpose of this was partly to ensure the identification of potentially relevant studies undertaken on interventions implemented in other relevant contexts outside the South Asia region. Stage two of the review was the screening of all studies located, in order to identify those that fitted the criteria for inclusion in the full review and that pertained to the review's specific and agreed-upon questions. These more focused questions, based upon the results of the scoping exercise, are described in section 2.3.1, below.

The reference lists of the work of key authors were scanned for relevant studies. Relevant studies were also sought via personal contacts of the review team, as well as through direct requests to key informants. Examples of key sources included:

- Dickson and Bangpan (2012)
- Duvendack et al. (2011)
- Pande et al. (2012)
- Stewart et al. (2010)
- Stewart et al. (2012)
- Van Rooyen et al. (2012)
- Yoong et al. (2012)

We combined search terms relating to: microfinance, micro-saving, micro-insurance, micro-franchising, group lending, microcredit, microenterprise, credit programme and credit plus. These are specified in Appendix 2.1.

A range of web-based database sources and institutional websites were also examined for unpublished grey literature (Appendix 2.1).

We used the EPPI-Centre's specialist software, EPPI-Reviewer 4.0 (Thomas et al. 2010), to track and code studies identified and included during the review.

SCREENING STUDIES: APPLYING INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Following a pilot on a sample of potentially relevant studies identified through the scoping review, the inclusion criteria and the exclusion criteria for this review (see Appendix 2.2) were applied to (i) titles and or abstracts and (ii) full reports, when required.

Full reports were obtained for those studies that appeared to meet the criteria or where we had insufficient information from which to draw a firm conclusion. These reports were appropriately coded within EPPI-Reviewer 4.0. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were reapplied to the full reports, and those that did not meet these initial criteria were excluded.

CHARACTERISING INCLUDED STUDIES

The included literature was characterised using an agreed-upon coding tool that was developed using the EPPI-Centre's Core Keywording Strategy (EPPI-Centre 2001). The coding tool (Appendix 2.4) was adapted and updated as required, to fit with the specific systematic review questions posed by the review (this is discussed further in section 2.3.1).

Additional keywords that were specific to the context of the review were added to the coding tool as necessary. After the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to the studies, key-wording strategies were tested upon a subset of material prior to moving on to charting the data. The key-wording strategy was discussed with the research team's South Asia microfinance expert, DFID-SARH, the EPPI-SG and the Expert Advisory Group to clarify any potential changes required, based upon this text dataset. Once the key-wording strategy was finalised, it was used to code the studies in EPPI-Reviewer 4.0.

Operational definitions were developed for each code item and these were discussed to ensure a shared understanding of the meanings of each definition and how it would guide the coding process. This discussion was focused upon establishing the context-related aspects of each paper and the level of fit between each paper and the scoping-exercise question.

Studies included from the scoping review were initially evaluated and characterised according to which type(s) of microfinance intervention(s) they included (microcredit, micro-savings or micro-leasing, and whether these were provided in partnership with micro-insurance, money transfers and/or other non-financial services, such as education and training). The provider of the microfinance intervention(s) and the beneficiaries were described, as well as the country

or region in which the intervention was offered and the setting (that is, the South Asian country or country/context relevant to South Asia, in an urban or rural environment).

Each study was then characterised according to its design, including: systematic review, qualitative, mixed-methods, process evaluations, and quantitative approaches with qualitative data reported upon. The phenomena of interest assessed were described in relation to the context of the participants, their experiences and views of receiving or delivering microfinance interventions, and other impacts on the microfinance service users, where available (see the proposed codes in Appendix 2.3). Phenomena of interest that related to how particular microfinance interventions were designed or intended to work were also noted, where available.

While studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria for the scoping report were excluded at screening stage, the included studies were of varying relevance to the review questions ultimately included. This relevance was judged according to the following criteria:

- Whether they examined people’s experiences of receiving or delivering credit/loan services and savings (or only other financial services, such as insurance and money transfers).
- Whether they examined people’s experiences of microfinance interventions (refer to the phenomena of interest in sections 4.1-5.3 in Appendix 2.3).
- Whether they reported qualitative methods of data collection and analysis of people’s experiences.

The study methods were recorded, including details of sampling, data collection and analysis, where available. These were used to weight the evidence according to quality (see 2.3.3 below).

IDENTIFYING AND DESCRIBING STUDIES: QUALITY-ASSURANCE PROCESS

The review processes, including the electronic search string, inclusion and exclusion criteria, coding sheets and synthesis, were all piloted and discussed among the review team, including the research team’s South Asia microfinance experts — Professor Mishra, DFID-SARH, the EPPI-SG and Expert Advisory Group — to clarify any potential changes required before they were finalised.

Attempts were made to reduce researcher bias and ensure that all relevant literature was included in the review. One reviewer initially applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria to titles and abstracts, and a second reviewer then independently screened any studies the first reviewer excluded, to ensure that no relevant studies were omitted. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion with a third reviewer. The coding of included papers was conducted by two members of the review group working independently. The results of the coding were compared and their decisions discussed. Any disagreements regarding coding were resolved through discussion with a third reviewer.

2.3 IN-DEPTH REVIEW

MOVING FROM BROAD CHARACTERISATION (MAPPING) TO IN-DEPTH REVIEW

The findings of the scoping exercise were discussed with DFID-SARH, the EPPI-SG and the Expert Advisory Group, to inform the subsequent choice of questions to be addressed by the review. The choice of questions was based upon the available evidence within papers that met the review's inclusion criteria, as identified through the scoping review. As suggested in Section 1.6, a series of possible questions had been proposed; however, the scoping-review process was not limited by this initial set of questions. Instead, the data included in the scoping report were used to shape which questions emerged and had sufficient evidence for a systematic review leading to comprehensive conclusions.

After the inclusion and exclusion criteria had been applied and the data in the included studies had been coded, the review group used thematic-synthesis methods to synthesise the qualitative data. The aim was to use these themes to answer our specific review questions and to develop conclusions regarding the ways in which people experience microfinance interventions. Where possible, themes were examined to see whether they were influenced by different contextual factors, such as gender, ethnicity and country.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF STUDIES IN THE IN-DEPTH REVIEW

The detailed descriptions of the studies in the in-depth review were extracted and recorded using the EPPI-Reviewer 4.0. Reviewers independently undertook data extraction with a standardised tool, informed by the work of Stewart et al. (2010) on the analysis of microfinance interventions and substantially based upon the JBI template for data extraction from the included studies (JBI 2014). Detailed data from the studies included, but were not limited to, the following:

- aims and rationale of the study;
- design;
- description of the sample;
- data-collection methods; and
- data-analysis methods.

As with the extraction of codes described above, the review group discussed the standardised details extracted in advance and predetermined definitions to inform decision making as to which text was representative of the data fields. The scoping exercise and consultation with the EPPI-SG, DFID-SARH and the Expert Advisory Group were used to inform the extraction of review-specific data. Data extraction represented a significant aspect of the review process, and the use of pre-identified fields and standardised operational definitions for those fields was crucial to promoting the transparency and auditability expected of systematic reviews.

Results, in the form of the expressed and recorded beliefs and experiences of the study participants, were extracted from studies in relation to the specific questions of the review. Extracted results included:

- i. Perceived positive benefits as a result of microfinance participation.+
- ii. Apparent (actual experiences of) positive benefits as a result of microfinance participation.+
- iii. Perceived negative consequences as a result of microfinance participation.+
- iv. Apparent (actual experiences of) negative consequences as a result of microfinance participation.+
- v. Motives to participate in one or more financial microfinance interventions.≠
- vi. Motives to not participate in one or more financial microfinance interventions.≠^
- vii. Motives to drop out from participation in one or more financial microfinance interventions. ≠*
- viii. The expressed and recorded positive/negative beliefs/attitudes of other household members towards the primary population of interest.
- ix. The expressed and recorded positive or negative beliefs/attitudes of community members towards the primary population of interest.

+Perceived positive benefits/negative consequences were those that participants expressed that they believed would occur as a result of participating in a microfinance programme.

This was distinct from ‘apparent’ positive benefits/negative consequences, which were the actual positive benefits/negative consequences that participants expressed that they had experienced personally as a result of participating in a microfinance programme.

≠ Motives were the explanations expressed by participants as directly leading them to make a decision (for example, to participate, not participate, or drop out from a programme).

^‘Not participating’ was defined as a decision to not continue participation — for example, upon the completion of a payment cycle.

*‘Dropping out’ was defined as withdrawing from participation — for example, before the completion of a payment cycle.

In addition to the above information, the reviewers also applied a standardised quality-assessment instrument to the included studies (described below).

ASSESSING QUALITY OF STUDIES AND WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE FOR THE REVIEW QUESTION

Studies identified as meeting the inclusion criteria for the full review were analysed in depth, and recorded on EPPI-Reviewer.

Studies were appraised for methodological quality prior to inclusion in the review, using standardised critical appraisal instruments from JBI (see Appendix 2.4). Following a pilot of the critical-appraisal instruments on a sample of papers to establish agreement between the reviewers on the criteria to be used to determine the inclusion and exclusion of studies, papers that met the review's inclusion criteria were assessed by two independent reviewers for methodological quality. Any disagreements between assessors were resolved by discussion between the two reviewers and, if necessary, discussion with a third reviewer. Given the difficulty of conducting research within the proposed contexts, the review took an inclusive approach to study selection based on methodological quality, and the reasons for excluding studies are reported in the review.

SYNTHESIS OF EVIDENCE

OVERALL APPROACH TO AND PROCESS OF SYNTHESIS

The scoping literature search was comprehensive and inclusive, and the results of the scoping, in terms of the types of evidence and what directions arise from the evidence, were presented to the Expert Advisory Group, the EPPI-SG and DFID-SARH, to inform consideration of the specific in the light of what the evidence is able to contribute in terms of knowledge and understanding of microfinance.

As described, thematic analysis has been conducted to synthesise qualitative findings reported in included papers. A thematic-synthesis approach was chosen, as this allowed close consideration of the evidence collected through the scoping exercise to inform and structure the synthesis of data in terms of the specific review questions.

The specific methods adapted for the formal conduct and write-up of the review report were employed within the EPPI-Reviewer 4.0 software. The methods and write-up were guided by JBI and EPPI-Centre processes for synthesis and informed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines for good reporting of systematic reviews, as well as the Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research (ENTREQ) statement for enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research (Liberati et al. 2009, Tong et al. 2012). This included the development and approval of an *a priori* protocol, the development of reproducible, transparent search strategies specific to each included database, use of two reviewers to undertake initial selection, independent critical appraisal of each study that met the inclusion criteria, and data extraction based upon a standardised template and software.

SELECTION OF PAPERS FOR SYNTHESIS

The following criteria for inclusion/exclusion in the in-depth review were discussed and decided on with DFID-SARH, the EPPI-SG and the Expert Advisory Group, based upon the results of the scoping exercise. Papers were included in the in-depth review if they:

- qualitatively investigated people's experiences of their involvement in the receipt of microfinance programmes in terms of positive benefits/negative consequences;
- qualitatively investigated people's motivations to participate/not participate/drop out of microfinance programmes;
- qualitatively investigated other household or community members' beliefs and attitudes towards people who participated in microfinance programmes; and
- reported upon data collected in a South Asia context.

PROCESS USED TO COMBINE/SYNTHESISE DATA

The data were synthesised to bring together the papers that answered the review questions and that met the quality criteria relating to appropriateness and methodology. Once the formal systematic review question was finalised and agreed upon, the PICO-based systematic review was undertaken using a thematic-synthesis approach. Two reviewers read and re-read study findings and applied codes to capture the content of the data. The coded data were then grouped and organised further into higher-order categories and themes in accordance with the phenomena of interest of this review. These themes have been used to answer our specific review questions and to develop conclusions regarding the way people have experienced microfinance programmes. Relevant features of the extracted data and source papers have been considered, such as differences in microfinance interventions, participants and their contexts.

It was unnecessary to contact the study authors for missing data. It was deemed inappropriate to attempt to replace missing data, as would be the case for a quantitative meta-analysis.

CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING IMPORTANT REVIEW RESULTS

On completion of the synthesis, the review team met to discuss their findings, as well as the implications for policy, practice and research.

The initial conclusions and proposed implications were circulated to the team's network of review users (see 2.1 above) for their input. Amendments have been made in the light of feedback received. This allowed consideration of wider forms of policy and practice knowledge and provided an opportunity for researchers to inform the team of any new relevant research published since the search was conducted.

The completed draft review was also sent for formal peer review to DFID-SARH and the two peer reviewers.

3. IDENTIFYING AND DESCRIBING STUDIES: RESULTS

3.1 STUDIES INCLUDED FROM SEARCHING AND SCREENING

IDENTIFICATION OF POTENTIAL STUDIES: SEARCH STRATEGY

The initial scoping review included a search to locate all the available evidence that fitted the inclusion criteria. The search for papers was undertaken over late December 2014 and early January 2015. The scoping search was conducted across a number of databases using key words and terms defined in the protocol, established through a review of extant literature, and in discussion with the funding agency (see Appendix 2.1). Relevant journals published in South Asia, including *Economic and Political Weekly* in India, were screened, along with relevant studies also sought via personal contacts of the review team, as well as through direct requests to key informants (see Appendix 2.1). The reference lists of the work of review papers by key authors were scanned for relevant studies (see Appendix 2.1).

The search was date-limited to papers published since January 1990, as this commonly marks the period when MFIs burgeoned and publication of peer-reviewed articles on the topic significantly increased (Brau and Woller 2004). The initial keywords and search terms are reported in Appendix 2.1. When determining which papers to retrieve, the following limits were explicitly applied: English language papers published since 1990, while papers published since 1990 in Modern Standard Hindi would also be retrieved to be collated (but not translated, appraised, extracted or synthesised). The PRISMA flow diagram reflecting the results of the search is presented below, in Figure 1.

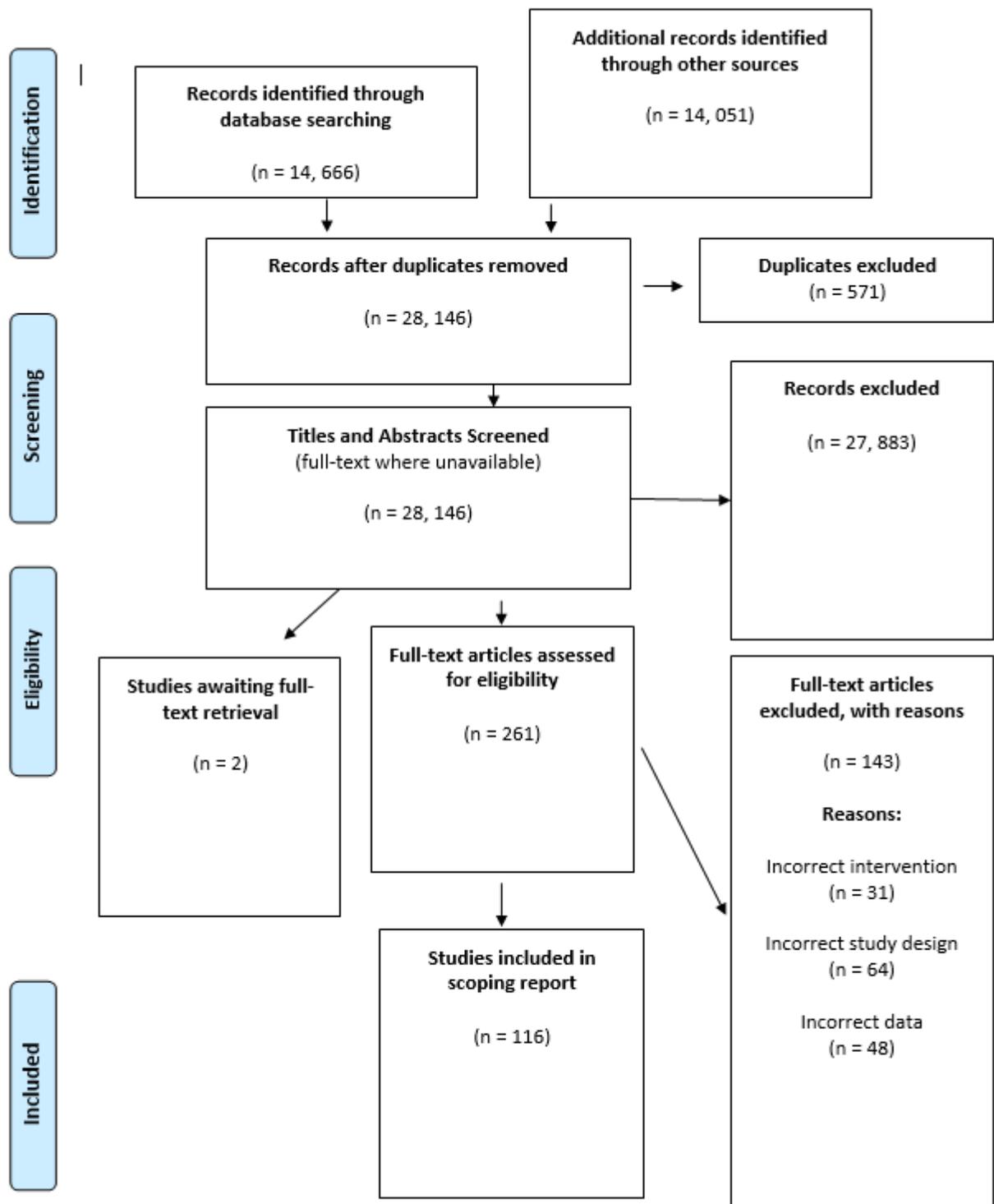


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of papers sought and included in the scoping report (Moher et al. 2009)

SCREENING STUDIES: APPLYING INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Initial screening was by title and abstract, where available. In the absence of an abstract, or in the presence of an unclear title/abstract, the full text was sought for screening. Screening was undertaken across the team on completion of searching. Full-text reports were obtained for those papers that appeared to meet the criteria, or where the review team had insufficient information with which to make a clear decision. Papers for screening were coded against the criteria specified in Appendix 2.2. Following feedback and consultation with the EPPI Support Group and the DFID-SARH, it was agreed that further in-depth coding be conducted on the subset of papers that were conducted within the South Asia region, including those conducted across multiple regions, but including evidence from South Asia.

IDENTIFICATION OF RELEVANT STUDIES

The search located 28,717 papers; after the removal of 571 duplicates, 28,146 papers remained for screening of the title and abstract. Where abstracts were unavailable, the full text of the paper was screened. After screening, 261 papers remained for full-text screening, with 27,883 papers excluded. The full text of two papers could not be retrieved for screening. One hundred and forty-three papers were excluded on the basis of full-text screening, with reasons provided as to why each did not meet the inclusion criteria for the present review (see Figure 1). As illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram, 31 papers were excluded as the primary intervention of interest was not a microfinance-type intervention; 64 papers were excluded as the design or methods did not include a description of qualitative methods; and 48 papers were excluded for not reporting any qualitative data, although they were based on relevant interventions, and, on first read, had appeared to fit the inclusion criteria.

Although the protocol specified that papers in Hindi would be included in an appendix, no papers that met the inclusion criteria and were published in Hindi were located. The publication dates for identified papers ranged from 1994 to 2015, with the largest group published between 2010 and 2015 ($n = 67$). Of the included papers, six were part of larger research programmes (Ashraf Ali 2014, Guerin 2014, Hargreaves et al. 2010, Jahiruddin et al. 2011, Rao et al. 2011 and Segers et al. 2010). The majority of papers appeared to be reports of 'stand-alone' studies that did not form part of a larger research programme. At the end of the process, 118 papers were identified for inclusion in the scoping review report.

Following consultation with the funding organisation, the EPPI-SG, and the Expert Advisory Group, it was agreed to limit the full review to only studies that had been conducted in South Asia. The papers were further screened in relation to whether or not they contained qualitative evidence to answer the specific review questions of the full systematic review (see Section 1.6).

One hundred and sixteen papers were assessed for eligibility for inclusion in the full systematic review. Of the 116 papers, 67 were excluded, as they did not contain evidence from studies conducted in South Asia, 26 did not include qualitative methods of data collection, analysis or both, two papers did not contain relevant data in relation to the specific systematic review

question, and one study was not eligible in terms of the type of study it reported, as it concerned the promotion/uptake of microfinance products (Tounytsky 2006). Figure 2 summarises the flow of papers through from the results of the scoping review to the full systematic review, and provides a breakdown of the exclusion criteria at full-text stage.

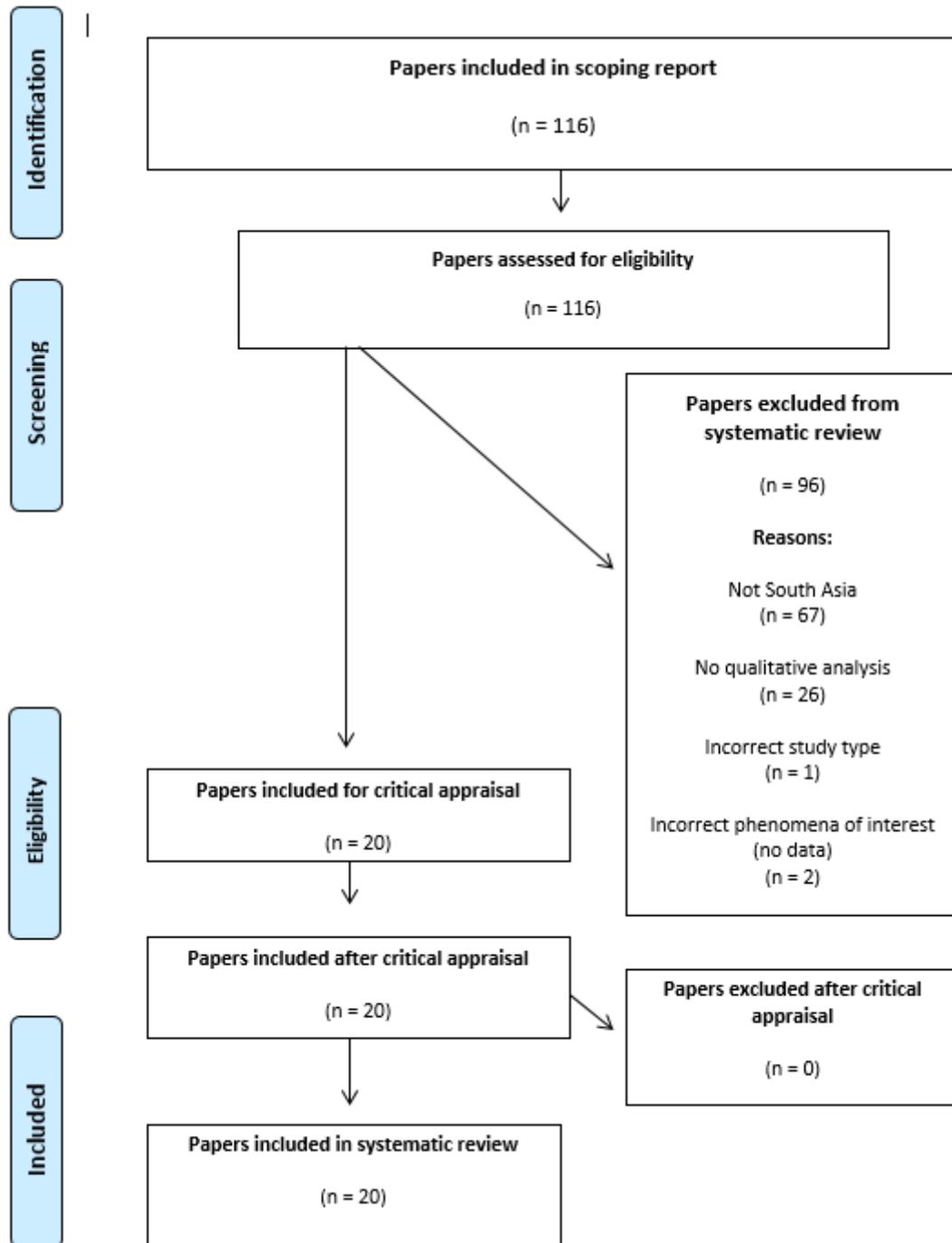


Figure 2: PRISMA flow diagram of papers included in the full review report from the scoping report (Moher et al. 2009)

3.2 BROAD CHARACTERISTICS FROM INCLUDED STUDIES

We included 20 papers, published between 1996 and 2014, that contained qualitative data regarding people's experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits/negative consequences of participating in a microfinance programme, people's motivations to participate, not participate, or drop out of existing microfinance programmes, and/or the beliefs and attitudes of other members of the households and community towards participants in microfinance programmes. The papers have been coded with a set of keywords (see Appendix 2.3). Two papers (Guerin et al. 2010, 2013) contained identical data and reported upon the same study; these were treated as one study for the purposes of this systematic review. The descriptive information below is based on the data extracted with this tool and provides an outline of selected relevant aspects of the studies included in this systematic review.

Included studies were conducted in Bangladesh (n = 8), India (n = 7) and Afghanistan (n = 2). Almost half of the included studies explicitly stated that they were conducted in rural regions (n = 7). Two included studies reported that they were conducted in urban areas (n = 2), one of which also included a rural site (n = 1).

All of the included studies (n = 19) included microcredit programmes. In around a quarter of the studies (n = 5) microcredit programmes were delivered based on an SHG model. A group-lending model was also used in some studies (n = 4). Microcredit plus, where additional education, skills, and/or training programmes were offered, was used in two studies (n = 2). Microfinance, including specific services such as micro-savings and/or micro-insurance, was reported in one study (n = 1). One study (n = 1) included microcredit and group micro-savings. Green microcredit was delivered in one study (n = 1).

All studies (n = 19) were undertaken with women beneficiaries of microfinance programmes. Of these studies, men (usually husbands, sons, or other male family members) were also included in the population of interest as beneficiaries of microfinance programmes (n = 5). Two studies included adolescent girls and young women beneficiaries (n = 2). Twelve studies (n = 12) also included participants who were not beneficiaries of microfinance programmes, including relatives and household members (n = 7), community members (n = 5) and staff from microfinance programmes (n = 8).

In most studies, the specific methodological approach was unstated by the authors; for example, in some reports (n = 7) the methodological approach was simply described as 'qualitative fieldwork'. The next most common study design was a mixed-methods approach that included both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis (n = 5). In two mixed-methods studies, the specific approach to qualitative-data collection and analysis was stated (as ethnographic fieldwork and DFID's Sustainable Livelihood Framework, respectively) (n = 2). Four studies used ethnographic fieldwork as a methodological approach (n = 4). One study used grounded theory (n = 1), one used community-based oral testimony (n = 1), and one study used feminist methodology (n = 1).

4.1 MOVING FROM IDENTIFYING STUDIES TO IN-DEPTH REVIEW

Section 3 described the findings of the first stage of the review process and provided a brief description of the 19 studies included in the review. This section of the systematic review describes the next stage of the review process and presents further descriptive information about the included studies, their quality, as the findings that were synthesised to answer the review questions.

All 19 relevant studies contained qualitative data regarding beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits/negative consequences of participating in microfinance programmes. This data were synthesised to answer the primary review question:

What are beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits/negative consequences of participating in microfinance programmes?

Eleven of the 19 studies also contained qualitative data that could be synthesised to answer the following question:

What are people's motivations for deciding to participate/not participate or drop out of a microfinance programme?

Five of the 19 studies also contained qualitative data that could be synthesised to answer the following question:

What are the beliefs and attitudes of other household and community members towards microfinance-programme participants?

Below, the included papers are described in further detail. Information is provided about the types of microfinance programmes found, where studies were conducted, who the participants were, and how the studies were conducted.

4.2 FURTHER DETAILS OF STUDIES INCLUDED IN THE IN-DEPTH REVIEW

STUDY OBJECTIVES AND CONCLUSIONS

As reported in Section 3, a range of studies were identified that examined qualitative evidence around people's positive and negative experiences of microfinance-programme participation, motivations to participate/not to participate, and other household and community members' views and attitudes towards microfinance beneficiaries. The objectives and conclusions of each study are presented in Appendix 2.5. Based on the conceptual model (outlined in Section 1.2.1), the study objectives and conclusions were extracted, as these details were pertinent to the identification of the phenomena of interest from the included studies:

Study objectives: What did the study author(s) seek to examine, explore or describe in their study?

Conclusions: What conclusions did the study author(s) draw from their analysis of the qualitative evidence collected by the study?

TYPE AND APPROACH OF INTERVENTIONS

As reported in Section 3, a range of microfinance programmes were represented in the included literature. They are grouped and described in Appendix 2.6. Based on the conceptual model (outlined in Section 1.2.1), a number of specific details regarding the microfinance programmes were extracted:

Type of microfinance programme: Was the programme microcredit, microcredit-plus, micro-savings, micro-leasing, micro-insurance or money-transfer?

Provider: What kind of organisation provided the microfinance programme/s?

Country: Which country(ies) was the programme delivered in?

Region/district: Which region(s) district(s) was the programme delivered in?

Setting: Which setting was the programme delivered in (region/district, urban, rural, both, unspecified)?

TYPES OF PARTICIPANTS IN MICROFINANCE PROGRAMMES

As reported in Section 3, microfinance programmes provide services to a range of beneficiaries. They are grouped and described in Appendix 2.7. Based on the conceptual model (outlined in Section 1.2.1), a number of specific details regarding microfinance-programme beneficiaries were extracted:

Population size: What were the sample sizes of the populations in each study?

Gender: Did the study include men, women, or beneficiaries of both genders in their population of interest?

Income/poverty level: What was the income/poverty level of the beneficiaries included in the study?

Age: What were the average ages/age ranges of the beneficiaries included in the study?

Secondary population: Was a secondary population (household or community members) included in the study?

IDENTIFICATION OF PARTICIPANTS AND COLLECTION OF DATA

As reported in Section 3, studies of participants' experiences of microfinance programmes could use a range of approaches to identify, recruit and collect data from participants. They are grouped and described in Appendix 2.8. Based on the conceptual model (outlined in Section 1.2.1), a number of specific details regarding how studies identified their population of interest and collected data from them were extracted:

Identification of population: How did authors identify their population of interest in each study?

Identification of participants: How did study authors identify/recruit study participants from their population of interest?

Collection methods/tools: How did study authors collect qualitative data from participants and which tools/approaches were used?

Data-analysis method/approach: Which methods or approaches were used by study authors to analyse the qualitative data gathered from participants?

Location data collected: Where was qualitative data collected from participants?

Who collected data: Who collected qualitative data from participants?

4.3 QUALITY AND RELEVANCE OF STUDIES

All included papers were appraised for methodological quality prior to inclusion in the review, using a standardised critical-appraisal instrument from JBI (see Appendix 2.4). The critical-appraisal instrument was piloted on a sample of papers to establish agreement between the reviewers on the criteria to be used to determine the inclusion and exclusion of papers. Any disagreements between assessors were resolved by discussion between the two reviewers. When necessary, discussion with a third reviewer was used to resolve disagreements. Given the difficulty of conducting research within the proposed contexts, the review took an inclusive approach to selection, based on methodological quality; no papers were excluded on the basis of methodological appraisal. The results of the critical appraisal of each paper are presented in Appendix 2.9 and Table 1, below. The included papers represent the best available qualitative evidence that was identified and met the inclusion criteria of the present systematic review.

Table 1: The results of the critical appraisal

Study	Critical appraisal criteria met (out of 10)
Ahmed 2008	9
Ashraf Ali 2014	9
Aslanbeigui et al. 2010	3
Cons and Paprocki 2010	6
Garikipati 2013	7
Guerin et al. 2010	6
Jones et al. 2007	2
Joseph 2005	2
Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006	2
Khan 2014	10
Krenz et al. 2014	9
Lyby 2006	2
Ray-Bennett 2010	5
Sanyal 2009	3
Schuler et al. 1996	9
Shanzaz and Karim 2008	0
Shetty 2010	1
Uddin 2012	8
Zand 2011	4

4.4 BENEFICIARIES' EXPERIENCES OF THE PERCEIVED OR APPARENT BENEFITS/NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF PARTICIPATING IN MICROFINANCE PROGRAMMES

Nineteen studies (20 papers) of low-to-high quality investigating microfinance programmes in South Asia collected qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits /negative consequences of participating in microfinance programmes. The findings categorised as 'apparent' and 'perceived' were collated and reported on in the results below, where necessary. Qualitative analysis of the findings of each study resulted in two main phenomena of interest:

- (i) Positive experiences of the benefits of participating in microfinance programmes.
- (ii) Negative experiences of the consequences of participating in microfinance programmes.

This section describes beneficiaries' experiences of each of these two phenomena of interest, in turn. Appendix 2.10 contains a table that shows which studies contributed findings to these phenomena of interest, as well as their themes and categories. Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme and category.

BENEFICIARIES' EXPERIENCES OF THE PERCEIVED OR APPARENT BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN MICROFINANCE PROGRAMMES

Seventeen studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes. These findings have been grouped into three themes. These themes represent beneficiaries' experiences of:

- (i) Financial and economic benefits.
- (ii) Empowerment of women.
- (iii) Positive social and personal impact.

Each of these themes contains 17 categories, informed by the results extracted from the included studies. Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme, subtheme and category.

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Eleven studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the apparent or perceived (in two studies: Joseph 2005 and Ray-Bennett 2010) financial and economic benefits of participating in microfinance (Ahmed 2008, Aslanbeigui et al. 2010, Garikipati 2013, Guerin et al. 2010, Khan 2014, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006, Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006, Shetty 2010 and Ray-Bennett 2010). Beneficiaries frequently spoke about the various financial and economic benefits that they had experienced as a result of their participation in microfinance programmes. This afforded an insight into how beneficiaries experienced the success or

otherwise of one of the main aims of microfinance in general: to reduce the poverty levels of participants and their families. The participants in the studies reported having experienced a range of benefits, from the short-term, such as the ability to stabilise family-consumption patterns, to the more long-term and prospective benefits of being able to invest in ongoing income-generating activities, such as personal and family businesses.

SAVINGS, SECURITY AND PLANNING FOR FUTURE COSTS AND CRISES

Six studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes in terms of savings, security and the ability to plan for future costs and potential crises (Ahmed 2008, Garikipati 2013, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006 and Shetty 2010). Four of these studies were conducted in India with women who participated in rural and urban SHGs or a microcredit and group-based savings programme (Garikipati 2013, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014 and Shetty 2010). One study was conducted in rural and urban Afghanistan, with both men and women beneficiaries (Lyby 2006). However, the findings for this theme were solely from the perspective of women. One study was conducted in Bangladesh with female beneficiaries of a Grameen Bank microcredit programme (Ahmed 2008).

Study participants spoke of how their participation in microfinance programmes meant that they were able to save money, improving the financial security of their households (Ahmed 2008, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014 and Shetty 2010). Access to credit services meant that families had greater security against potential crises, such as family emergencies and being obliged to enter exploitative debt relationships with money-lenders, for example. However, without a security net such as insurance, beneficiaries' experiences of poverty may still be negatively affected (Garikipati 2013). Garikipati discusses the problem that, while microcredit could mean that beneficiaries were able to avoid or mitigate potential catastrophes, when women's loans were funnelled into meeting urgent household expenses, the capacity of microcredit as a development tool was lost, as one woman remarked:

When we formed Anapurna (the name of the SHG), we were full of hope. But now we are dashed; we have nothing to look forward to except the misery of loan repayments. My loan came when part of our crops had failed due to the drought, and there was nothing to be done, other than use it to buy food for the children. What choice did I have? (Garikipati 2013, s 66)

Microcredit loans appeared to be experienced as bringing a cumulative benefit; while loans might first be used to stabilise consumption, repair household assets, and pay off debt, increased access to loans — especially in combination with savings — reduced household vulnerability and contributed to more long-term economic stability (Krenz et al. 2014).

Savings had both functional and symbolic value for women, and some spoke of the importance of feeling that the money was their own. The courage women gained from knowing that they had access to their own money in the event of a crisis appeared to have a powerful impact upon them.

It's my money. It's not the bank's money, the moneylender's money, the pawnbroker's money. Now, if I need money in a hurry, I can get it the same day... I don't have to worry; it gives me peace of mind.' (Shetty 2010, p 376)

Women who participated in microfinance programmes with savings products in Afghanistan appeared to have more modest experiences of the benefits of being able to save in case of crises (Lyby 2006). Savings were spoken of positively and women felt more comfortable knowing that they were able to reserve some money for future expenses, due to the common tendency for men to have considerable control over household finances.

One study contained qualitative data on women beneficiaries' views regarding the perceived benefits they may experience as a result of participating in a microcredit programme in India (Ray-Bennett 2010). This study discusses how microcredit-programme participation allowed women to recoup losses sustained as a result of natural disaster. Here, access to credit was viewed as a potential avenue for women to redevelop their income after losing livestock to a super-cyclone, for example.

INCOME CONTRIBUTIONS AND INVESTMENT IN INCOME-GENERATING ACTIVITIES

Eight studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes, in terms of improving their ability to increase household income via income-generating activities (Aslanbeigui et al. 2010, Garikipati 2013, Joseph 2005, Khan 2014, Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006 and Shetty 2010). Four of these studies were conducted in India with women who participated in rural and urban SHGs or a group-based micro-credit and savings programme (Garikipati 2013, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014 and Shetty 2010). One study was conducted with girls and young women who received savings and credit services from a programme run by a trade-union-run cooperative bank (SEWA) in India (Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006). Two studies were conducted in Bangladesh; one with women beneficiaries of a Grameen Bank microcredit programme (Aslanbeigui et al. 2010), and one with men and women beneficiaries of a 'green microfinance' programme (Khan 2014). One study was conducted in rural and urban Afghanistan, with both men and women beneficiaries (Lyby 2006).

Beneficiaries spoke of how their participation in microfinance programmes benefited them in terms of an increased ability to generate income and how they used their loans to invest in their own, existing businesses in the form of equipment, land and materials, as well as how they occasionally used credit to invest in new business ventures (Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006, Khan 2014, Krenz et al. 2014). Beneficiaries also spoke of the perceived benefits of participation, suggesting that they had developed an increased awareness of, and assurance regarding, the range of new possibilities open for them to succeed in future endeavours (Krenz et al. 2014).

As well as experiencing benefits from microfinance participation in the form of investment in income-generating activities, beneficiaries also used loans to improve their household finances more generally: from stabilising income and consumption and repaying existing

debts, to meeting everyday expenses, household repairs, education materials for children, and even travel costs.

A beneficiary of a green microfinance programme, who had been a member of Grameen Bank many years previously, spoke of how participation had allowed her to invest in small-scale organic agriculture, as well as developing related skills (Khan 2014). While the work was hard and the hours long, the incentives in the form of the generally larger loans provided by the green microfinance programme meant that the benefit to her household's livelihood made the experience a positive one for her.

Using loans to invest in existing household businesses, as opposed to an income-generating activity owned or operated by the beneficiaries themselves, was a perceived benefit of participation. Beneficiaries described how they did not always use their loans for their own income-generating activities; other family members frequently appropriated loans from women loanees. However, women also sometimes gave up their loans to other family members willingly, in order for the family members to invest in other household businesses (Garikipati 2013).

My husband and father-in-law have a (local) business. I have given them the money. They know how to do business and (know) money matters ... What will I do with the money—if I do some business and fail, who will give money (for the repayments)?
(Garikipati 2013, s 65)

While giving up the loan may appear to demonstrate a perceived lack of confidence and skill on the part of the beneficiary — or even coercion or domination on the part of other family members — the author explains that beneficiaries perceived a benefit to their own status as a result of allowing their loans to be leveraged by other family members (Garikipati 2013).

ASSET REPAIR AND ACCUMULATION

Four studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes, in terms of improving their ability to accumulate or improve non-productive household assets (Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006 and Shetty 2010). Three of these studies (Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014 and Shetty 2010) were conducted in India with women who participated in rural and urban SHGs, or a group-based microcredit and savings programme. One study was conducted in rural and urban Afghanistan, with both male and female beneficiaries (Lyby 2006).

Beneficiaries told of how they had used loans provided by microfinance programmes to fund the purchase of common household assets, such as radios or televisions (Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006 and Shetty 2010). Accumulation of assets, while not useful in terms of income generation, is important to people in terms of how their household is regarded by other community members (Joseph 2005). Beneficiaries enjoyed the increased respect and status they had acquired as a result of accumulating and improving household assets, and strove to maintain this outward image of success.

I take extreme care now in the selection of my dress and gold ornaments before I go anywhere. (Joseph 2005, pp 144–145)

While purchase of a brand new home appeared to be out of reach for beneficiaries (it was reported, however, that one beneficiary purchased land for a new house with their loan), the enhanced ability to make repairs or improvements to existing homes were frequently cited as benefits (Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006 and Shetty 2010). Indeed, as explained in one study (Joseph 2005), the condition of one's house and assets can be an important sign of empowerment in Indian society. Asset purchase and home construction were also cited by beneficiaries when discussing the perceived benefits of microfinance-programme participation (Joseph 2005).

More practical assets were also purchased by beneficiaries, including improved water, sanitation and electrical amenities (Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014). While this may improve the status of the household, such assets were also thought of as necessary by beneficiaries, who admitted to sometimes having lied about the stated use of loans.

I told them that I have some personal loans to repay ... I did not tell them that it is for the water line. But then, instead of paying the debt, I bought a water line because you cannot live without water, right!? For me, the best thing was that I could buy a water line/tap using the money I borrowed from Annapurna. Water is so necessary and we did not have any at home. We had to go far away to fill our buckets with water for daily use. Now, I have a water tap near my house, thanks to Annapurna. (Krenz et al. 2014, p 318)

Indeed, improvements to basic amenities may lead to positive knock-on effects for beneficiaries, who gain access to clean, accessible drinking water and sanitation.

LOWER INTEREST RATES AND REDUCED RELIANCE ON MONEY LENDERS

Two studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes in terms of access to lower interest rates and reducing their reliance on money lenders (Khan 2014, Shetty 2010). One study was conducted in Chennai, India, with women who participated in urban group-based microcredit and savings programmes (Shetty 2010). The other study was conducted across multiple districts in Bangladesh with men and women beneficiaries of a green microfinance programme (Khan 2014).

Beneficiaries in both India and Bangladesh described how their participation in microfinance programmes (both savings and loan services) meant that they were less reliant upon local money lenders, which also included loans from pawnbrokers, relatives and employers (Khan 2014, Shetty 2010).

It's the only place where we can get money for our businesses, other than the local money lender and pawnbroker. They charge interest of a rupee for every ten rupees you borrow, every month. Here, they tell you exactly how much you have to pay and

you pay monthly, Rs. 45 the first month, then 42, 40, and so on, and, at the end of ten months, you are all done. They are not out to get your money or take away your things. (Shetty 2010, p 372).

Microfinance participation could also mean avoiding demeaning debt relationships that subordinate beneficiaries to other community members. Money lenders not only charge a much greater interest rate (sometimes up to 120%), they may also be more risky for women, as they may forcibly take a loan defaulter's belongings. Beyond simply reducing beneficiaries' reliance on expensive sources of credit, beneficiaries also found money lenders to be exploitative and dependence on them humiliating (Shetty 2010). By being able to avoid this kind of relationship due to the availability of microfinance-operated loans and savings products, beneficiaries experienced increased self-respect and esteem (Shetty 2010).

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Fifteen studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the apparent or perceived benefits of participating in microfinance programmes in terms of their ability to empower women (Aslanbeigui et al. 2010, Ahmed 2008, Garikipati, 2013, Guerin et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006, Ray-Bennett 2010, Sanya, 2009, Shahnaz and Karim 2008, Shetty 2010, Schuler et al. 1996, Uddin 2014 and Zand 2011). Beneficiaries in each of these studies were almost always exclusively women; as women are the primary beneficiaries of most microfinance programmes, this is not surprising. Women's empowerment in these studies was closely tied to the financial and economic benefits described above, and included experiences such as increased ability to participate in financial decision making, as well as gaining greater status and respect in the household and community as a result of being able to contribute to the household's income and livelihood. Other benefits to women in terms of their empowerment were also experienced, such as improved independence and mobility and even greater protection from domestic violence. Social support and contact with other women outside of regular kinship networks was also experienced as a great benefit to women, as was microfinance's ability to empower adolescent girls. Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme, subtheme and category.

IMPROVED MOBILITY AND INDEPENDENCE

Eight studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes, in terms of improving the mobility and independence of women (Ahmed 2008, Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005, Lyby 2006, Sanyal 2014, Shetty 2010, Schuler et al. 1996 and Zand 2011). Four studies were conducted in India with women who participated in urban and rural SHGs and group-based micro-credit and savings programmes (Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005, Sanyal 2009 and Shetty 2010). Two studies were conducted in rural and urban Afghanistan, with both male and female beneficiaries of a number of different microfinance programmes (Lyby 2006 and Zand 2011). Two studies were carried out in three separate districts in Bangladesh with female

beneficiaries of Grameen Bank and BRAC microcredit programmes (Ahmed 2008, Schuler et al. 1996).

Beneficiaries from all countries and regions spoke of how their participation in microfinance programmes had led to great changes in their physical mobility and independence outside the home, in their communities. While the increase in mobility and independence was not equal, or, indeed, always apparent, many beneficiaries spoke in positive ways about the changes that microfinance participation had facilitated.

We no longer depend upon men for money. We consult, but we can spend on our own, also. Now, we are seen as those who save, have self-confidence, solve problems, are mobile, have contact with the outside world, know a lot of information, and get loans for the benefit of the family. (Joseph 2005, p 150)

In one study, it was found that lower-caste women tended to emphasise the improvements to their physical mobility more than higher-caste women, due to the greater importance placed on the facilitation of access to credit that the SHG microcredit programme had provided (Jones et al. 2007), as noted by a rural development officer from Annapurna:

Previously, women did not leave their houses and they were never seen in the banks either, but, nowadays, after the establishment of the SHGs, they are going to banks, and know about their entitlements. They are also able to go to any office and deal with the forms, and they don't bring their husbands along now. They are able to go anywhere on their own and get the work done. (Jones et al. 2007, pp 16–17)

Lower-caste women typically face more constraints upon their mobility and independence than higher-caste women, so this improvement was profound for them. Men, in one study conducted in Afghanistan, reported a small increase in the mobility of women as a result of microfinance participation; however, women in the same study noted little change, albeit due to the perception that they were already fairly mobile and independent before joining a programme.

Participation appeared to improve mobility and independence, at least to some extent, by necessitating that female beneficiaries leave their homes and participate in activities such as going to banks, group meetings, and other community spaces such as market places, without men or other family members to accompany them. Even having the opportunity to meet and spend time with other people outside of the home increased beneficiaries' social circles and relationships (Lyby 2006, Sanyal 2009). This increased need — and also the acceptance of the need — to move beyond the traditional household milieu appeared to be a very positive experience for some women, who reported improvement in their levels of self-confidence.

I was least interested about the type and the kind of the dress I wore before joining the group. I was totally confined either to my house or to my village and the type and the kind of dress and gold in the forms of necklaces, nose-rings, and earrings I wore meant nothing for me, as my outside mobility was restricted to a great extent. Now, they have become very important, as there is tremendous increase in my outside

mobility. I take extreme care now in the selection of my dress and gold ornaments before I go anywhere. (Joseph 2005, p 144)

This kind of improvement in self-confidence and awareness of outward appearances of success and status in the community seemed to be related to length of participation; the longer women participated in programmes, the higher their confidence in themselves and their independence (Joseph 2005). Group membership and the ability to network with others with whom they may otherwise have had little contact also led to a greater sense of independence outside of the family, as well as feelings of psychological well-being (Sanyal 2009).

While opposition to improvements to women's mobility and independence did exist, as will be discussed in the section about the negative experiences of microfinance-programme participation, some household members were also found to be extremely supportive and encouraging.

My husband gives me more value since my membership in the group and my income. I know, because now he hands all his earnings to me. If I had not become a member in the group, not gone to the meeting, not taken a loan, not leant the work, I would not get the value I have now, I would have to continue to ask my husband for everything in total dependency. My husband knows I am very busy, so he washes our clothes and dishes and cooks for us and I think it is because I am helping him financially. (Joseph 2005, p 151)

Independence can also bring a range of indirect social benefits for the household more broadly, through women's participation in microfinance programmes, as highlighted by one study conducted in Afghanistan (Zand 2011). By exercising independent financial decision making, one woman used her loans to fund the family business; this not only helped her household increase its income-earning potential, but also meant that she was now not financially dependent on her in-laws, which prevented disputes with her sisters-in-law. In this way, women's increasing independence can be seen to contribute to social harmony and peace among family members.

IMPROVED FINANCIAL, BUSINESS, VOCATIONAL AND SOCIAL SKILLS

Seven studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes in terms of improving the financial, business and social skills of women (Ahmed 2008, Garikipati 2013, Guerin et al. 2010, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014, Shetty 2010 and Zand 2011). Five studies were conducted in India with women who participated in urban and rural SHGs, credit-plus and group-based micro-credit and savings programmes (Garikipati 2013, Guerin et al. 2010, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014 and Shetty 2010). One study was conducted in a village in Kabul, Afghanistan, with female beneficiaries of microfinance programmes based on individual and group-lending models (Zand 2011). One study was conducted in Satkhira district in Bangladesh with female beneficiaries of a Grameen Bank microcredit programme (Ahmed 2008).

While women may learn practical financial, business and social skills by having to manage loans, repayments, income-generating ventures, and by attending meetings (Zand 2011), teaching female beneficiaries financial, business and vocational skills was an element of a number of microfinance programmes. Credit-plus programmes, especially, emphasise these added services to their beneficiaries (Krenz et al. 2014, Shetty 2010). Through training programmes, women gained greater knowledge and awareness of banks, their policies and the risks of using local money lenders (Shetty 2010). While not all women reported significant changes in their behaviours (Shetty 2010), many women who began with little skill in managing money or businesses reported that the development of skills was invaluable to them.

The biggest change in my life is that in the beginning I did not have a penny in my savings account but now with God's grace I have been able to save 60,000 rupees. That has also made me a more confident person. I do not waste any money, I pay my dues on time, I save a little bit out of my income and I am capable of providing my family good food and education. In the future I plan to continue my hard work and build my own house one day. (Krenz et al. 2014, p 320)

As with the women described above, who had spoken of how improved mobility had led to increased feelings of self-confidence and worth, women who experienced improved business, financial and social skills also appeared to feel an enhanced degree of confidence.

I have changed, everyone around me has changed. We are now business-women. We have to deal with all sorts of people in our fertilizer business. At first, people only saw us as women — but now they are used to us. They know we run a good business — they respect us for this. My son wants to start a business of his own. He comes to me for advice. (Garikipati 2013, s 65)

As the above quote from one participant demonstrates, women's skills are recognised and appreciated by other household and community members. This indicates that increased skills, confidence and respect may be intimately tied up with improved social standing and respect from other family and community members.

Confidence and self-esteem, as aided by developing practical business and financial skills, were also linked to women feeling that they were able to meaningfully contribute economically to their households. Despite increased workloads due to participation, beneficiaries affirmed that they felt pride and satisfaction in the fact that their skills meant that they were able to help their families (Joseph 2005).

Women did not necessarily have to have complete control over loans in order to experience benefits in terms of their increased ability to negotiate in financial matters (Guerin et al. 2010). Even when loans were used by husbands or other family members, as opposed to the female beneficiaries themselves, the skills gained through programme participation may still be noted by participants. When women did use loans gained through microfinance, even learning the

practical skills brought about by engaging in business negotiations with customers was a positive experience.

The early days I had started tailoring, women gave me about 20 to 50 Afs for a piece and I felt shy to ask them for more money. I have gained more courage and I tell them, 'you should pay 100 or 200 Afs for the dress!' (Zand 2011, p 37)

GREATER INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION MAKING

Five studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes, in terms of improving women's involvement in household decision making (Guerin et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014 and Lyby 2006). Four studies were conducted in India with women who participated in urban and rural SHGs, and credit plus micro-credit and savings programmes (Guerin et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005 and Krenz et al. 2014). One study was conducted in rural and urban Afghanistan (a village in Qarabagh district, Kabul), with both male and female beneficiaries of a number of different microfinance programmes that provided services such as loans, savings and micro-insurance (Lyby 2006).

Decision making is a theme that is very closely tied to the above theme of financial, business, vocational and social skills, as it appears that, by gaining skills in these areas, women improve both in terms of confidence and the ability to participate in household decision making, and are more readily acknowledged by other household members around them as being able to participate. Independence is also a theme that is closely linked to decision making. Decision making, as a specific theme and indicator of women's empowerment, is important, however, as many female beneficiaries singled out this particular experience of improvement in their lives as a benefit of microfinance participation (Joseph 2005). Decision making included decisions at individual level (such as whom to vote for in local elections), household level (such as decisions about what to spend money on or about child-raising) and business level (such as how to allocate money to income-generating activities).

Even when the woman's loan was appropriated by other family members, as highlighted above, merely being the initial recipient of the loan appears to mean that women were able to exercise some level of decision making in respect of household finances, an improvement on the prior situation (Guerin et al. 2010).

Two years ago my husband and I decided to leave the joint family. My mother-in-law never accepted our decision. She was always saying: you are going to lose everything. You won't be able to do anything. I managed to borrow more than 60,000 rupees for my husband's business [from the SHG but also from other sources]. I had to demonstrate the strength of my husband and my own strength to my in-laws. Now they cannot say anything. (Guerin et al. 2010, p 9)

In the above case, while the loan was used for the husband's business, the female beneficiary's decision to use her loan to fund the business also represented a way of standing up to her in-laws. Microfinance-programme participation was given as the reason why this kind of strategic

decision making was possible. While husbands were often reported to have the final say on many financial and business matters — and they sometimes reversed their wives' decisions — participation in decision making was viewed as a significant change for many women.

In another study, beneficiaries' improved capacity as decision makers was evident in the experiences of women who spoke about how they had become able to make decisions in terms of their children's education, household-consumption issues, access to health services, and choice of marriage partners (Jones et al. 2007). A number of women in this study reported that, prior to participation in the programme, they had little involvement in many decisions affecting their lives. Upon joining the programme, many women were now much more involved in decision making at individual, household and business levels.

Improvements in beneficiaries' involvement in decision making allowed women greater control over household resources, which could lead to more equal and egalitarian household relationships. I can make decisions about my children and my work. However, all important decisions are taken by my husband, but we consult each other before making any big decision. We never label the money we earn as my money or his money. It is our money. Otherwise, our relationship could get affected. He doesn't expect me to keep a record of every penny that he spends and so I should not expect the same thing from his as well. If I lose my job one day then he will be the one to help me out. (Krenz et al. 2014, p 321)

Women's improved participation in decision making meant that relationships within the household were less strained. The same study noted that, when women were less dependent upon their husbands' potentially fluctuating wages, they were also less vulnerable to domestic abuse and violence (Krenz et al. 2014). Beneficiaries' experiences of being able to improve their financial situation appeared to demonstrate a pattern where increased financial assets led to less poverty-related stress and vulnerability, and resulted in healthier relationships and more cooperative decision making (Krenz et al. 2014).

The study conducted in Afghanistan also showed improvements in women's participation in decision making. However, while around two thirds of beneficiaries reported that their involvement in household decision making had increased, their testimonials reflected that (similar to many women in the studies conducted in India), men still often had the last word when it came to decisions.

There is definitely an increase in the overall level of respect women get within the household, since the men realize that they have to go through the women to get to the money.

... (B)ecause women participate in the decisions on how to spend money. They cannot overrule their husband's decisions completely but at least they have begun to participate in the decision making process.

I make the household decisions. After becoming unemployed my husband made no efforts to find a job or contribute towards the household economy. I made all the efforts, I earn all the money and I make all the decisions now. (Lyby 2006, p 37)

Overall, even when women's participation in decision making appeared minor, improvements were quite regularly noted by participants.

REDUCED DOMESTIC ABUSE AND VIOLENCE

Three studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences related to reduced abuse and violence from husbands as apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes (Ahmed 2008, Sanyal 2009 and Schuler et al. 1996). Two studies were conducted in Bangladesh with women beneficiaries of a Grameen Bank microcredit programme in Satkhira district (Ahmed 2008) and with village members from six villages in two regions where beneficiaries participated in Grameen Bank and BRAC programmes (Schuler et al. 1996). One study was conducted in rural India (West Bengal) with female members of a group-lending programme (Sanyal 2009).

As will be discussed later, female beneficiaries may face violence and abuse from husbands and other family or community members, as a result of their participation in microfinance programmes. However, some studies also reported women's experiences of reduced levels of violence being perpetrated against them as a result of participating. Microfinance can often mean changes to the gender roles of female beneficiaries, which, unsurprisingly, have an impact upon their relationships with men, especially their husbands, who, traditionally, are the heads of the household and the chief breadwinners. Even when abuse and violence appeared to be reduced or avoided as a result of participation in microfinance programmes, however, women's explanations of their experiences appeared to be somewhat ambiguously. Indeed, the findings show how reduced or improved violence against women does not appear to be a simple outcome of participation.

My husband used to beat me up and take my money. Now he can beat me a thousand times and I won't give him my money. I tell him, 'you had better not beat me too much I can live without you!' (Schuler et al. 1996, p 1,739)

In this example, it appears that participation may have led to an increase in violence, as well as improved confidence in the face of a continual physical threat.

Another study describes how domestic violence stopped after the woman joined a microfinance programme. This participant was described as highly capable and outspoken, and she spoke to the researchers about how male neighbours used to encourage her husband to beat her, in order to 'keep her in her place'. Participation in the Grameen Bank women's group not only helped her earn money, but meant that she also gained the confidence to confront the men and stop the beatings (Ahmed 2008).

In one study, female beneficiaries of two group-lending programmes experienced a number of benefits in terms of their ability to participate in collective actions in their community

(Sanyal 2009). These benefits included being able to mobilise collectively to protect both group members and non-group members against domestic violence perpetrated by husbands. In one case described in the study, a number of beneficiary groups intervened to save a non-member, who was a victim of chronic domestic violence, from committing suicide. Microfinance groups mobilised to collect donations to contribute to the woman's medical treatment (Sanyal 2009). From the same study, another woman described her experience of feeling safer from abuse due to participation in a microfinance group.

He plucked out a bamboo pole from the fence and started beating me. All the neighbours watched but never uttered a word. They silently enjoyed watching me being beaten; even my mother-in-law sat there watching... I can't express in words how much I've suffered. I don't think things would've gone as far if the group had existed at the time. (Sanyal 2009, p 542)

IMPROVED SOCIAL AND HOUSEHOLD STATUS AND RESPECT

Seven studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences in relation to gaining improved respect and status within the household and community as an apparent benefit of participating in microfinance programmes (Aslanbeigui et al. 2010, Guerin et al. 2010, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006, Schuler et al. 1996 and Zand 2011). Three studies were conducted in India with women who participated in urban and rural SHGs, and credit plus micro-credit and savings programmes (Guerin et al. 2010, Joseph 2005 and Krenz et al. 2014). Two studies were conducted in Bangladesh, one with female beneficiaries of the Grameen Bank in three districts (Manikgonj, Dhaka and Gazipur) (Aslanbeigui et al. 2010), and the other with members from six villages in two regions where beneficiaries participated in Grameen Bank and BRAC programmes (Schuler et al. 1996). Two studies were conducted in rural and urban Afghanistan (Herat, Balkh, Bamyan and Kabul provinces), with both male and female beneficiaries of a number of different microfinance programmes that provided services such as loans, savings and micro-insurance (Lyby 2006, Zand 2011).

Participants in each of the studies shared with researcher's stories of how, as beneficiaries of microfinance programmes, they had experienced improvements in their personal and household status, both in relation to their family members and the community. This increase in status appeared to be related to a number of factors, one being directly tied to having an improved income and the ability to use that income for savings and asset accumulation and improvement. This link was evident in the findings discussed earlier (savings, security, and planning for future costs and crises; income contributions and investment in income-generating activities; and asset repair and accumulation). With increased wealth, accumulated over many years of borrowing, the status and respect afforded to beneficiaries by others also appeared to increase, as reported by the beneficiaries themselves.

'Money brings respect.' Selina interprets her former menial position along the same lines. She understood that in order to gain a 'voice' in the household and the village, she needed to acquire earning power. Shy, in want of many things, and reluctant to leave her bari, her earlier economic and social existence was dismal: 'If you don't have

money, there is no respect.’ Because she can take loans, earn money, and invest it, her social standing has advanced considerably. Now people respect her and see her as a leader. As Selina puts it, if she tells ten people to do something, nine will follow her. (Aslanbeigui et al. 2010, p 199)

Clearly, status and respect are also closely linked to women’s empowerment in terms of increased mobility and independence within their communities. Some women even commented that their status in the community had become higher than that of their husbands.

Increased respect from husbands was also important to beneficiaries, who not only enjoyed being less financially and socially dependent, but were also able to contribute to the household’s financial and social situation (Joseph 2005). This increased contribution by female beneficiaries was sometimes rewarded by husbands, who took a more active role around the home and were supportive of their wives’ involvement with microfinance programmes.

Now, I enjoy special respect at home and better mobility. My opinions are sought and respected. I am able to think and act independently. I am able to go wherever I want to go. I get permission from my husband easily go out for various reasons. Now, it is even enough if I just cook the food. My husband eats by himself, and also feeds the children. Sometimes, as we commence cooking, some visitor might come. I ask my husband to complete cooking, and he does without objecting. He understands, cooperates and shares in my work. He washes at least his own clothes if not the children's, and sometimes mine. He reminds me now to go and attend the meeting on time. He has realized that there is benefit in my being member of the group. (Joseph 2005, p 150)

Improved status and respect from husbands also appeared to afford women in Bangladesh some protection against violence and abuse. Violence from husbands against their wives may diminish when women bring home loan money. Even when husbands appropriated their wives’ loans, the acknowledgment that the wife was the source of this benefit improved her position in the house (Schuler et al. 1996). Similar improvements in women’s status within households were also reported in Afghanistan, where, despite the limitations of credit for improving women’s participation in decision making, beneficiaries appeared to have a stronger voice in their households (Zand 2011). Beneficiaries may assist their husbands with their business ventures, and, despite not having direct control over their household’s financial situation, they may acknowledge their own value in the household. Improved status and respect from husbands and other family members made beneficiaries more assertive in voicing concerns and husbands even changed their own behaviour in response (Zand 2011).

I keep and spend the money my husband makes. We both spend a lot on medication. When my husband complains about me spending a lot, I tell him, ‘You have your separate business since I took the loan. We now have money and I can spend that.’ (Zand 2011, p 36)

Increased respect from neighbours, relatives and other community members appeared to reinforce the women's self-esteem and lead to more positive social interactions. Women beneficiaries' improved self-respect, social skills and ability to interact with larger social networks appeared to be closely linked to women's having an increased voice and social standing within household relationships and in the community (Krenz et al. 2014).

Women beneficiaries felt that they were more able to interact comfortably with people in positions of power, which, it has been suggested, may enhance women's social capital and access to resources (Krenz et al. 2014).

Undoubtedly, my capabilities have been enhanced after joining the group: I can conduct meetings, and pass resolutions, I have learnt to work together as a group, I can maintain registers and accounts, I can meet outsiders (even men) without being shy, I can speak boldly, I can take part in any meeting conducted by outsiders, I can visit government officials without fear, I can meet with high officers and interact with them and I can petition regarding village issues. (Joseph 2005, p 154)

As women's statuses improved, and the respect afforded to them grew, they often began to take up leadership roles in the programmes and community. Some women became group leaders and held meetings in their homes, training and providing advice and support to other women in the community (Lyby 2006).

Improved status for beneficiaries also appeared to have an impact upon restrictions imposed by caste. Some beneficiaries reported that they were able to attend programme meetings and other activities, and could sit, talk and eat together with other women, regardless of their caste (Joseph 2005). The researchers pointed out that this attitude shift illustrates a major change in the caste structure in the villages, however small.

GREATER SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND SUPPORT

Nine studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of increased social solidarity and support from other group members as an apparent benefit of participating in microfinance programmes (Guerin et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2007, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006, Ray-Bennett 2010, Sanyal 2009, Shetty 2010, Uddin 2014 and Zand 2011). Six studies were conducted in India with women who participated in urban and rural SHGs, and credit plus micro-credit and savings programmes (Guerin et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2007, Krenz et al. 2014, Ray-Bennett 2010, Sanyal 2009 and Shetty 2010). Two studies were conducted in rural and urban Afghanistan (Herat, Balkh, Bamyan and Kabul provinces), with both men and women beneficiaries of a number of different microfinance programmes that provided services such as loans, savings and micro-insurance (Lyby 2006, Zand 2011). One study was conducted in Bangladesh with women beneficiaries of the Grameen Bank and BRAC, in three villages in the Sylhet district (Uddin 2014).

While the social support and solidarity between members presented in this section was not a guaranteed experience for all women (as we shall see in a subsequent section, some experienced the very opposite), many beneficiaries spoke of how participation in microfinance

programmes led to improvements in their experience of social support and solidarity between members — both within groups, such as members of the same SHG, and sometimes with members of groups from other programmes in the area. Women from each study — especially SHG members — described their personal investment in the continuation of their group. With the enhanced mobility experienced by many members, as described above, SHGs offered members an opportunity to come together and share their experiences during meetings, something which did not previously occur in their everyday lives (Ray-Bennett 2010). Women in the studies, while living in close proximity to one another, were often not a close-knit group before programme participation. It was evident in many studies that, as opposed to tapping into an existing community, microfinance programmes facilitated the creation and maintenance of a new, vibrant and supportive community for the women who participated in them.

By participating in the frequent meetings often required from group members, mutual identification between women was nurtured and strengthened. Women who once would not have come into contact with one another were motivated to offer support to others. This, in effect, led to an expansion of women's social networks and the development of firm non-kinship networks (Sanyal 2009, Shetty 2010 and Uddin 2014). Women who were able to participate in regular group meetings and training sessions, such as those provided by credit-plus programmes, were able to benefit from the opportunity to cross household and neighbourhood boundaries, which had been difficult previously.

Before I didn't know anyone; we never used to go to each other's houses. But now, through the group I can get to know many more people... I like it that now the 20 of us can get together in one place and discuss different things. If we didn't have this group, then we'd have to spend this time at home. (Sanyal 2009, p 544)

Members described how, when they were able to participate frequently in personal interaction with other women, common problems could be discussed and strategies to tackle them formulated. Through these experiences, women acquired increased social exposure and greater independent mobility and social interaction across kinship, class and gender divides. Increased mobility and interaction augmented women's confidence in their capabilities.

No, we didn't have this zeal before. Back then we never used to get together. But now, from the way in which everyone gets together in one place, the mentality has also become one. Mine is yours and yours is mine; that's how we ask each other about our situations. If something happens to one person, everyone gets to know about it: 'Something's happened to her; come let's go and see what the matter is.' But it wasn't like this before. Back then, what you were going through was your private affair. (Sanyal 2009, p 544)

Group membership offered women a way of accessing support and information not otherwise available to them. Women spoke of finding out about new resources, such as daycare centres, which are important to women who must attend many meetings, through participating in group discussions (Krenz et al. 2014). The new relationships women developed also meant

they were able to learn new skills to improve their livelihoods. In both studies conducted in Afghanistan, women spoke of how they were able to learn and impart skills to other women through group participation (Lyby 2006, Zand 2011).

Women discussed how microfinance programmes were also able to increase their ability to undertake collective action. Increased trust, gained through economic ties and frequent interaction, meant that women could not only mobilise to support one another, financially and practically with information and skills-development opportunities, but could also engender greater empowerment and safety within their communities. Group membership meant that women were able to come together to assist one another — and other women in the community — in many ways, from intervening and protecting women from domestic abuse, and policing moral issues such as extramarital affairs, underage marriage, male sexually promiscuous behaviour and attempted polygamy, as well as social and community issues such as anti-alcohol and gambling campaigns, to acquiring public goods and organising public events (Sanyal 2009).

The kind of support that members experienced was not limited solely to social support. SHG membership in Guerin et al. (2010) also led to the reinforcement of the financial networks of female beneficiaries. The majority of members spoke of how they would often exchange loans, either giving part of their loan to another member or repaying their own debts earlier to allow other members to benefit. In another study, members felt compelled to support their group by covering the debts of members who could not meet loan repayments (Krenz et al. 2014). In another study, women described how, by pooling their resources, they were able to fund emergency-healthcare costs for a child of another group member (Jones et al. 2007). This enhanced ability to help one another highlights a level of trust and cohesiveness that may not have previously been present between women in these communities.

IMPROVED CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM

Seven studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of increased personal confidence, pride and self-esteem as apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes (Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006, Sanyal 2009, Shetty 2010 and Zand 2011). Five studies were conducted in India with women who participated in urban and rural SHGs, group lending, and credit plus micro-credit and savings programmes (Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014#, Sanyal 2009 and Shetty 2010). Two studies were conducted in rural and urban Afghanistan (Herat, Balkh, Bamyan and Kabul provinces), with both male and female beneficiaries of a number of different microfinance programmes that provided services such as loans, savings and micro-insurance (Lyby 2006, Zand 2011).

Raised self-esteem and confidence as a result of participation in microfinance programmes was reported by female beneficiaries in many studies. Confidence, pride and self-esteem appeared to be closely linked with the improvements in women's skills, knowledge and status within their households and the community. Women described feeling 'better', 'more confident' and 'happy', demonstrating greater self-confidence and self-assurance in their work and daily interactions (Krenz et al. 2014). This confidence meant that they were able to

get by in social situations they may have previously avoided. Apparently, confidence was also associated with greater mobility. By participating in programmes, women began to feel more comfortable and confident in community spaces and interactions that were once intimidating to them (Shetty 2010).

Happiness and self confidence rose due to women's newly gained ability to contribute to the household income and finances. In Afghanistan, savings were seen as important by many, not only to reduce vulnerability to external shocks, but also because savings would be in their own name (Lyby 2006). In another study conducted in Afghanistan, women felt an increase in their own individual sense of worth (Zand 2011). While women were previously engaged in social reproduction work in their homes, this was rarely recognised as valuable by other family members. Taking loans placed a monetary value on their contribution, which appeared to have resulted in an amplified sense of value.

I made my own and my family's life better. Other people should also take a loan and improve their life. I want others to take loans as I did. They should work like me...Since I took the loan I built my house, engaged my son and also bought some livestock. (Zand 2011, p 33)

Because women felt better able to plan futures both for themselves and their families, their confidence also benefited (Joseph 2005). In India, simply having access to an independent source of credit was important to women (Shetty 2010).

He doesn't have money; he can't get a bank loan. But I saw that I could take a loan for him, to let him start a repair business. He is very good; he can fix anything. (Shetty 2010, p 373)

There was a great sense of pride in having exclusive access to credit, and, even when loans were not put to a business-related use, women felt pride in having obtained them. The newfound sense of self-confidence gained by many women as a result of participation in microfinance programmes was discussed by many beneficiaries. One participant noted that, prior to her participation in SHG, 'Women were like a frog in a well;' membership had empowered women who previously had feelings of fear and inferiority and helped them become more active and self-confident community members (Jones et al. 2007, p 16).

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS AND ADOLESCENTS

Two studies contained qualitative data on the empowerment of, specifically, young female adolescent beneficiaries from participating in microfinance programmes (Joseph 2005, Shahnaz and Karim 2008). One study was conducted in rural India with female microcredit-programme SHG members (Joseph 2005). The other study was conducted across ten regions of Bangladesh, with adolescent girls who participated in a BRAC microcredit-plus programme run through ELA centres (Shahnaz and Karim 2008). The additional components of the programme included education and skills training, and also offered a safe and supportive social space for girls.

For the poor in South Asian countries such as Bangladesh and India, women's traditional roles are restricted to the household, while men may participate more actively in the community. As discussed above, women who participate in microfinance programmes may experience various improvements in mobility and confidence, and an increased ability to move outside the home and into the wider community. In one study conducted in India, female beneficiaries explained that, because they themselves had participated in microfinance programmes, they had gained a greater appreciation of the importance of women's equality and empowerment — not just for adult women, but also for children (Joseph 2005). Women began to see it as equally important for girls to be educated, to receive the same healthcare as boys, and to have savings accounts devoted to their education and benefit.

...Previously, I did not want to give equal rights to girls. Now, I am becoming aware that they are equal to boys and that they must be given equal rights. Our girls ride cycles like boys. The society has come to accept it. (Joseph 2005, p 152)

In Bangladesh, too, the lives of adolescent girls may be largely predetermined by unequal social norms and characterised by inequality and subordination to family and society. Early marriage, dowry requirements, frequent pregnancy, abandonment or divorce, domestic violence, marginalisation, and exclusion from social and economic opportunities are all common realities (Shahnaz and Karim 2008). In one study where BRAC combined financial and social interventions to improve the lives and livelihoods of adolescent girls, many members described that they had experienced various improvements. While dowry was still a common practice, which was not generally supported by microfinance programmes, girls reported improved confidence to speak to parents about their decision not to commit to early marriages (Shahnaz and Karim 2008).

While girls tended to begin their involvement with the programme mainly to receive training for income-generating activities, the opportunity to improve their knowledge about social issues was also an improvement cited by participants in this study.

Earlier our knowledge about centres was vague and unclear but now it is not so. We knew about some of the other members before going to the centres but due to the regular interaction in the centres our friendship has deepened. We now try to help each other in every possible way. (Shahnaz and Karim 2008, p 32)

As with adult women beneficiaries, participation in the programme brought about greater social solidarity and support for girls; girls spoke of having many new friends, and the ability to have greater access to social events. Mobility was also improved for many, with girls explaining that they could now travel in groups beyond the village to markets, cinemas and community events in the city (Shahnaz and Karim 2008).

Social involvement, support and mobility were not the only improvements experienced by these young beneficiaries. The financial services and skills education provided through the programme also meant that they acquired skills of financial management. The girls now had greater control over their lives and financial decisions; they were better able to manage loans

and repayments and could also manage household duties better (Shahnaz and Karim 2008). Girls could access savings services, which were often used for their education. Some even spoke of how they had had arguments with their parents, and had to press the importance of continuing their education. Many girls in this study showed a keen understanding of the importance of education and were confident that education would be fundamental to realising their full potential and ambitions.

Only with a good education could the girls seek qualified husbands, eradicate dowry practices, and seek job opportunities. (Shahnaz and Karim 2008, p 24)

Participation in the programme described in this study appeared to be strongly associated with improvements to adolescent girls' social and financial skills, confidence and mobility. Empowerment of adolescent girls could be seen to be equally beneficial and experienced as similarly positive as that of adult female beneficiaries.

POSITIVE SOCIAL AND PERSONAL IMPACT

Seven studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the apparent or perceived benefits of participating in microfinance programmes, in terms of their ability to lead to positive social and personal benefits (Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005, Khan 2014, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006, Shetty 2010 and Zand 2011). This was the least reported of the themes around the positive benefits of microfinance-programme participation, probably because all of the included studies tended to focus on how microfinance had benefitted people in terms of their financial situation, or in terms of women's empowerment (two main foci of microfinance). The experiences described in this section were rather less richly supported by participant voices and were also generally not the focus of the included papers. That being said, these experiences are no less valid or important than any other, and each may be highly beneficial to people who participate in microfinance programmes. Beneficiaries spoke of improved diets and the ability to invest in the future of their children. They also remarked upon their improved knowledge of and access to health services. Microfinance was also a way for people, who otherwise may lack a strong voice in community matters, to be heard by more powerful community members and decision makers. Finally, green microcredit, an emerging subset of microfinance, was a way for people to learn how to utilise more sustainably local natural resources to benefit their families. Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme, subtheme and category.

DIET

One study conducted with female SHG members of a microcredit programme in rural India found that women had experienced improvements to their diets since joining the programme (Joseph 2005). Women told the researchers that, since beginning to participate, their families were able to eat either rice alone or accompanied by a simple curry, twice a day. Some participants could even afford to eat three times daily and had begun including milk, vegetables, legumes and meat in their diets. Not only had beneficiaries' food quality increased, but they were also beginning to be able to secure their own more sustainable

sources of food, including livestock for meat and milk, and land to grow rice, vegetables and fruit (Joseph 2005).

IMPROVED CHILDREN'S EDUCATION, EXPENSES AND ASPIRATIONS

Seven studies contained qualitative data pertaining to people's experiences or perceptions of being able to invest more in their children's education and had greater aspirations for the future of their children as a result of participating in microcredit programmes (Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005, Khan 2014, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006, Shetty 2010 and Zand 2011). Four studies were conducted in rural and urban India with female beneficiaries of microcredit programmes, two based on SHG models (Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005), one based on a credit-plus model (Krenz et al. 2014), and one based on a microcredit and savings programme (Shetty 2010). Two studies were conducted in rural and urban Afghanistan, with both male and female beneficiaries of a number of different microfinance programmes (Lyby 2006, Zand 2011). One study was conducted in a number of districts in Bangladesh, with male and female beneficiaries of a green microfinance programme (Khan 2014).

Many beneficiaries in these studies invested their money loaned through the microcredit programmes in the education of their children or for child-related expenses. Women spoke of their pride in making financial contributions to their children's education, not simply because it helped earn the respect of their husbands, but because it also ensured the best possible education for both daughters and sons (Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014). As such, parents' aspirations for the future of their children had improved and were brighter for having become participants. Parents in Bangladesh also spoke similarly, and expressed that they did not want their children to take up the traditional family livelihood practices as they had done.

I could not finish school due to the liberation war, and after the war I had to work in the field with my family to support ourselves. But I want my sons to be educated and have a better life. They are in the big city now for better education. I will support them even if I have to work hard. (Khan 2014, p 83)

Beneficiaries also spoke of the perceived benefits that they imagined for their children as a result of their participating in microcredit programmes (Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005). Even when beneficiaries expressed no particular plans for themselves, joining an SHG and receiving loans meant that they were able to plan for their children's future. Participants felt that they were now able to buy books, uniforms and education supplies for their children (Shetty 2010). In Afghanistan, too, women spoke of how they were able to spend their loan money on their children, their education and their futures (Lyby 2006, Zand 2011).

ACCESS TO AND KNOWLEDGE OF HEALTH SERVICES

Two studies contained qualitative data pertaining to people's experiences of having greater knowledge of and access to healthcare services. One study was conducted in rural India with female members of microcredit SHGs (Joseph 2005), and the other with female beneficiaries of a microcredit and savings programme in Chennai (Shetty 2010).

In the study by Joseph (2005), some beneficiaries reported that, prior to participation, they had not been able to access specialised healthcare beyond the traditional and local medical shops. One beneficiary had asthma and was only able to afford medication for temporary relief; as a result of participation and her increased income, she reported being able to travel to receive proper medical care. Beneficiaries also had an improved awareness of local, district and regional health services. In the other study, beneficiaries also reported that they had gained knowledge and skills from attending a training programme that covered health issues, family planning, social issues (alcohol and substance abuse) and gender issues, such as gender equality and the need for women to take care of their own health (Shetty 2010).

SOCIAL SPACE FOR MEMBERS' VOICES TO BE HEARD

Two studies contained qualitative data pertaining to beneficiaries' experiences of having greater access to social spaces for their voices to be heard on issues that were important to them. One study was conducted in Bangladesh with male and female beneficiaries of a green microfinance programme in a number of districts (Khan 2014). The other was conducted with female microcredit SHG members in Andhra Pradesh, India (Jones et al. 2007).

In Bangladesh, memberships of NGO microfinance programmes not only helped beneficiaries to access a source of loans, the programmes were also a platform for minority populations to have their voices heard in the community. As members of microfinance programmes, they gained an otherwise inaccessible avenue to communicate directly with government institutions and the social elites (Khan 2014).

The greater involvement of microfinance beneficiaries in community affairs may be seen as a positive development, and some female beneficiaries welcomed the new role as recognition of members of their group within their local community (Jones et al. 2007).

KNOWLEDGE OF SUSTAINABLE RESOURCES

The final theme arising from our analysis pertained to people's experiences of improved knowledge of sustainable natural-resource use as a result of their participation in green microfinance programmes in Bangladesh (Khan 2014). Beneficiaries explained that, as a result of participation, they had gained new knowledge of how to manage their local natural resources in a more sustainable manner, which could benefit them and their families. As with many microfinance interventions, it can take time for people to experience the effects of any new project, and some changes in beneficiaries' behaviour and perception were found among green microcredit beneficiaries.

I did not have to cut trees or buy firewood last year and also can use the by-product from the plant as fertilizer. I am saving money from two sides. (Khan 2014, p 64).

BENEFICIARIES' EXPERIENCES OF THE PERCEIVED OR APPARENT NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF PARTICIPATING IN MICROFINANCE PROGRAMMES

Thirteen studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent negative consequences of participating in microfinance programmes. These findings have been grouped into three themes. These represent beneficiaries' experiences of:

(i) Negative financial and economic consequences.

(ii) Disempowerment of women.

(iii) Negative social and personal impact.

Each of these themes contains 11 findings informed by the results extracted from the included studies. Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme, subtheme and category.

NEGATIVE FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

Despite the many experiences of positive financial benefit described above, microfinance participation could also lead to negative experiences and consequences for participants and their families. Ten studies contained qualitative data pertaining to beneficiaries' experiences of the negative financial and economic consequences of participating in microfinance programmes (Ashraf Ali 2014, Cons and Paprocki 2010, Garikipati 2013, Guerin et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005, Schuler et al. 1996, Ray-Bennett 2010, Lyby 2006 and Uddin 2014). Five studies were conducted with female beneficiaries of microcredit SHG programmes in mainly rural India (Garikipati 2013, Guerin et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005 and Ray-Bennett 2010). Four studies were conducted in Bangladesh with female beneficiaries of microcredit programmes from a number of providers, including BRAC and Grameen Bank (Ashraf Ali 2014, Cons and Paprocki 2010, Schuler et al. 1996 and Uddin 2014). One study was conducted in rural and urban Afghanistan, with both male and female beneficiaries of microfinance providers offering a range of services, including loans, savings and insurance (Lyby 2006).

LACK OF HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT

Four studies included qualitative data pertaining to beneficiaries' experiences of a lack of household support of their participation in microfinance programmes (Ashraf Ali 2014, Garikipati 2013, Joseph 2005 and Schuler et al. 1996). Two studies were conducted in rural India with women members of microcredit programmes based on SHG models (Garikipati 2013, Joseph 2005). Two studies were conducted in Bangladesh with beneficiaries of microcredit programmes provided by a number of organisations (Ashraf Ali 2014, Schuler et al. 1996).

Beneficiaries spoke of various experiences of not being supported by their husbands and family members in terms of their participation. Frequently, this manifested itself as husbands

and families not supporting beneficiaries to make repayments, which could result in having to sell off assets to service outstanding loans (Garikipati 2013, Joseph 2005). This could then lead to further withdrawal of support and many additional negative experiences. Beneficiaries described experiencing hostility from other group members in relation to making repayments, which pressured them into selling family assets. Their families did not consent to these sales and both women suffered as a result. One woman was not allowed to keep money from the sale of her crops or have access to her husband's or her own wages. Her husband organised for her wages to be delivered directly to him from her employer, to prevent her from using any income to pay back her loans (Garikipati 2013). Women were punished in other ways by husbands and families, and experienced deliberate negligence in terms of being denied access to food during lean periods. Some beneficiaries could not report any positive changes to their household roles as a result of participating, and, in some cases, women reported worsened circumstances. A number of beneficiaries reported actually having less say over household decisions and incomes after their participation in microfinance programmes. This occurred when they joined, as family members prevented them from diverting household resources to repay their loans (Garikipati 2013). This pushed beneficiaries further into debt.

Some women experienced a lack of support, less in the form of actual discrimination and more in terms of not being supported to use their loans for their intended purpose of income generation.

My husband's contribution to the household decreased once I began to earn more income and became able to cover more of the household's expenses. Occasionally, my husband withdrew his support to the extent that I was forced to my loan primarily to meet consumption needs instead of investing in my business. (Joseph 2005, p 151)

Other women explained that their husbands requisitioned their loans for their own use, but left their wives with the responsibility of repaying them. This meant that the women ended up being even more dependent upon their husbands than before (Joseph 2005). This attitude on the part of husbands appeared to be relatively common in the study by Schuler et al. (1996), where beneficiaries described how husbands took their wives' loans, spent them on recreation, but left the women to repay the debt.

Men and women disagree on how the wife's money should be spent. Men beat their wives to make them give up their money. For example, M. had saved up 1000 Taka (about \$25), She wanted to invest it in dadan (lend it to a cultivator who pays it back after the harvest in the form of paddy) but her husband wanted to use it for rice trading. Her husband beat her to make her go along with this, and then he spent the whole amount for consumption instead of investing it in rice. (Schuler et al. 1996, p 1,733)

DEBT, REPAYMENT AND FAILED INVESTMENTS

Four studies included qualitative data pertaining to beneficiaries' experiences of inflexibility in making repayments on their loans provided by microfinance programmes (Ashraf Ali 2014, Cons and Paprocki 2010, Lyby 2006 and Ray-Bennett 2010). Two studies were conducted in

Bangladesh, one study with male and female microcredit beneficiaries in a rural area (Cons and Paprocki 2010), and one study with male and female microcredit beneficiaries located in the Chittagong Hill tracts (Ashraf Ali 2014). One study was conducted in rural and urban Afghanistan, with male and female beneficiaries of various microfinance programmes (Lyby 2006). One study was conducted in Orissa, India, with members of households headed by women that participated in a microcredit programme (Ray-Bennett 2010). In each of these studies, participation in microcredit programmes further entrenched beneficiaries in poverty and vulnerability. The respondents who were poor to begin with were now overburdened with debt. Some recipients found themselves in positions of amplified dependency and lowered self-sufficiency because of their microcredit participation.

How could there be any change or improvement in our lives? One person owes four or more organisations at a time and has to pay instalments every week. They take loans from one organisation to repay the loans of the other organisations. Their financial condition keeps deteriorating. They can't even eat as much as they could before. They can't even think of having nutritious food and clothes due to the tension of making repayments. (Cons and Paprocki 2010, p 643)

In one study, beneficiaries' livelihoods had been undermined by an influx of MFIs into the area (Cons and Paprocki 2010). Beneficiaries described their situation as being compounded by loan officers of other institutions' encouraging them to take up loans to pay back old debt from previous loans. The pressure to make repayments had many negative effects upon beneficiaries' living standards, as they would prioritise loan payments over other needs, including children's education, health and food.

Education requires a lot of things. If we send children to school, they need money or books, notebooks, pencils, pens, examination fees and many other things . . . But where will we get money? We cannot give it to them even if we have money in pocket as we have to pay a loan instalment the day after tomorrow. (Cons and Paprocki 2010, p 647)

Inflexibility was experienced by beneficiaries when they were not able to make loan repayments on time. For example, loan officers may confiscate beneficiaries' assets, including even the building materials of their homes or income-generating assets (Ashraf Ali 2014, Cons and Paprocki 2010). In this one case, the beneficiaries could not make their repayments on time because the poultry they had invested in as a source of income had died. Beneficiaries faced similar experiences in Afghanistan, where one woman spoke of how she was still making repayments, despite her cow's being stolen soon after purchase.

I was not afraid in the beginning because I could purchase the cow with my loan, so I was optimistic about repayment. But I am very scared now. They stole my cow, and without it how can I pay back? (Lyby 2006, p 31)

In India, women beneficiaries also experienced negative consequences concerning repayments, following the failure of their investments in livestock (Ray-Bennett 2010).

Women described how meeting monthly credit repayments became extremely difficult, due to the inadequate and sporadic income earned from livestock. Repayments were even more difficult for women who did not own cows any more. These women, who were already poverty-stricken and vulnerable, were additionally burdened with debts that they were unable to repay on time. Beneficiaries also spoke of how, even when their livestock investments were productive, the costs of maintaining them were often greater than their income (Ray-Bennett 2010).

The cow needs three kilos of chokodo [processed food] every day. For three kilos of chokodo it provides three litres of milk. For one kilo of milk I get seven rupees from the Milk Store, and one kilo of chokodo costs me seven and a half rupees. So I am not making any profit. I have credit of about 15,000 rupees which I have to repay. I deposit 30 rupees as chanda [savings] monthly and 100 rupees for the loan. If I happen to get 700 rupees by selling milk I repay the loan, deposit the chanda and also buy kunda [processed food] and chokodo for the cow. Ultimately after all these expenses I end up with nothing to fend for myself. So often I fail to pay the credit to the SHG. (Ray-Bennett 2010, pp 253–254)

In Bangladesh, beneficiaries spoke of the inflexibility of repayment systems in terms of not being congruent with the seasonal agricultural cycles, as opposed to the loans provided by the traditional local *mojans* (money lenders) (Cons and Paprocki 2010). Microfinance providers may fail to tailor loan-repayment systems to seasonal agricultural cycles (for example, *Monga*, which is a seasonal hunger that falls between two annual rice harvests (Cons and Paprocki 2010). Landless families who rely on agricultural labour face great difficulty in securing enough employment to provide food during this time. Beneficiaries spoke of how, before the influx of microfinance providers, they used to store rice in a traditional manner, as a kind of community food bank (Cons and Paprocki 2010).

During Monga, for three months, we meet our need for food with a loan. Becoming indebted to microcredit loan programmes, we struggle through these disasters. But if any member of this loan programme is not able to pay an instalment in time, just after the deadline, NGO workers come to her house and ask for it very inhumanly. They force us to pay at any cost. (Cons and Paprock, 2010, p 644)

DOMINATION AND SUBJUGATION BY OTHER MEMBERS

Five studies included qualitative data pertaining to beneficiaries' experiences of being dominated by other beneficiaries during their participation in microfinance programmes (Ashraf Ali 2014, Guerin et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2007, Ray-Bennett 2010 and Uddin 2014). Three studies were conducted in India: one study in Orissa, with members of households headed by women who participated in a microcredit programme (Ray-Bennet 2010), and two studies with female SHG members in rural Southern India and Andhra Pradesh state (Guerin et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2007). Two studies were conducted in Bangladesh: one with female beneficiaries of a Grameen Bank SHG programme from three villages in Sylhet (Uddin 2014),

and one with male and female microcredit beneficiaries located in the Chittagong Hill tracts (Ashraf Ali 2014).

These studies contained qualitative evidence of microfinance-programme members using positions of relative power to subjugate, dominate and take advantage of other female beneficiaries. Sometimes, this domination was based upon the loan-repayment-collection practices of the provider; microfinance fieldworkers would give loan group leaders or groups of female members the responsibility for collection debts from other group members (Ashraf Ali 2014, Uddin 2014). In another study, some group members of higher castes kept lower-caste members in a disempowered state for their own advantage and kept a proportion of their loans for their own use (Jones et al. 2007). In Guerin et al. (2010), existing hierarchies between women were reinforced by participating in microfinance programmes, with some women regularly appropriating other women's loans. Female group members also actively prevented other members from borrowing from the group's revolving pool of savings due to a lack of confidence in other women's ability to repay the amount (Ray-Bennett 2010).

Whenever I have asked for some help [extra credit], they have refused repeatedly. They say, 'Why shall we give you five rupees?' This is because they do not get the sahas-bol [confidence] to give me money. So they have not lent to me. (Ray-Bennett 2010, p 251)

This meant that some women were merely puppets in a group; they contributed savings, but reaped little reward. Loans in some groups were consistently only offered to the least vulnerable members of the group. Credit delivery thereby reproduced and amplified class hierarchies, with more privileged women receiving greater benefit than the poorer respondents (Ray-Bennett 2010). In this study, it also appeared that households that were headed by men were less vulnerable to this treatment, due to local gender hierarchies.

DISEMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

While microfinance is largely focused on contributing to the empowerment of women, microfinance participation could also lead to negative experiences and consequences for women in terms of their opportunities for empowerment. Six studies contained qualitative data pertaining to women beneficiaries' experiences of disempowerment as a consequence of participating in microfinance programmes (Ahmed 2008, Cons and Paprocki 2010, Garikipati 2013, Shahnaz and Karim 2008, Schuler et al. 1996 and Zand 2011). Four studies were conducted in Bangladesh with women and adolescent girls, who were beneficiaries of microcredit programmes from a number of providers, including BRAC and Grameen Bank (Ahmed 2008, Cons and Paprocki 2010, Shahnaz and Karim 2008 and Schuler et al. 1996). One study was conducted in India with female members of a SHG in rural Andhra Pradesh (Garikipati 2013). One study was conducted in Afghanistan with female microcredit-programme beneficiaries in Kabul (Zand 2011). As opposed to affording women beneficiaries the opportunity to take a greater part in decision making, some women experienced their involvement in decision making to be greatly reduced as a result of their participation in microfinance programmes. While some women were more protected from domestic abuse and violence from husbands due to their participation in microfinance programmes, others

were left more vulnerable, as their husbands and other household and community members may have felt threatened by women's increasing mobility, skills, independence and involvement with social-group and microfinance-programme staff outside the home. Women may also experience decreased social status as a result of participating in microfinance, when working for pay is viewed as less worthy than fulfilling household duties. Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme, subtheme and category.

HAMPERED DECISION MAKING

Four studies contained qualitative evidence of women's contribution to household and personal decision making being negatively impacted by participating in microfinance programmes. Two studies were conducted in Bangladesh (Cons and Paprocki 2010, Shahnaz and Karim 2008), one study in India (Garikipati 2013), and one in Afghanistan (Zand 2011). Women in one study described the immense pressure they faced from their husbands or family members to take loans.

Women are in so much trouble now. They have to deal with all of the hassles of the repayment of microcredit loans. MFI workers don't go to the husband for the loan instalments. They go to the wife, as she's the one who took the loan. Thus women have to tolerate the torture from both their husbands and the NGO workers. They are now under tremendous pressure. (Cons and Paprocki 2010, p 646)

As opposed to feeling empowered and liberated by their access to credit, women felt their options had been constrained and their ability to make choices reduced. These women felt more like conduits for credit to their husbands than controllers or decision makers.

I gave my loan to my husband to buy a motor for the farm, but this was a mistake. He does not discuss anything with me nowadays. He feels that if he tells me anything, I will pester him for money. Instead of helping me with repayments, he asked me to go for kulie pani (to repay the loan). (Garikipati 2013, s 68)

This reduction in ability to contribute to decision making also occurred when young women and adolescent girls were offered loans without adequate training in their use (Shahnaz and Karim 2008). Here, loans were often given away to other family members with the primary beneficiary having lost all control. In one extreme example from Afghanistan, a woman's brother and husband threatened to kill her children if she continued sending them to school with the money she had earned by investing in her own tailoring business (Zand 2011).

What women spent their loan money on could also constrain their decision-making potential. In one study, women who used their loans for general household expenses or non-income-generating expenses experienced notable limitations in terms of their influence over household decision making and livelihood options (Garikipati 2013). Loans were also sometimes used to pay dowries. Dowry practices were often actively discouraged by MFIs; however, participation seemed sometimes to reinforce, rather than limit them (Cons and Paprocki 2010). Beneficiaries argued that the availability of loans actually led to the inflation

of dowry prices, which were sometimes dozens of times greater than in previous generations. Multiple loans from different organisations were, at times, taken to cover costs (Cons and Paprocki 2010).

INCREASED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

Three studies contained qualitative evidence of women's experiences of violence and abuse as a result of participating in microfinance programmes in Bangladesh (Ahmed 2008, Cons and Paprocki 2010 and Schuler et al. 1996). This was because, in many cases, providing money to women as opposed to men means confronting highly ingrained patriarchal systems that can be fraught with domestic violence. Women participants may be seen by their families and their communities as subverting gender roles. Indeed, a *fatwa* against women participating in microfinance programmes and other groups outside the home had been issued (Schuler et al. 1996). While the same studies often also reported instances where violence against women had stopped or was reduced after participating in microfinance programmes, this was not always the case.

In one study, female beneficiaries appeared to be more vulnerable to violence, despite the household being better off financially (Ahmed 2008). Sometimes, by allowing their male relatives to control the loans, women were able to avoid being beaten (possibly to death) if they did not hand their loans over to their husbands. Sometimes, when women tried to resist, they were beaten.

My husband likes to go to the movies, smoke and drink tea. When he runs out of money he takes my pumpkins and chickens [and sells them]. If I try to stop him he beats me. (Schuler et al. 1996, p 1,733)

Abuse was not always manifest in the form of physical violence; women spoke of how abuse could be verbal, being told they were worthless to the family if a loan was not taken. (Cons and Paprocki 2010)

REDUCED SOCIAL STATUS AND RESPECT

One study conducted in India with SHG members of microcredit programmes found evidence that women perceived that their social status had dropped as a result of participating in microfinance (Garikipati 2013). Beneficiaries reported that, prior to obtaining their loans, many engaged in agricultural work on family farms, or within their own households. The wage labour necessary to make loan repayments was perceived to be of lower status and was consequently experienced negatively.

I was happy working in my home and on the farm (before joining the group), but now I have to go for kulie pani (wage work) everyday. Sometimes I think I should leave the group, so I can stop this chakiri (drudgery). I know I have to clear all my debts before I can talk like this. (Garikipati 2013, s 68)

This indicates that experientially, women felt that the shift from one kind of work to another was a fall in status despite improvements to other economic outcomes (Garikipati 2013).

NEGATIVE SOCIAL AND PERSONAL IMPACT

Eight studies contained qualitative evidence of various negative social and personal impacts that people faced as a result of participating in various microfinance programmes. The subthemes under this theme tended to be informed by only a very few findings, as the majority of papers included in the study focused on either financial and economic consequences, or issues of empowerment of women. Four studies were conducted in India with SHG model female beneficiaries in both rural and urban regions (Garikipati 2013, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014 and Ray-Bennett 2010). Three studies were conducted in different regions of Bangladesh with female beneficiaries involved with Grameen Banks and multiple other NGOs (Ashraf Ali 2014, Cons and Paprocki 2010 and Uddin 2014). One study was conducted with both male and female microfinance beneficiaries in rural and urban Afghanistan (Lyby 2006). Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme, subtheme and category.

OBLIGATIONS AND WORKLOAD

Two studies contained qualitative evidence that women experienced an increase in workload and obligations as a result of participating in microfinance programmes (Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014). Both studies were conducted in India. Some women in these studies commented that, due to having to attend meetings of the SHGs they were involved in, they would miss out on at least two hours' worth of income (Krenz et al. 2014).

The problem is we don't get time to go to the meeting and if we do we don't talk about it much as we are all busy. We go to the important meetings; all of us rarely manage to go at the same time. We get a lot of good information at the meetings but unfortunately we don't have time to go. (Krenz et al. 2014, p 317)

Women in another study felt pride in being able to contribute to their household economy, but also spoke of the increased workload and responsibilities they faced (Joseph 2005). In this study, women also remarked that the obligation to attend meetings sometimes meant that their safety was put at risk by returning home late.

NEGATIVE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

One study contained qualitative evidence that children's education opportunities may be negatively impacted by their parents' participating in microfinance programmes (Lyby 2006). This study was conducted in a rural part of Afghanistan and concerned children being required to take care of the family livestock. In this case, the female beneficiary's 12-year-old son suggested using the loan to purchase lambs to be prepared for resale. He then worked as a herd boy, taking care of the animals, but this meant that he could no longer attend school. As his mother said:

Most of the kids go to school, but if more of them went who would then look after the animals? (Lyby 2006, p 30)

Here, it is clear that, even with good investments, there may be a trade-off in other areas of people's lives.

POOR TREATMENT BY MICROFINANCE STAFF

Two studies conducted in Bangladesh contained qualitative evidence of beneficiaries' being treated poorly and abused by the staff of MFIs (Ashraf Ali 2014, Cons and Paprocki 2010). Most often, this abuse was suffered in the context of not paying loan repayments on time, and could take the form of either indecent, shaming language directed by staff towards beneficiaries, or the encouragement of the physical abuse of beneficiaries by staff.

They [fieldworkers] are so indecent that they behave unscrupulously with the senior women. They use slang language, which is very disturbing and embarrassing for us. If a senior woman can't manage her loan instalment the fieldworker may ask, 'Why don't you pass a night with someone? You can easily manage this amount of money by having sex with somebody.?' Sometimes, the fieldworker asks the group leader to 'bring the [defaulting] woman grasping her hair, uncovering the cloth from her body.' (Ashraf Ali 2014, p 331)

This kind of abuse and shaming can be devastating for female beneficiaries. In the same study, participants spoke of another woman in the local area who committed suicide after repeated insults from microfinance fieldworkers and other women in her group (Ashraf Ali 2014).

In another study, the authors discussed how the pressure on microfinance loan officers to collect repayments was an incentive to them to use any practice at their disposal to make sure that women repaid on time. This led to reports of both physical and sexual abuse by male staff (Cons and Paprocki 2010).

UNSUPPORTIVE MICROFINANCE PRACTICES, PROCESSES

Two studies contained qualitative data regarding beneficiaries' experiences of a lack of support in terms of the practices and processes of microfinance organisations. One study was conducted in Bangladesh with SHG members (Uddin 2014), and the other in India with microcredit beneficiaries (Ray-Bennett 2010).

The findings ranged from reports of people remarking that, in the aftermath of a natural disaster, they could not access money from their micro-insurance when they needed it (Ray-Bennett 2010), to a number of findings where people reported that participation in the programme had not benefited them in terms of increasing their experience of support and social solidarity (Uddin 2014, p 39).

People sometimes felt let down when organisations did not follow their own rules and failed to organise meetings for beneficiaries, despite maintaining that meetings were required. This indicated to beneficiaries that there was a power divide between them and the microfinance staff — those who made the rules, but did not have to adhere to them, and beneficiaries who simply had to repay their loans on time (Uddin 2014).

This lack of meetings then led to members' feeling unconnected to one another, isolated, and that the organisation was only interested in their money.

What is the necessity to go there? I only know that I have to give the instalments money every week, nothing more. If you have nothing nobody will help you. As I have taken out credit for several years, I have been continually interacting with some borrowers. Despite the fact that most of them are my neighbours; I only socialize (chola-pera) with them. (Uddin, 2014:150)

In one study, many members felt unsupported in their group, and that they were not able to rely on the other beneficiaries. Because the MFI had not helped the group members feel responsible to one another, the ability of the group to work effectively was compromised (Uddin 2014).

The members have no helping attitude. Nobody wants to help others without interest. If any member helps you, s/he is always awaiting when you also help her in return. If you fail to offer similar help, then the relationship gets destroyed. If anybody has money, s/he also does not wish to give a loan, rather he /she gives advice to take a loan from kisti (instalment) bank. This is the rule (niyom) of the world. (Uddin 2014, p 153)

As opposed to other studies that reported groups that worked together well and looked out for one another, members of these groups had little interest in reciprocity or supporting one another.

SINFULNESS OF CHARGING INTEREST, ACCORDING TO ISLAMIC LAW

One study contained qualitative evidence that beneficiaries may have negative experiences regarding their participation in microfinance programmes, due to the fact that, in accordance with Islamic Law, charging interest is considered sinful (Zand 2011). In this study, conducted in Afghanistan, participants remarked that, while even some very religious people still took loans, programmes could suffer declining numbers as a result of religious figures' preaching about the sinful nature of taking loans with interest. In this study, participants faced resistance and arguments from family members who were afraid to take loans and may also have felt that their participation would negatively affect them in the future owing to their religious belief that their activities would no longer receive Allah's blessing.

KEY MESSAGES

Experiences of financial and economic benefits and negative consequences

Beneficiaries had both positive and negative experiences in terms of financial and economic factors, due to their participation in microfinance programmes. Access to micro-savings services meant that beneficiaries were able to plan and protect themselves and their families against future costs and crises.

Investment in income-generating activities also increased beneficiaries' income and their household and community respect and status. Through participation, assets and homes could be improved, repaired and added to, which was also experienced positively.

Microfinance appeared to offer beneficiaries an avenue through which to access loans at lower interest rates than those offered by local money lenders, which meant that beneficiaries were able to reduce their reliance on these riskier sources of credit.

Lack of household support for beneficiaries appeared to contribute to beneficiaries' negative experiences of microfinance participation in terms of making repayments, as well as loss of status and respect within households. Debt to MFIs, especially due to failed, stolen or poor investments, also led to many negative experiences.

Loan-repayment policies could also be inflexible and unsuited to beneficiaries' circumstances. Some beneficiaries also experienced domination from other members, who took their loans for themselves and took advantage of other women's savings.

Experiences of women's empowerment and disempowerment

Beneficiaries had both positive and negative experiences in terms of women's empowerment, due to their participation in microfinance programmes. Female beneficiaries appeared often to experience greater mobility and independence as a result of participating in microfinance programmes.

Programme participation meant women were more readily able to leave their households and move about in the community. While this could be dangerous for some women, especially at night, or where women's mobility and microfinance participation were seen as improper, for many women, this increased independence and mobility was experienced as positive.

Improved financial, business, vocational and social skills were lauded by many women as positive benefits of microfinance participation. Improvements to these skills led to increased status, respect, and feelings of self-worth and of making a valuable contribution to the household economy. When other family members were supportive of participation, these skills were also valued by husbands and other relatives.

Many women also experienced positive benefits in terms of their ability to participate in decision making at individual, household and business levels. Domestic violence and abuse appeared to be variably affected by women's participation in microfinance programmes, in that some women experienced increased violence and abuse from householders and husbands, while others experienced less. Microfinance participation appeared to be a way for women to access greater social support from and solidarity with other women, and, while not all programme participants felt this benefit, when programme groups met frequently and facilitated group reciprocity and mutual identification, the positive benefits to women were great.

Experiences of positive and negative social and personal impact

Beneficiaries had both positive and negative experiences in terms of social and personal impact due to their participation in microfinance programmes. Beneficiaries' diets could improve as a result of participation, as could their ability to invest in their children's education and future.

Access to health services and knowledge about health and health services also appeared to be improved. Participation in microfinance programmes could afford members a social space for their voices to be heard regarding issues that were important to them, and green microfinance appeared to increase beneficiaries' knowledge of the sustainable use of natural resources.

Poor treatment by microfinance staff, as well as negative experiences related to various unsupportive practices and processes, were also reported. It is also important to consider the impact of the obligations of participation in microfinance programmes on aspects of beneficiaries' lives, as reduced time spent on income-generating activities may be experienced negatively. In Islamic cultures, it also may be relevant to recognise that taking loans with interest may be viewed as sinful and lead to negative experiences for beneficiaries in terms of perception.

4.5 MOTIVES FOR DECIDING TO PARTICIPATE/NOT TO PARTICIPATE OR DROP OUT OF A MICROFINANCE PROGRAMME

Twelve studies (Ahmed 2008, Ashraf Ali 2014, Guerin et al. 2010, Garikipati 2013, Jones et al. 2007, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006, Sanyal 2009, Shahnaz and Karim 2008, Shetty 2010, Uddin 2014 and Zand 2011) investigating microfinance programmes in South Asia collected qualitative data regarding motives or reasons to participate or not in microfinance programmes. Studies were deemed to be of low to very high methodological quality. Although the research team aimed to investigate factors and experiences leading to drop out, no findings were identified in the literature regarding withdrawal from a microfinance programme. Qualitative analysis of the findings of each study resulted in two main categories:

(i) Motives or reasons to participate in microfinance programmes.

(ii) Motives or reasons to not participate in microfinance programmes.

This chapter describes beneficiaries' experiences of each of the two main categories in turn. Appendix 2.10 contains a table that shows which studies contributed findings to these phenomena of interest, as well as their themes and categories. Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme and category.

MOTIVES OR REASONS TO PARTICIPATE

Eight studies (Ashraf Ali 2014, Guerin et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2007, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006, Sanyal 2009, Shetty 2010 and Uddin 2014) contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' motives or reasons to participate in microfinance programmes. Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme and category. The following findings were identified:

MALE DOMINATION

One study (Ashraf Ali 2014), conducted in the Chittagong Hill Tracts district in Bangladesh, reported male domination as a motivating factor for women to participate in microcredit programmes. As stated by the authors:

Male domination together with household poverty may force women to continue with microcredit programmes. (Ashraf Ali 2014, p 335)

TO ESCAPE POVERTY

Four studies (Ashraf Ali 2014, Jones et al. 2007, Sanyal 2009 and Uddin 2014) contained qualitative data regarding microfinance as a means by which to escape poverty as a motivating factor to participate in these programmes. Two of these studies were conducted in Bangladesh with participants in microcredit programmes (Ashraf Ali 2014, Uddin 2014), with the other two conducted in India with participants in microcredit (Jones et al. 2007, Sanyal 2009). For Uddin and Jones, the intervention was a microcredit SHG programme/model, while Sanyal investigated group lending.

Study participants spoke of their experiences of household poverty and economic constraints, with many seeing microcredit as a way by which to improve their situation, access credit and/or employment, and hence be able to generate income (Ashraf Ali 2014, Jones et al. 2007). This may be due to ongoing poverty, natural calamities or immediate economic constraints.

We ask them [officials] 'you told us that belonging to the group will lead to work.'
(Jones 2007, p 20)

Although, in many instances, the information about potential benefits came from providers of microfinance programmes, other times it came from the participants themselves, encouraging their poor neighbours to participate as well, as shown in a study conducted across three villages in Bangladesh (Uddin 2014).

She claimed that since all her neighbours were poor they also came forward to access the credit programme. In fact, when the centre was established in Suchona 's house, she had also encouraged some of her neighbours to take out credit, otherwise the centre may not have been established here [...] when microcredit started its operation, the NGO 's staff encouraged some local people and then these people encouraged their neighbours to take credit. (Uddin 2014, p 147)

As reported in one study conducted in rural west Bengal in India, this monetary incentive was, in some cases, so powerful that it facilitated 'women's continued participation in these groups, even in the face of family objections'. (Sanyal 2009, p 543)

DEBT CYCLES

One study, conducted in the Chittagong Hill Tracts district in Bangladesh, reported multiple cycles of debt as a motivating factor for women to participate in microcredit programmes (Ashraf Ali 2014). As stated by the author:

Three factors — male domination, household poverty, and multiple cycles of debts — simultaneously explain why these poor women continue their microcredit participation, despite negative social, psychological, and economic experiences and consequences. (Ashraf Ali 2014, pp 12, 336)

DOMINATION OF OTHERS

One study conducted in two villages in rural South India (Vellore and Thiruvallur districts) investigating female participants in an SHG microfinance programme reported that the opportunity to hold power over others was a motivating factor to participate within kinship groups and their neighbourhood (Guerin et al. 2010).

Women would deliberately use development programmes (here, microfinance) to dominate other women. (Guerin et al. 2010, p 1)

BENEFIT TO CHILDREN

One study, conducted across four sites in the Andhra Pradesh state in India, investigating female participants in an SHG microfinance programme, reported that the potential benefits to their children were a motivating factor for participating in microfinance programmes (Jones et al. 2007). Through microfinance interventions, participants were able to generate income, which could then be saved to benefit children in areas such as education and health.

We are surviving in this group not just for the sake of the loans but to benefit my children in the future. For that purpose we keep the money I save in the self- help group for the development of our children. (Member, Anantapur) We are poor people and work as daily labourers. We save one rupee each day. We will develop by doing so. It helps our children's education and health. (Jones et al. 2007, p 18)

ACCESS TO HEALTH INSURANCE

One study, conducted in Mumbai in India, investigating female participants in a credit-plus programme, reported the ability to access health insurance as a motivating factor for participating in microfinance programmes (Krenz et al. 2014). Microfinance programmes that offered the option of paying towards health insurance for the beneficiaries and family members were viewed positively.

The women can pay toward health insurance for themselves and their family members. Through Annapurna's microinsurance program, women receive health counselling; assistance and referral services; financial assistance on events like hospitalization, death, and disability; and awareness training on issues like health and hygiene. A majority of the women cited the health insurance program as the deciding factor in their choice to take a loan from Annapurna Pariwar. (Krenz et al. 2014, p 321)

MFIS PREFERRED OVER OTHER SOURCES OF CREDIT

Two studies, one conducted in rural and urban sites in Afghanistan, investigating male and female experiences of varying microfinance interventions (Lyby 2006), and the other conducted in Chennai in India, with female participants in a microcredit and group-micro-saving programme (Shetty 2010), reported that microfinance programmes were viewed preferably over other forms of microcredit. Shetty states that participants were drawn to MFIs due to the ease of access and the rate of interest comparing favourably to other sources of credit. As such, if participants were seeking credit, they were attracted to MFIs as compared to informal credit or banks.

The members in the group either have tailoring jobs, or are cooks. There is no shop to sell the items, rather they sell it in the market. The group is on its second loan, for about 200 dollars now. They are grateful to borrow from an MFI, rather than use informal credit. As women they feel that they have been able to take charge of the money, and be the decision makers along with their husbands. Zainab has been tailoring for 25 years, and feels that it is the best occupation for her. She says, 'When I get my next loan, I want to continue tailoring.' (Lyby 2006, p 30)

MOTIVATIONS OR REASONS TO NOT PARTICIPATE

Eight studies (Ahmed 2008, Sanyal 2009, Uddin 2014, Zand 2011, Jones et al. 2007, Krenz et al. 2014, Shahnaz and Karim 2008 and Garikipati 2013) contain qualitative data on beneficiaries' motivations or reasons to not participate in microfinance programmes. Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme and category. The following findings were identified:

AVOID OBJECTION AND CONFLICT IN THE HOME

Two studies, one conducted in the Satkhira district in Bangladesh investigating female participants' experiences of microcredit (Ahmed 2008), and the other in rural west Bengal in India, investigating the experiences of female participants in group-lending microcredit

programmes (Sanyal 2009), discussed how home dynamics, including the desire to reduce or avoid conflict, prevented females from participating in these programmes. While some women were able to overcome these objections, for others it was a barrier to participation.

Peace at home is all important; Mehrun quit the bank because she did not want to jeopardize it....His objections made it difficult for her to access the Grameen Bank housing loan. (Ahmed 2008, p 130)

LOANS WITH INTEREST SEEN AS SINFUL

Two studies, one of female participants in a microcredit SHG programme conducted in three villages across Bangladesh (Uddin 2014), and the other investigating female participants (and non-participants) in various microcredit programmes in a village in the Qarabagh district of Afghanistan (Zand 2011), reported that subjects chose not to participate in microfinance programmes due to religious beliefs. In these settings, either giving or receiving a loan that carried interest was seen as sinful, and as the subjects did not want to commit a sin, they did not enrol.

The interest attached to a loan and the fear of committing a sin was one of the important reasons for the non-participating families not joining the loan programme. Three people were identified who had opted out once they realised there was interest involved in the credit. (Zand 2011, p 25)

However, it may be the case that this is changing, at least in Bangladesh:

The religious people (mawlana or imam in the mosque) used to avoid credit programmes because they had maintained that it is strictly prohibited in the Islamic religion to take or give loans with interest. However, even they send their female family members to take credit now. I found this to be a significant change in religious structure at a local level. (Uddin 2014, p 148)

PROBLEMS WITH MICROFINANCE ORGANISATIONS, OPERATIONS, OBLIGATIONS AND PRODUCTS

Five studies (Uddin 2014, Ahmed 2008, Jones et al. 2007, Krenz et al. 2014 and Shahnaz and Karim 2008) reported on issues and problems with the MFIs themselves as a factor that prevented participation in microfinance programmes. One study conducted in the Satkhira district of Bangladesh investigating female participants' experiences of microcredit reported that, due to the poor management of an NGO, they were compelled to leave and find another provider, in this case the Grameen Bank (Ahmed 2008). Another study investigating female participants in a credit-plus programme, conducted in Mumbai in India, reported that some providers were seen as exploitative:

Many women remarked on the exploitative practices of other lenders and financial institutions that extend loans at exorbitant interest rates with little regard for borrower's ability to pay. (Krenz et al. 2014, p 318)

The requirements of certain microfinance programmes, such as needing to attend meetings, were also a barrier to participation. One study, investigating female participants in an SHG microfinance programme conducted across four sites in the Andhra Pradesh state in India, reported that attending meetings was very difficult, highlighting the experience of mothers with young children (Jones et al. 2007).

If I go out to attend the meeting of the group, then who is going to take care of my child, all other women in the group have big children, so they have free time. I may think of becoming a member once my child grows up. (Jones et al. 2007, p 24)

Another finding from Jones was that there was difficulty getting access to loans as SHG members, and also difficulty handling repayment schedules. In a study of adolescent female participants of BRAC's ELA centres involved in a microcredit-plus programme conducted across regions in Bangladesh, participants believed that the requirement to keep obligations would adversely impact their education, and, in addition, there was a fear among poorer families of not being able to repay loans (Shahnaz and Karim 2008).

One study of female participants in a microcredit SHG programme, conducted in three villages across Bangladesh, similarly found that the obligations required in SHG programmes, particularly the need for some participants to take on difficult leadership roles, resulted in these roles being considered as unpopular among participants (Uddin 2014).

Because of the collateral mechanism, the guarantors and the group leaders work to facilitate the programmes by collecting instalments from the defaulters and by disciplining the members. This sometimes causes scuffles and cultivates isolation and alienation among the members. As a result, leadership roles are generally unpopular among the rural women, who do not want the 'headache' of chasing up loans from their neighbours. (Uddin 2014, p 148)

REDUCED EMPLOYMENT AND HOUSEHOLD STATUS

One study of female participants in SHG microfinance programmes conducted in the Mahabubnagar district, in the Telangana region in Andhra Pradesh in India, found that the requirement to make repayments led to less bargaining power, which, in turn, led to the necessity of becoming a labourer for low wages, also threatening their household status.

In addition, the women found that their need to make repayments had severely eroded their bargaining positions in the labour market, and several of them had to exchange their labour for very low wages. It is not surprising then that G3W11 expressed the

desire to discontinue SHG membership so that she could stop working as a wage labourer. (Garikipati 2013, s 69)

KEY MESSAGES

Key motivations or reasons to participate

These were identified in the included studies as: male domination; the desire to escape poverty and cycles of debt; to dominate others and hold a position of power; to be able to provide for their family and particularly their children; and to access health insurance. It was found that some participants preferred microcredit over other forms of finance.

Key motivations or reasons to not participate

These were identified in the included studies as: the desire to avoid conflict in the home; religious beliefs, whereby loans with interest were seen as sinful; problems with MFIs and difficulties related to their operations, products and meeting obligations; and reduced employment and household status.

4.6 BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF OTHER HOUSEHOLD AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS TOWARDS MICROFINANCE-PROGRAMME PARTICIPANTS

There were five studies related to householders' and community members' beliefs and attitudes related to microfinance (Jones et al. 2007, Shahnaz and Karim 2008, Zand 2011, Ahmed 2008 and Lyby 2006). As reported below, these studies described the perspectives of householders and members of the wider community. Beliefs and attitudes were identified through the experiences reported as qualitative data, often framed through the individual's experience, but spoken from a wider, third-person perspective. Within this section of the systematic review, the findings are presented in light of the specific aspects of the original questions posed in the tender documentation:

- Positive beliefs and attitudes within households.
- Positive beliefs and attitudes in the wider community.
- Negative beliefs and attitudes within households and the wider community.

Within this structure, a series of themes were identified and reported upon; these included women's empowerment and equality, use of loans only, independence and mobility, knowledge and financial skills, and normative gender development for girls. The identified themes do not all appear for each aspect of the question, as participants from the included studies did not speak uniformly to these themes. Appendix 2.10 contains a table that shows which studies contributed findings to these phenomena of interest, as well as their themes and categories. Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme and category.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND EQUALITY

Two studies (Jones et al. 2007, Shahnaz and Karim 2008) reported on women's empowerment and equality, as evidenced by the subjective views and opinions of members of their households. The following findings were derived from the qualitative data. The study by Jones et al. was conducted in India across four sites in Andhra Pradesh. With a focus on microcredit and female only SHGs, no specific qualitative methodology was reported; however, qualitative data was presented in the form of participant voices and descriptive analysis. Shahnaz and Karim present a mixed-methods synthesis on adolescent girls in Bangladesh, where microcredit was combined with education and skills training (Shahnaz and Karim 2008). Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme and category.

Engaging with microcredit and programmes for learning and teaching was seen by family members as moving the perception of women away from a focus on running the house to their making a broader contribution.

As one grown son from Seethampet eloquently argued: 'The problems [women can address] are not just relating to their families but also to national development, national financial development. When families are economically strong how can they be spoiled? Women are going out, attending meetings, learning many things, undergoing training, sending their children to school... Because women are the key of the family, it is important that they should be empowered financially. (Jones et al. 2007, p 19)

As Jones noted, adult sons saw a link between their mothers' developing skills and knowledge, and being enabled to send their children to school through innovative use of microcredit. Further to this, Jones also identified that seeing empowered women within the home was recognised as contributing to the economic strength of the family, and promotion of recognition of women as key to family life.

The qualitative data from Jones et al. (2007) presented a complex set of interactions between microfinance, skill and knowledge development, and empowerment. Partners of women who participated in this study noted that their wives were empowered through a range of in-country programmes and SHGs. As illustrated in the following excerpt, this was most visibly evident to male partners through accumulation and implementation of new knowledge of raising children and utilisation of public services, to the benefit of the family.

Many of the women interviewed reported that their awareness of, and access to, information about child-rearing practices and uptake of public services had improved as a result of their self-help group participation.

[...]Focus group discussions with members' male partners confirmed this finding,

although some noted that women's empowerment has also been enhanced through exposure to media and by affirmative-action programmes for women instituted by local governments. (Jones et al. 2007, p 23)

Women's empowerment in Bangladesh was attributed to the combined role of microfinance within a support-group context. As is illustrated below by Shahnaz and Karim (2008), the impact on family perception widened over time. Brothers of adolescent girls, in particular, were found to have increased respect and admiration for their sisters previously, they had been of the view that girls should stay at home and support their mothers by doing household chores. This suggests a qualitatively significant cultural change: prior to microcredit and community involvement, the notion of a 'good girl' was one who stayed indoors and did domestic chores; with the advent of microcredit and community involvement, the notion of a good girl had changed; adolescent girls who were outdoors, who interacted with their wider communities, were still seen as 'good' by their male family members.

The males interviewed were contemporaries of the ELA members, often their brothers, relatives or neighbours. Their responses to ELA were continuously positive, and they clearly displayed approval for the activities carried out by ELA members. The centre participants also reported that the adolescent boys started appreciating their activities (adolescent girls' issues, their incidents of get together etc.). They claimed this to be a by-product of their enhanced voice. Some of the centre participants' brothers initially objected to their participation, insisting that their sisters should remain home in order to assist their mothers. One of the FGD participants cited few cases, she said, 'The attitude of the boys has changed. My brother used to think that girls should remain home and not goes outside. Initially he disagreed to the idea of the girls' going to centres.' She further added that her brother said to her, 'Why mother should work home while you go outside' but now his behaviour has changed. Other participants said, 'Now they also play with us and think that we are good girls.' (Shahnaz and Karim 2008, p 32)

The social significance of being at greater personal liberty, while still being seen as 'good', represents a significant gain for adolescent Bangladeshi girls in their relations with their male peers, particularly their brothers. Daughters, like sons, were recognised as having a need for socialising and recreation.

Discussion with adolescent girls as well as parents and community members revealed that since the beginning of the ELA Centre intervention, parents had become more aware and more accepting toward issues regarding adolescent girls. They now started realizing that, like their sons, their daughters also needed recreation and leisure. (Shahnaz and Karim 2008, p 32)

The benefits were also extended to parents. The positive benefits accrued to girls' involvement in microfinance and community activity included girls' educating their mothers on what they were learning. The confidence parents showed in their daughters was expressed

through greater personal autonomy, as parents' views were changing as they recognised the level of competence their daughters were attaining.

Mothers of the centre members became aware about the issues that their daughters discussed and learnt at the centre, which included household work, healthcare and hygiene, and childcare. Parents were now generally much more accepting of mobility, allowing their daughters to venture out of the village because of a growing confidence in their daughters' abilities. Daughters were now asked for their opinions on family matters, as parents wanted to see what daughters had learned and understood at the centre. Perhaps the most salient change of perception was the growing dependency that parents now had on their daughters due to IGA training and loan intakes. Steadily, the daughters were being given more responsibility in the family; their potential for economic productivity was now being given some worth. (Shahnaz and Karim 2008, p 33)

POSITIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Beliefs and perspectives of family members appear to be precursory to community engagement. Without the support of family, it can be difficult for women living in South Asia to engage with the wider community; however, the qualitative evidence on positive influences of microcredit participation on the wider community are identified through a series of key statements positioned in a 'family-centric' perspective by research participants. Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme and category.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND EQUALITY

Albeit from a small number of studies, the data acquired through participant voices shows women engaging more fully in cooperative decision-making, but also in independent decision-making arising from increased self-confidence and self-awareness, and from the knowledge gained through engagement with microfinance services.

She had to adjust to whatever her husband has given and to follow whatever her husband says. But now, she too is earning something. Now she is thinking 'why can't I build my family and my children She is coming to know all those things. (Jones et al. 2007, p 22)

KNOWLEDGE AND FINANCIAL SKILLS

Development of knowledge and skills to support good financial decision making is recognised through women's careful accounting of expenditure and judicious saving strategies. This was acknowledged particularly when women were perceived as contributing to the stability and development of their families. One participant described this as follows:

Members look for savings, saving every rupee. They know the value and don't spend on unnecessary things... They make strong decisions that lead to the stability and the development of the family. (Jones et al. 2007, p 19)

Respect was seen as arising from demonstration of knowledge and skills in financial management, particularly through innovative employment. Favourable community perception further increases a women's empowerment, giving her greater autonomy and a greater role in her community. A woman in this context gains social mobility through her ability to provide for, and manage, her family. This is very much a community-driven perspective. The following excerpt illustrates the significance of this perception within a community context.

For four of the respondents, the enhanced respect is not limited to the family and is expanded to the wider community. Marina, the tailor, owes the respect of her neighbours and family to the service she offers them. Her customers respect her for her skill and the ability to make her own money. They show their appreciation to her by bringing her food and giving her special respect by placing her at the top of the room in weddings. Sabzina, who gave her loan to her sons to start businesses with, notes that her neighbours regard her as a smart woman who has improved the well-being of her family. They come to seek her advice on how to improve their own families' economies. (Zand 2011, p 34)

NORMATIVE GENDER DEVELOPMENT FOR GIRLS

The impact of community perception on the life and well-being of adolescent girls cannot be overestimated. Socialisation of girls prior to microfinance opportunities linked to community centres in the study by Shahnaz and Karim (2008) was through their role within the confines of the house and the needs of their family. A positive community experience was self-reinforcing. Girls who were initially discouraged from participating in case they learned too much and gained too much knowledge, gradually found that the knowledge they gained was acknowledged and respected.

When the ELA Centres were first opened, community members generally opposed the idea of allowing adolescent girls to waste their time with recreation while they should be concentrating on their studies or household chores. They were also afraid that the girls would learn inappropriate things and become too mature for their age. Now, community members became more accepting of the centre and APON programmes, engendering positive attitudes due to successful outcomes of the adolescent girls. In particular, they appreciated the fact that the centre members had become well mannered, neater, and cleaner. Some of the FGD participants said, 'Initially people used to think that we go to the centres only to gossip but now they remind us to go there when its time.' (Shahnaz and Karim 2008, p 33)

NEGATIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF HOUSEHOLDERS

While there were many examples of women's achieving gains in their status, standing or independence within their family and/or community, the complexity of familial interactions did include both positive and negative experiences. Not all husbands were supportive of their wives, and some questioned the usefulness of the types of learning outcomes that were being attributed to participation in microfinance. Appendix 2.11 contains a list of every extracted finding by study, phenomena of interest, theme and category. As Jones et al. identify:

...there was little mention of literacy training — indeed, some men pointed out that the programmes were using the rhetoric of literacy but in reality this was very superficial and women were only learning how to sign their names for loans. (Jones et al. 2007, p 24)

KNOWLEDGE AND FINANCIAL SKILLS

Entrepreneurship was not always seen as a positive activity. Some husbands withdrew support from their wives when it became evident that participation in microfinance was leading to increased skills and knowledge, and increased standing of their wives in the wider community. The role of husbands in the success of women's engagement in microfinance could be substantively positive (as has been shown in this report); however, it could also be negative:

Resentful of Mehrun's growing entrepreneurial skills and status, Ibrahim wanted her to quit being a Grameen Bank loanee. (Ahmed 2008, p 126)

Where the husbands' attitude was often that women have a clear, traditional role within the house and that this role is entirely sufficient for women, it was unlikely that support to increase the knowledge and skills of female members of the household would extend beyond traditional requirements (Jones et al. 2007). However, as can be seen from the following illustration, these were often described as 'better-off' households, where husbands were making sufficient money to provide for the family. There was no 'felt need' expressed in studies of better-off households for more income or greater community respect; therefore, men were not motivated to encourage their wives to participate; they actively acted and spoke to oppose participation.

...the more harmonious families where the wife would be a full party to all major decisions, were not necessarily also the most prosperous ones. Better-off households with successful businesses often were run by men who adhered to strict and restrictive rules about female behaviour. In such cases, the woman might get a loan and give the money to the husband without any trace of empowerment could be observed.[...]They both argue that there is no need for their wives to take a loan or any other professional employment for that matter because the burdens of household chores is so great. They subscribe to the old view that men are the only bread winners in the family. For them, it is incomprehensible that women would undertake productive employment not because they need to but because they want to. (Lyby 2006, p 39)

INDEPENDENCE AND MOBILITY

Where households were not supportive of women's participating in microfinance, and gaining knowledge and skills through their experiences, there was also evidence that some men acted to restrict female independence and mobility in response to personal insecurity concerning their relationship and the potential negative impact on themselves. In some cases, this was voiced as concerns that empowered wives who had financial autonomy may leave their husbands. One study noted that a family member (husband):

... made it clear that he would not allow Salma to own property in her name, even if it was bought with her earnings, because this might give her enough economic independence to leave him — a common male nightmare in rural Bangladesh. (Ahmed 2008, p 141)

Other husbands were found to be unsupportive, calling their wives 'spoiled', suggesting their wives were ignoring the needs of the family and challenging the traditional male powerbase. Jones et al. illustrate this through the findings of a SHG, with a participant's husband declaring:

...because of self- help groups women have become spoiled. Now they are not taking care of the needs of children and men. They are even confronting men in some cases. (Jones et al. 2007, p 17)

Husbands' lack of support reflected a very gendered perspective on roles and ability, where the male, as the head of the home, should be the decision maker. These men resisted supporting their wives' participation in microfinance because they, as men, were the financial providers. The lack of support is a circular argument: women are denied the opportunity to generate income because women do not generate income.

One male focus group discussion in Seethampet, for example, questioned the extent of women's new economic empowerment:

Respondent 1: 'Most of the women ask before taking loans, how can they take without asking us?'

Respondent 2: 'From where can a woman get the money? She is not doing any job, not doing any work, how can she repay, anyways we have to help them, always men are in leading.'

Respondent 3: 'Who is getting money? Only men are getting money. Before, taking loans women discuss, only with the help of their husbands are they taking and repaying loans, otherwise how can they repay? From where will she get the money? (Jones et al. 2007, p 19)

USE OF LOANS ONLY

Occasionally, there was evidence that husbands would support their wives' participation, but with provisos. Where microfinance created opportunities for women to participate in groups

or community settings, husbands did threaten to restrict social engagement if their wives were not successful in gaining loans. Therefore, male approval and support was not for the empowerment or development of their wives' knowledge, skills, capability or social mobility, but for the potential to access an alternative source of money.

Rather than rethinking gender roles more fundamentally, some male partners appear to value women's participation in SHGs only for the loans that they might secure. One woman member from Atlur, for example, noted that her husband threatened to stop her involvement in the group when she was not allocated a loan in the first year of attending SHG meetings. (Jones et al. 2007, p 22)

NEGATIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND EQUALITY

There was a dearth of evidence related to negative community perceptions. This may have been due to participating women with unsupportive families' focusing primarily on the lack of family support. In one study, while it was not clear why the systematic review did not identify much evidence related to community perspectives, the resistance at community level was clearly gendered and tied to forms of behavioural and perceptual manipulation (Ashraf Ali 2014, p 12), with the study observing that:

Female loanees are accused of going to the all-male local Grameen Bank office to have affairs. (Ahmed 2008, p 152)

KEY MESSAGES

Household perspectives

Positive experiences with microfinance within the home lead to women's having greater autonomy and a more significant role outside the home.

A positive experience with microfinance was seen as being contributory to the economic and, therefore, social strength of the family, firstly within the family, then the wider community.

Participation in microfinance and the acquisition of knowledge and skills for life by adolescent women helped change familial definitions of a 'good woman', thereby increasing the scope for women to socialise and develop further skills

Unsupportive husbands predominantly used 'traditional-role' arguments, or intimated that sexual misconduct might be associated with a wife's having greater mobility and autonomy. Only one instance of a man's expressing his personal fear that his wife might use her newfound independence to leave him was found throughout the entire review.

Community perspectives

Favourable community perspectives enhance women's standing in their homes, which further enhances their community status and social mobility.

Positive community perspectives are self-reinforcing for adolescent girls.

Negative community perspectives may be based upon manipulation of the reputational notion of a 'good wife', in order to coerce women to behave in a certain way.

5 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This section summarises and discusses the findings reported in Section 4 and informs the conclusions presented in Section 6, below. First, a summary of the main findings of the review is presented by topic and theme, before reflecting on the nature of those findings. Consideration of the current gaps in the evidence base is also included. This is followed by the recommendations for policy, practice and research. Finally, the strengths and limitations of this systematic review are presented.

5.2 SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

Of the 20 papers (19 studies) included in this systematic review of qualitative evidence, 19 relevant studies all contained qualitative data regarding beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits/negative consequences of participating in microfinance programmes. These data were synthesised to answer the primary review question:

What are beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits/negative consequences of participating in microfinance programmes?

Eleven of the 19 studies also contained qualitative data that could be synthesised to answer the following question:

What are people's motivations for deciding to participate/not participate or drop out of a microfinance programme?

Five of the 19 studies also contained qualitative data that could be synthesised to answer the following question:

What are the beliefs and attitudes of other household and community members toward microfinance-programme participants?

Six papers were deemed of high quality, meeting between eight and ten of the ten critical appraisal criteria. Six papers were of moderate quality, each scoring between four and seven. Eight papers were deemed to be of low quality, meeting between zero and three of the inclusion criteria. Given the difficulty of conducting research within the proposed contexts, the review took an inclusive approach to selection based on methodological quality; no papers were excluded on the basis of methodological appraisal.

PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPATING IN MICROFINANCE PROGRAMMES

Nineteen studies (20 papers) of low to very high quality investigating microfinance programmes in South Asia collected qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits/negative consequences of participating in microfinance programmes. Qualitative analysis of the findings of each study resulted in two main

categories: positive experiences and negative experiences of participating in microfinance programmes. Seventeen studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes. Thirteen studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent negative consequences of participating in microfinance programmes.

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC EXPERIENCES: POSITIVE BENEFITS AND NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

Beneficiaries in 11 studies frequently spoke about the various financial and economic benefits that they had experienced as a result of their participation in microfinance programmes (Ahmed 2008, Aslanbeigui et al. 2010, Garikipati 2013, Guerin et al. 2010, Joseph 2005, Khan 2014, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006, Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006, Shetty 2010 and Ray-Bennett 2010). These findings afforded an insight into how beneficiaries experienced one of the main aims of microfinance in general: to reduce the poverty levels of participants and their families. The participants in the studies reported having experienced a range of benefits, from the short-term, such as the ability to stabilise family-consumption patterns, to the more long-term and prospective benefits of being able to invest in ongoing income-generating activities, such as personal and family businesses.

Despite the many experiences of positive financial benefit found in the literature, microfinance participation could also lead to negative experiences and consequences for participants and their families. Ten studies contained qualitative data pertaining to beneficiaries' negative experiences of the financial and economic consequences of participating in microfinance programmes (Ashraf Ali 2014, Cons and Paprocki 2010, Garikipati 2013, Guerin et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005, Schuler et al. 1996, Ray-Bennett 2010, Lyby 2006 and Uddin 2014).

SAVINGS, SECURITY AND PLANNING FOR FUTURE COSTS AND CRISES

Study participants told of their experiences of the apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes in terms of savings, security and the ability to plan for future costs and potential crises. Participation in microfinance programmes meant that beneficiaries were able to save money, which could lead to the improved financial security of their households. Beneficiaries spoke of how access to microcredit meant that their families had greater security against potential crises. Microcredit-programme participation meant that women felt that they could potentially recoup losses sustained as a result of crises such as natural disasters. Here, access to credit was a potential avenue for women to redevelop their income potential. Access to credit services gave beneficiaries other options in terms of protecting themselves and their households from emergencies, and having to enter exploitative debt relationships with money lenders. It was, however, noted by some that, without a security net such as insurance, beneficiaries' experiences of poverty may still be negatively affected.

While receipt of microcredit appeared to mean that beneficiaries were able to avoid or mitigate potential catastrophes, when loans were used for meeting urgent household

expenses, the capacity of microcredit as a development tool may be lost, with its simply fulfilling the role of social security. However, this finding appeared to be tempered by the finding that microcredit loans appeared to be experienced as having a cumulative benefit, even when used for household expenses — at first. While loans might first be used to stabilise consumption, repair household assets and pay off debt, increased access to loans — especially in combination with savings — contributed to the lessening of household vulnerability and more long-term economic stability being experienced by beneficiaries.

Beneficiaries' testimonies suggested that savings had both functional and symbolic value for women, and some spoke of the importance of feeling that the money was their own. Savings were frequently spoken of positively and women felt more comfortable knowing that they were able to reserve some money for future expenses.

INCOME CONTRIBUTIONS AND INVESTMENT IN INCOME-GENERATING ACTIVITIES

Beneficiaries' experienced an improved ability to increase their household income via income-generating activities funded by their participation in microfinance programmes. Beneficiaries used their loans to invest in their own existing businesses in the form of equipment, land and materials. Other beneficiaries also occasionally used microcredit programmes to invest in new business ventures. Beneficiaries felt that, through their participation, they benefited from an increased awareness and assurance of the range of new possibilities open for them to succeed in future financial and business endeavours. As well as experiencing benefits in the form of investment in income-generating activities, beneficiaries also used their loans to improve household finances in a general sense. This included stabilising household income and everyday expenses, repaying existing debts to other creditors (both MFIs and money lenders), household repairs, purchase of education materials for children, and travel costs. Beneficiaries of green microfinance were able to invest and develop skills in small-scale organic agriculture. Investing loans in household businesses, for example, those run by other family members, as opposed to an income-generating activity owned or operated by the beneficiaries themselves, were also perceived by beneficiaries as a positive benefit of participation. Beneficiaries were not always able to invest their loans in their own income-generating activities, as other family members — frequently men — often appropriated the loans for their own businesses or personal use. Loans were not necessarily given up unwillingly and, while giving up the loan may appear to demonstrate a lack of confidence or coercion from other family members, beneficiaries might experience improvement in their own status as a result of allowing their loan to be reappropriated and used by other family members.

ASSET REPAIR AND ACCUMULATION

Beneficiaries experienced an improved ability to accumulate or improve non-productive household assets as a result of participating in microfinance programmes. Beneficiaries spoke of how loans were invested in accumulation of common household assets, such as radios or televisions. Beneficiaries experienced increased respect and status as a result of accumulating and improving their household assets. Despite being not practically useful in terms of income generation and poverty reduction, this was still important to many beneficiaries in terms of

how their household was regarded by other community members, and beneficiaries wished to maintain an outward image of success and wealth. While beneficiaries were rarely able to invest in the purchase of brand new homes, the enhanced ability to make repairs or improvements to existing homes was frequently experienced. Indeed, the condition of one's house and assets is considered an important sign of empowerment and status in Indian society. Practical assets were also purchased with loans by beneficiaries, including improved water, sanitation and electrical amenities. Such assets were considered by beneficiaries as both necessary and as ways in which to improve their household's status in the community. Some beneficiaries even reported lying to MFIs about what they planned to purchase, so that they could receive loans to improve their home or purchase new, non-productive household assets.

LOWER INTEREST RATES AND REDUCED RELIANCE ON MONEY LENDERS

Beneficiaries experienced benefits due to their improved access to MFI's credit and savings programmes. This helped people to reduce their reliance on local money lenders, which also included loans from pawnbrokers, relatives and employers, who also frequently charged much higher interest rates — sometimes up to and beyond 100%. Microfinance participation meant that people could potentially avoid demeaning debt relationships that subordinated beneficiaries to other community members. As well as reducing beneficiaries' reliance on costly sources of credit, beneficiaries reported that local money lenders could be exploitative and reliance on them humiliating. Avoiding this kind of relationship due to the availability of microfinance-operated loans and savings products, beneficiaries felt greater self-respect and esteem. Beneficiaries also spoke of how dealing with money lenders may be more risky for women, as the former sometimes forcibly took loan defaulters' belongings. It is important to note, however, that some MFIs were also reported to be involved in the confiscation of beneficiaries' assets when they did not make repayments on time.

LACK OF HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT

Negative experiences were also felt by beneficiaries when they were not supported by other household members in their participation in microfinance programmes. Beneficiaries told of various experiences of not being supported by their husbands and other family members, often manifested as their not being allowed to make repayments. This could result in beneficiaries' being left with no choice but to sell off assets to service outstanding loans, which could then lead to further withdrawal of support if household assets were sold and result in many additional negative experiences when families did not consent to this. Beneficiaries could also experience hostility and pressure from other microcredit-group members to make repayments forcing them to sell family assets. Other negative experiences included beneficiaries' not being allowed to keep money from the sale of crops or have access to wages. Women were also punished through deliberate negligence in terms of their access to food when their loan repayments adversely impacted their families. Some beneficiaries reported no positive changes to their household roles as a result of participating, and, in some cases, worsened household circumstances were experienced as a result of participating in microfinance when other family members were unsupportive. A number of beneficiaries

reported a diminished level of control over household expenses when they joined, as family members prevented them from diverting household resources to repaying their loans. This pushed beneficiaries further into debt and led to worse outcomes for households. Some women experienced a lack of support from their families less in the form of actual discrimination and persecution, and more in terms of not being supported to invest loans for their intended purpose, such as income generation. Some women beneficiaries told of how their husbands requisitioned their loans for their own use, but left them with the responsibility of repaying them. These women ended up being even more dependent upon their husbands than before.

DEBT, REPAYMENT AND FAILED INVESTMENTS

Beneficiaries reported having negative experiences when MFIs were inflexible in terms of demanding repayments on their loans. In these cases, participation in microcredit programmes further entrenched beneficiaries in poverty and vulnerability, as beneficiaries who were already poor became overburdened with debt. Some beneficiaries reported that, since joining a microfinance programme, their dependency had increased, while their self-sufficiency correspondingly decreased. Beneficiaries' livelihoods could be undermined when other MFIs' loan officers encouraged them to take up loans to pay back old debt from previous loans. Pressure to make repayments had numerous negative effects upon beneficiaries' living standards, as they would prioritise loan payments over basic needs, including children's education, health and food. As mentioned above, loan officers sometimes confiscated beneficiaries' assets, even including the building materials of their homes or income-generating assets. Inflexibility was also experienced by beneficiaries when they were made to repay loans for assets that died, broke, or were stolen or lost. Women described how inflexible monthly credit repayments became extremely difficult to meet, due to the inadequate and sporadic income earned from livestock. These women, who were already poverty-stricken and vulnerable, were additionally burdened with debt that they were unable to repay on time. Beneficiaries explained that, even when livestock investments were productive, the costs of maintaining them were often greater than their income. Repayment systems could also be inflexible in terms of not being congruent with the seasonal agricultural cycles, as opposed to the loans provided by the traditional local money-lenders, or *mojans*, as microfinance providers may fail to tailor loan-repayment systems to seasonal agricultural cycles. This meant that, for beneficiaries who relied upon income from crops, MFIs still demanded payment before harvest. Landless families who relied on agricultural labour faced great difficulty in securing enough employment to provide food during certain times of the year, and found it difficult to make repayments when they could not get work.

DOMINATION AND SUBJUGATION BY OTHER MEMBERS

Beneficiaries could experience domination by other beneficiaries during their participation in microfinance programmes. Some microfinance-programme members used their positions of relative power to subjugate, dominate and take advantage of other women beneficiaries. Domination was sometimes based upon the loan-repayment collection practices of the provider, where microfinance fieldworkers would give loan-group leaders or groups of women

members the responsibility for collecting debts from other group members. Group members of higher castes sometimes also kept lower-caste members disempowered for their own advantage, and kept back a percentage of their loans for their own use. Existing hierarchies between women could be reinforced by participating in microfinance programmes when powerful group members regularly appropriating other women's loans. Women group members could also actively prevent other members from borrowing from the group's revolving pool of savings, citing a lack of confidence in other women's ability to repay the amount. This meant that some women were merely puppets in group savings and loans programmes; they contributed savings, but gained no benefit. Loans in some groups were consistently only offered to the least vulnerable members of the group, so that those who were already relatively well-off had the greatest access to credit. Credit delivery therefore reproduced and amplified class hierarchies, with more privileged women receiving greater benefit than the poorer respondents.

EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND DISEMPOWERMENT

Beneficiaries across all the included studies were almost exclusively women. Women's empowerment was closely tied to the experiences of the financial and economic benefits described above, and covered experiences such as increased ability to participate in financial decision making, as well as gaining greater status and respect in the household and community due to being able to contribute to the household income and livelihood. Other benefits to women's empowerment were also experienced; for example, improved independence and mobility and even greater protection from domestic violence. Social support and contact with other women outside of regular kinship networks were perceived to be of great benefit to women, as was microfinance's ability to empower adolescent girls.

Fifteen studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the apparent or perceived benefits of participating in microfinance programmes in terms of their ability to empower women (Aslanbeigui et al. 2010, Ahmed 2008, Garikipati 2013, Guerin et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006, Ray-Bennett 2010, Sanyal 2009, Shahnaz and Karim 2008, Shetty 2010, Schuler et al. 1996, Uddin 2014 and Zand 2011). While microfinance is largely focused on contributing to the empowerment of women, microfinance participation could also lead to negative experiences and consequences for women in terms of their opportunities for empowerment. Six studies contained qualitative data pertaining to women beneficiaries' experiences of disempowerment as a consequence of participating in microfinance programmes (Ahmed 2008, Cons and Paprocki 2010, Garikipati 2013, Shahnaz and Karim 2008, Schuler et al. 1996 and Zand 2011). It is interesting to note that the studies that reported negative experiences in terms of women's empowerment are also those that contained positive experiences, indicating that the positive and negative experiences were felt by beneficiaries of the same programmes. For three findings discussed below, both positive and negative experiences were identified pertaining to the same phenomena. These were: decision making, domestic abuse and violence, and social and household status and respect. These findings are discussed below, bringing together both positive and negative

experiences to explain the variable nature of beneficiaries' experiences of participation in microfinance programmes.

MOBILITY AND INDEPENDENCE

Women beneficiaries experienced benefits from participating in microfinance programmes in terms of improving their mobility and independence in their households and the community at large. Women from all countries and regions spoke of how their participation in microfinance programmes had led to great improvements in their physical mobility and independence outside the home and in their communities. While increases in mobility and independence were not equal for all women, or always apparent, many women spoke positively about the changes that microfinance participation had facilitated. Lower-caste women with relatively low levels of mobility prior to participation tended to emphasise the improvements to their physical mobility more than did higher-caste women, due to the greater significance placed on the facilitation of access to credit that self-help-group microcredit programmes had provided. Lower-caste women tended to face greater constraints upon their mobility and independence than women of higher castes. In one study conducted in Afghanistan, men rarely reported an increase in the mobility of women as a result of microfinance participation; however, women in this study noted that this could be because they were already fairly mobile and independent prior to involvement in microfinance programmes.

Mobility and independence appeared to improve partly due to the women beneficiaries' having to leave their homes to participate in group meetings and to go to communal spaces such as market places and banks without men or other family members accompanying them. Simply having the opportunity to meet and spend time with other men and women outside of the home was felt to increase beneficiaries' social circles and relationships. The acceptance of the increased need to move beyond the traditional household milieu was experienced very positively by some women, who reported an improvement in their self-confidence. Improvements to self-confidence as a result of increased independence and mobility appeared to be related to length of participation; the longer women participated in programmes, the higher their confidence in themselves and their independence. Group membership and the opportunities to network with others also led to a greater sense of independence and feelings of psychological well-being.

While opposition to improvements to women's mobility and independence was also found, as discussed below, other household members could be extremely supportive and encouraging.

Independence could also be conferred on the household more broadly through women's participation in microfinance programmes, when they used their loans to reduce the dependence of the household on others. In this way, women's improved independence may contribute to social harmony and peace between family members.

FINANCIAL, BUSINESS, VOCATIONAL AND SOCIAL SKILLS

Women beneficiaries experienced improved financial, business and social skills. While women learned practical financial, business, and social skills simply by having to manage loans, repayments, income-generating ventures, and attending meetings, up-skilling women's financial, business and vocational skills was an element of a number of microfinance programmes. Credit-plus programmes, in particular, emphasise these added services to their beneficiaries. By involving women in training programmes, women gained a greater knowledge and awareness of banks, their policies, and of the risks of dealing with local money lenders. While significant changes were not reported by all women, many who began with few relevant skills reported that the development of financial and business skills was invaluable to them. As with the women who experienced improved mobility, these women experienced enhanced feelings of self-confidence and worth; women who reported improved business, financial and social skills also felt greater confidence and self-worth. Confidence and self-esteem from developing practical business and financial skills was also linked to women's feeling that they were now meaningfully contributing to their households' economy. Women's skills were also recognised and appreciated by other household and community members. Increased skills, confidence, and respect were then intimately tied with improved social standing and respect from other family and community members. It was also found that women did not necessarily have to retain complete control over loans in order to experience benefits in terms of their increased ability to negotiate in financial matters. Even when loans were requisitioned by husbands or other family members, the skills gained through programme participation were still noted by participants.

DECISION MAKING

Women in a number of studies experienced both positive benefits and negative consequences in terms of their involvement in decision making as a result of participating in microfinance programmes. Decision making included decisions at individual level (such as whom to vote for in local elections); household level (such as decisions concerning how to spend money or about raising children); and business decisions, including how to allocate money to income-generating activities. While some beneficiaries experienced improvement in their involvement in household decision making, other women's involvement in decision making was actually reduced due to their participation. Nevertheless, many women singled out improved decision making as one of the main benefits of microfinance participation. Indeed, decision making is a significant element of women's empowerment in a general sense. Decision making may be very closely tied to financial, business, vocational and social skills, and it appears that, by gaining these skills, women's confidence also improves in terms of their ability to participate in household decision making. These women can also be more readily acknowledged by other household members as being able to participate in the household decision-making process. Independence also appeared to be heavily linked to decision making.

Women may emphasise improvements to decision making, at least partly as it is often due to simply being the sole recipients of microfinance products. Even when loans were appropriated

by other family members, simply being the initial recipient of the loan appeared to mean that women were able to exercise some level of decision making in relation to household finances. Even while husbands were often reported to have the final say on many financial and business matters, participation in decision making was viewed as a significant change for many women.

Improvements to women's involvement in decision making also extended to their ability to make decisions in terms of their children's education, household-consumption issues, access to health services, and the choice of marriage partners. Upon joining programmes, many women became more involved in decision making at individual, household and business levels.

Beneficiaries' experiences of being able to improve their financial situation appeared to demonstrate a pattern where increased financial assets led to less poverty-related stress and vulnerability, and resulted in healthier relationships and more cooperative decision making. Women's improved participation in decision making meant that relationships within the household could be less strained. When women were less dependent upon their husband's potentially fluctuating wages, they could also be less vulnerable to domestic abuse and violence. Overall, even when women's participation in decision making appeared minor, improvements were regularly noted.

Women also experienced reduced involvement in decision making as a result of participating in microfinance programmes. Women described immense pressure from their husbands or family members to take loans and, as opposed to feeling empowered and liberated by their access to credit, women felt their options had been constrained and their ability to make choices reduced. These women felt like conduits for credit to their husbands, rather than controllers or decision makers.

This lowered ability to be involved in decision making also occurred when young women and adolescent girls were offered loans without adequate skills training in their use. Here, loans were often given away to other family members, with the primary beneficiary having lost all control. What women spent their loan money on was also found to constrain their decision-making potential, as women who used their loans for general household expenses or non-income-generating expenses experienced notable limitations in terms of their influence over household decision making and livelihood options.

DOMESTIC ABUSE AND VIOLENCE

Beneficiaries experienced both reduced and increased domestic violence and abuse in relation to their participation in microfinance programmes. This variable experience was found in studies that contained both positive and negative experiences in terms of domestic violence and abuse, indicating that the phenomenon was unlikely to be related to the particular programmes. Women beneficiaries may face violence and abuse from husbands and other family or community members as a result of their participation in microfinance programmes. Abuse did not always take the form of physical violence; women spoke of how the abuse could come in the form of verbal abuse, being told one was worthless to the family if a loan was not taken.

Some studies also reported women's experiences of reduced violence against them as a result of participating. Microfinance often led to changes in the gender roles of women beneficiaries, which had an impact upon their relationships with men, especially their husbands, who traditionally were heads of the household and chief breadwinners. Because, in many cases, providing money to women as opposed to men means confronting highly ingrained patriarchal systems that can be fraught with domestic violence, women participants may be seen by their families and their communities as subverting gender roles. Violence and abuse towards women could arise due to challenges to these gender roles and women's increasing mobility, which seemed to fuel resentment, fear and anger on the part of their husbands, who then resorted to physical violence and even threats of murder. Even when abuse and violence appeared to be reduced or avoided as a result of participation in microfinance programmes, women's explanations of their experiences appeared to be somewhat ambiguously positive. Indeed, the findings showed how reduced or improved violence against women does not appear to be a simple outcome of participation. While participation may lead to an increase in domestic violence, it can also confer improved confidence in the face of a continual physical threat.

SOCIAL AND HOUSEHOLD STATUS AND RESPECT

Women beneficiaries often experienced increased respect and status within the household and community as apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes. Participants shared stories of how, as beneficiaries of microfinance programmes, they experienced improvements to their personal and household status, both in relation to other family members and the community. This increase in status appeared to be related to a number of factors, one being directly tied to having an improved income, and ability to use that income for savings and asset accumulation and improvement. With increased wealth, accumulated over many years of borrowing, the status and respect afforded to beneficiaries by others also appeared to increase, as reported by the beneficiaries themselves. Status and respect appeared to be closely linked to women's empowerment in terms of increased mobility and independence within their communities. Some women even commented that their status in the community had become greater than that of their husbands. Increased respect from husbands was also important to beneficiaries, who not only enjoyed being less financially and socially dependent, but also being able to contribute to the household's financial and social situation.

Increased status and respect from husbands also appeared to afford women in Bangladesh some protection against violence and abuse. Violence from husbands against their wives may diminish when women bring home loan money. Even when husbands appropriated their wives' loans, the acknowledgment that the wife was the source of this benefit improves her position in the house. Similar improvements in women's status within households were also reported in Afghanistan, where, despite the limitations on credit for improving women's participation in decision making, beneficiaries appeared to have a stronger voice in their households. Beneficiaries may assist their husbands with their business ventures, and, despite not having direct control over their household's financial situation, may acknowledge their own value in the household. Increased status and respect from husbands and other family

members made beneficiaries more assertive in voicing concerns, and some husbands even changed their own behaviour in response.

Increased respect from neighbours, relatives and other community members appeared to reinforce women's self-esteem and lead to more positive social interaction. Women beneficiaries' improved self-respect, social skills and ability to interact with larger social networks appeared to be closely linked with women's having a greater voice and increased social standing within household relationships and in the community. As women's status increased, and the respect afforded to them grew, they often began to take up leadership roles in the programmes and in their communities. Improved status for beneficiaries also appeared to have an impact upon restrictions imposed by caste. Some beneficiaries reported that they were able to attend programme meetings and other activities, sit, talk, and eat together with other women, regardless of their caste.

However, improvements to status were not universal, as one study found evidence that women perceived that their social status had dropped as a result of participating in microfinance; beneficiaries reported that, prior to obtaining their loans, many engaged in agricultural work on family farms or within their own households. The wage labour necessary to make loan repayments was perceived to be of lower status and, consequently, was experienced negatively.

SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND SUPPORT

While the social support and solidarity between members was not a guaranteed experience for all women, many beneficiaries spoke of how participation in microfinance programmes had led to improvements in their experience of social support and solidarity between members — both within groups, such as members of the same SHG, and sometimes with members of groups from other programmes in the area. Women from each study — especially SHG members — described their personal investment in the continuation of their group. With the enhanced mobility experienced by many members, as discussed above, SHGs offered members an opportunity to come together and share their experiences during meetings, something which did not previously occur in their everyday lives. Women in the studies were often not a close-knit group before programme participation, and it was evident that, as opposed to tapping into an existing community, microfinance programmes facilitated the creation and maintenance of a new, vibrant and supportive community for beneficiaries.

By participating in the frequent meetings, as is often required of group members, mutual identification between women was nurtured and strengthened. Women who once would not have come into contact with one another were motivated to offer support to others. This, in effect, led to an expansion of women's social networks and the development of firm non-kinship networks. Women who were able to participate in regular group meetings and training sessions were able to benefit from the opportunity to cross previously difficult household and neighbourhood boundaries. Group membership offered women a way of accessing support and information not otherwise available to them. Women spoke of finding out about new resources, such as daycare centres, which are important to women who must attend many

meetings, through participating in group discussions. The kind of support that members experienced was not limited solely to social support. SHG membership in Guerin's (2010) study also led to the reinforcement of the financial networks of women beneficiaries. The majority of members spoke of how they would often exchange loans, either giving part of their loan to another member or repaying their own debts earlier to allow other members to benefit.

Women discussed how microfinance programmes were also able to increase their ability to undertake collective action to intervene and protect women from domestic abuse, policing moral issues such as extramarital affairs, underage marriage, male sexually permissive behaviour, and attempted polygamy to social and community issues such as anti-liquor and gambling campaigns, acquiring public goods, and organising public events.

CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM

Women beneficiaries experienced increased personal confidence, pride and self-esteem as a result of participating in microfinance programmes. Confidence, pride and self-esteem appeared to be closely linked with the improvements in women's skills, knowledge and status within their households and the community. This confidence meant that they were better able to get by in social situations they may have previously avoided. Apparently, confidence was also associated with greater mobility. By participating in programmes, women began to feel more comfortable and confident in community spaces and interactions that were once intimidating. Happiness and self confidence rose due to women's newly gained ability to contribute to the household income and financial situation. Taking loans placed a monetary value on their contribution, which appears to have resulted in an amplified sense of value. Because women felt able to plan better futures for both themselves and their families, their confidence also benefited; simply having access to an independent source of credit was important to women.

There was a great sense of pride in having exclusive access to credit, and, even when loans were not put to a business-related use, women felt pride in having attained them. The newfound sense of self-confidence gained by many women as a result of participation in microfinance programmes was discussed by many beneficiaries.

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS AND ADOLESCENTS

Young women and adolescent girls experienced increased empowerment from participating in microfinance programmes. Empowerment of adolescent girls could be seen to be equally beneficial and be experienced as similarly positive by adult women beneficiaries. For the poor in South Asian countries such as Bangladesh and India, women's roles can be traditionally restricted to the household, while men may participate more actively in the community. As discussed above, women who participate in microfinance programmes may experience various improvements to mobility, confidence, and an increased ability to move outside the home and into the wider community. In one study conducted in India, women beneficiaries explained that, because they themselves had participated in microfinance programmes, they had gained a greater appreciation of the importance of women's equality and empowerment

— not just for adult women, but for children, too. Women had begun to see it as equally important for girls to be educated, to receive the same healthcare as boys, and to have savings accounts devoted to their education and benefit.

The lives of adolescent girls may be largely predetermined by unequal social norms and characterised by inequality and subordination to family and society. Early marriage, dowry requirements, frequent pregnancy, abandonment or divorce, domestic violence, marginalisation and exclusion from social and economic opportunities are all common realities. While girls tended to begin their involvement with programmes mainly to receive training for income-generating activities, the opportunity to improve their knowledge about social issues was also an improvement. Participation in programmes brought about greater social solidarity and support for girls; many girls spoke of having many new friends, and reported the ability to have greater access to social events. Mobility was also improved for many, with girls explaining that they could now travel in groups beyond the village to markets, cinemas and community events in the city.

The financial services and skills education provided by the programme also meant that young women and girls acquired financial-management skills. Participation in the programmes appeared to be strongly associated with improvements to adolescent girls' social and financial skills, confidence and mobility.

EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL AND PERSONAL IMPACT: POSITIVE BENEFITS AND NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

Seven studies contained qualitative data on beneficiaries' experiences of the apparent or perceived benefits of participating in microfinance programmes in terms of their ability to lead to positive social and personal impacts (Jones et al. 2007, Joseph 2005, Khan 2014, Krenz et al. 2014, Lyby 2006, Shetty 2010 and Zand 2011). This was the smallest of the themes around the positive benefits of microfinance-programme participation, probably because all of the included studies tended to focus on how microfinance had benefitted people in terms of their financial situation or in terms of women's empowerment (two main foci of microfinance). Beneficiaries spoke of improved diets and the ability to invest in the future of their children. They also remarked upon their improved knowledge of and access to health services. Microfinance was also a way for people who otherwise may lack a strong voice in community matters to be heard by more powerful community members and decision makers. Finally, green microcredit, an emerging subset of microfinance, was a way for people to learn how to more sustainably utilise local natural resources to benefit their families.

Positive experiences were, however, not universal, as eight studies contained qualitative evidence of various negative social and personal impacts that people faced as a result of participation in various microfinance programmes (Garikipati 2013, Joseph 2005, Krenz et al. 2014, Ray-Bennett 2010, Ashraf Ali 2014, Cons and Paprocki 2010, Uddin 2014 and Lyby 2006).

DIET

One study conducted with women SHG members of a microcredit programme in rural India found that women had experienced improvements to their diets since joining the programme. Not only had beneficiaries' food quality increased, but they were also beginning to be able to secure their own more sustainable sources of food, including livestock for meat and milk, and land on which to grow rice, vegetables and fruit.

CHILDREN'S EDUCATION, EXPENSE AND ASPIRATIONS

Beneficiaries experienced or perceived that they were able to invest more in their children's education, and had greater aspirations for the future of their children as a result of participating in microcredit programmes. Even when beneficiaries expressed no particular plans for themselves, joining an SHG and receiving loans meant that they were able to plan for their children's future. Many beneficiaries in these studies invested their money loaned through the microcredit programmes in the education of their children or in child-related expenses. Women spoke of their pride in making financial contributions to their children's education, not simply because it helped earn the respect of their husbands, but also because it ensured the best possible education for both daughters and sons. Women explained how they were putting the knowledge gained through participation in SHGs into action by ensuring that both their sons and daughters received education as a result of their mothers' participation in microfinance. As such, parents' aspirations for the future of their children had been improved and were brighter for their having become participants.

One study contained evidence that children's education opportunities may be negatively impacted by their parents' participating in microfinance programmes. When beneficiaries invest their loans in income-generating activities that require their children's participation, children's opportunities for education can be negatively impacted. Even with good investments, there may be a trade-off in other areas of people's lives.

ACCESS TO AND KNOWLEDGE OF HEALTH SERVICES

Beneficiaries experienced greater access to knowledge of and access to healthcare services. Some beneficiaries reported that they were not able to access the specialised healthcare that they required (beyond the traditional and local medical shops) prior to participation. Beneficiaries also recognised that they had an improved awareness of local, district and regional health services. Beneficiaries also reported gaining knowledge and skills from attending training programmes that covered health issues, family planning, social issues (alcohol and substance abuse) and gender issues such as gender equality and the need for women to take care of their own health.

SOCIAL SPACE FOR MEMBERS' VOICES TO BE HEARD

As a result of microfinance participation, beneficiaries experienced improved access to social spaces for their voices to be heard regarding issues that were important to them. Microfinance programmes helped beneficiaries not only to access a source of loans; they were also a platform for minority populations to have their voices heard in the community. The greater

involvement of microfinance beneficiaries in community affairs may be seen as a positive development, and some women beneficiaries welcomed the new role as recognition of their group within their local community.

KNOWLEDGE OF SUSTAINABLE-RESOURCE USE

Participation in green microfinance programmes in Bangladesh appeared to help beneficiaries gain new knowledge of how to manage their local natural resources in a more sustainable manner, which could benefit them and their families.

OBLIGATIONS AND WORKLOAD

The increase in workload and obligations as a result of participating in microfinance programmes could sometimes be experienced negatively by beneficiaries. Some women commented that, due to having to attend meetings for the SHGs they were involved in, they would miss out on at least two hours' worth of income. While women in another study felt pride at being able to contribute to their household economy, they also spoke of the increased workload and responsibilities they faced and also remarked that the obligations to attend meetings sometimes meant that their safety was put at risk, owing to their returning home late.

POOR TREATMENT BY MICROFINANCE STAFF

Beneficiaries sometimes experienced poor treatment and abuse by the staff of MFIs. More often than not, this abuse was suffered in the context of not paying loan repayments on time, and could either be indecent, shaming language used by staff, or the encouragement by staff of the physical abuse of beneficiaries. This kind of abuse and shaming can be devastating for women beneficiaries. Pressure on microfinance-loan officers to collect repayments appears to be an incentive for them to use any practice at their disposal to make sure that women repay on time. This may lead to both physical and sexual abuse by male staff.

UNSUPPORTIVE MICROFINANCE PRACTICES, PROCESSES

Beneficiaries could experience a lack of support in terms of the practices and processes of MFIs. People sometimes felt let down when organisations did not follow their own rules and failed to organise meetings for beneficiaries, despite maintaining that meetings were required. This indicated to beneficiaries that there was a power divide between them and the microfinance staff — those who made the rules and didn't have to adhere to them and beneficiaries who simply had to repay their loans on time. Lack of meetings then led to members' feeling unconnected to one another, isolated, and as though the organisation was only interested in their money. Because the MFI had not helped the group members develop a sense of responsibility towards one another, the ability of the group to work effectively was compromised. Beneficiaries could feel unsupported in their group and that they were not able to rely on the other beneficiaries.

SINFULNESS OF CHARGING INTEREST UNDER ISLAMIC LAW

The evidence from one study showed that beneficiaries may have negative experiences regarding their participation in microfinance programmes, due to the fact that, in accordance with Islamic Law, charging interest is considered sinful. Participants faced resistance and arguments from family members who were afraid to take loans and felt that participation would negatively affect them in the future by removing the blessing of the money.

MOTIVES FOR DECIDING TO PARTICIPATE/NOT TO PARTICIPATE OR DROP OUT OF A MICROFINANCE PROGRAMME

Twelve studies investigating microfinance programmes in South Asia collected qualitative data regarding motives or reasons to participate or not in microfinance programmes. Studies were deemed to be of low to very high methodological quality. Although we aimed to investigate factors and experiences leading to drop out, no findings were identified in the literature regarding withdrawal from a microfinance programme. The key motivations or reasons to participate identified in the included studies were: male domination; the desire to escape poverty and cycles of debt; to dominate others and hold a position of power; to be able to provide for their family and, particularly, their children; and to access health insurance. It was found that some participants preferred microcredit over other forms of finance.

The key motivations or reasons to not participate identified in the included studies were: the desire to avoid conflict in the home; religious beliefs, whereby loans with interest were seen as sinful; problems with MFIs and difficulties related to their operations, products, and in fulfilling obligations; and reduced employment and household status.

Twelve studies included qualitative data regarding motives or reasons to participate or not in microfinance programmes across two categories:

- (i) Motives or reasons to participate in microfinance programmes.
- (ii) Motives or reasons to not participate in microfinance programmes.

MOTIVES OR REASONS TO PARTICIPATE

PREFERENCE OF MALE HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS

Continued participation was sometimes a pragmatic decision. Although women might have preferred to discontinue participation, it was not always a choice they felt free to make in the presence of opposition from male family members.

TO ESCAPE POVERTY

A perceived optimism regarding the future and the potential to escape from poverty were powerful influences motivating women's participation. Where this hope was realised, the motivation to continue with microfinance programmes became a significant driver in women's lives.

DEBT CYCLES

The cyclical nature of debt, and the balancing act associated with incurring debt in order to meet repayments on an existing debt, created pressures to engage and continue participation.

DOMINATION OF OTHERS

Successful female participants in SHG microfinance programmes experienced a form of power over others through having financial or social influence, and used this to extend their personal status or prestige.

BENEFIT TO CHILDREN

Future benefit to children was a powerful motivator. The participants were so influenced by this, that the benefit did not need to be realised, it could be a long-term potential benefit to their children, acting as a continuing motivating factor for participating in microfinance programmes.

ACCESS TO HEALTH INSURANCE

Health insurance was viewed positively, but infrequently identified in the literature. Experiences of micro-insurance as an adjunct service to microfinance were reported.

PREFERRED OVER OTHER SOURCES OF CREDIT

Participation in microfinance by NGOs or companies was experienced as facilitatory and lower interest rates were seen as helpful, rather than opportunistic or profiteering (perspectives commonly associated with traditional money lenders).

MOTIVATIONS OR REASONS TO NOT PARTICIPATE

Motivations to participate were experienced in relation to the home environment, spiritual or religious beliefs and impact on the experiences of participants.

AVOID CONFLICT IN THE HOME

Female participants of group-lending microcredit programmes were conflicted by a desire to improve their lives or their children's lives, but also to reduce or avoid conflict. Establishing and maintaining family harmony was owned as a female role; some women were able to overcome this opposition, but, for others, it was a barrier to participation.

LOANS WITH INTEREST SEEN AS SINFUL

Religious beliefs impacted women's decision making regarding microfinance participation. Where giving or receiving a loan that carried interest was seen as sinful, participants who did not want to commit a sin did not enrol.

PROBLEMS WITH MFIS, OPERATIONS, OBLIGATIONS AND PRODUCTS

The reputation and practices of MFIs or NGOs caused some women anxiety or difficulties; this led to migration between programmes, rather than cessation of microfinance involvement.

REDUCED EMPLOYMENT AND HOUSEHOLD STATUS

Women's experiences of bearing sole responsibility for their own repayments (rather than their being a family responsibility) included practices that negatively impacted their self-esteem, such as becoming paid day-labourers to help cover loan repayments.

BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF OTHER HOUSEHOLD AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS TOWARDS MICROFINANCE-PROGRAMME PARTICIPANTS

Five studies informed the section on householder and community members' beliefs and attitudes related to microfinance. The themes identified and reported upon included women's empowerment and equality, use of loans only, independence and mobility, knowledge and financial skills, and normative gender development for girls.

POSITIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF HOUSEHOLDERS

The support (or lack thereof) from household members was profoundly felt by women participating in microfinance. While resistance was common, women were increasingly supported as family members experienced the benefits to the household. The positive impact on householder beliefs and attitudes could be described as a reactive experience for many women across the included studies — resistance to participation was gradually reduced as benefits were observed and experienced.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND EQUALITY

Empowerment was experienced through knowledge and skill acquisition, with women experiencing a greater role as a knowledge broker for the household, once it became clear that participation in microfinance was increasing their skills and knowledge in running a household. Equality was experienced as women's empowerment grew through having the ability to use and leverage knowledge. The support of sons was found to be as important as the support of husbands, with the modification of traditional male roles in the house an enabling experience for many women.

POSITIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

There were fewer studies that investigated community attitudes, with comments from women predominantly focused on their home life. What became clear through the qualitative evidence was the broad impact of positive beliefs and attitudes across family and community. Women experienced community support in some cases as a net benefit of receiving household support, and, in other cases, were able to overcome household resistance by leveraging community support.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND EQUALITY

Being perceived as 'good' was a concern experienced by women, particularly adolescents. The pressure on girls to be 'good' in a traditional role tended to limit community interaction and autonomy. Participation in microfinance led to adolescent girls' gaining recreation time and

equality with their peers, without being seen as losing their traditional ‘family-centric’ roles through group activities associated with microfinance. Although empowerment began with an external locus through the support of community members, as women experienced equality and increased signs of respect, the studies found they also increased in empowerment and autonomy — without loss of the label of a ‘good woman’.

KNOWLEDGE AND FINANCIAL SKILLS

While not extensively reported on as a construct, knowledge and skills in finance were rewarded by the community through acknowledgement and respect. Some women gained respect for their increased ability to be frugal, to save and to be seen as ‘spending wisely’. The experience became linked with other phenomena, such as empowerment and equality, as community respect was demonstrated through gift giving, social recognition and deference to the women’s increased knowledge in practical financial management. Women gained social acceptance and mobility through the recognition of their ability to provide for, and manage, their families

NORMATIVE GENDER DEVELOPMENT FOR GIRLS

Socialisation was profoundly influenced by girls’ (adolescents’) participation in microfinance. Resistance was experienced, but at a reduced level and positive community experiences increased and became self-reinforcing for girls who were gaining knowledge through their microfinance participation. The experience of increased community support included reminders and encouragement to attend meetings and participate in group activities, through which girls experienced a broadening of their life experience.

NEGATIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF HOUSEHOLDERS

Resistance to participation in microfinance was not always resolved, as women gained and exercised their new knowledge and skills.

KNOWLEDGE AND FINANCIAL SKILLS

Women may experience negative influences from family members if the growth in their knowledge and role is perceived as ‘non-traditional’ or causes resentment among male family members (particularly husbands). In such cases, an increase in knowledge and skills was followed by increased resistance. Resistance was experienced as personal criticism of the woman, or of the status of the household. Men who felt their family was adequately well-off felt no need for further income, meaning that some women experienced criticism and a lack of support.

INDEPENDENCE AND MOBILITY

Criticism as an expression of negative beliefs and attitudes was experienced in terms of both words and actions. A lack of support was physically experienced as limitations on the ability to engage with the wider community, to leave the home, or exercise the skills and knowledge gained through microfinance participation. Some women experienced loss of control of the financial assets that they had built up, imposed on them in order to reduce the risk of their

independence, leading to greater social mobility. Conformity with a traditional perspective of a 'good wife' for some men did not include activities outside the home environment, and the wives of these men experienced criticism of their character.

USE OF LOANS ONLY

Negative beliefs and attitudes were also evident in how some men appeared to provide support, but were, in actuality, controlling and restricting their wives. Some women were supported to get a microfinance loan, but experienced threats to restrict their social engagement if applications for loans were unsuccessful. Social manipulation to continue loan cycles may be experienced by women in microfinance.

NEGATIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Perhaps due to the immediacy of the impact of negative beliefs and attitudes by family members, there was very little evidence on wider community-member impact and experiences.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND EQUALITY

As with overt resistance by male family members, negative community attitudes were expressed as verbal attacks on the woman's character. Women who experience community-based discrimination face attempts to manipulate their behaviour.

5.3 REPRESENTATION OF THE SYNTHESIS

Many of the experiences female microfinance beneficiaries reported were interrelated. Family support was more important to many women than community-based support, yet families and communities could both be influenced by each other. If family support was strong, this was often reflected in improved community standing and status, while, if family support was lacking, the women experienced lower levels of personal resilience, and increased community pressures. Skills and knowledge that improved female beneficiaries' ability to contribute to the household was beneficial to women's self-esteem, their social capital, and, therefore, their reputation in the wider community.

The social and personal impact of microfinance participation was cumulative. Women who were able to persist with multiple loan cycles appeared to have increased family support, greater self-confidence, and greater capacity to repay and manage loan cycles. This suggests that the social and personal impact of microfinance was tied to greater economic experience and empowerment. However, the benefits were experienced most positively when microfinance was inclusive of programmes or activities that actively promoted learning, social engagement and entrepreneurship. The provision of stand-alone microfinance did not have the same impact for women, as they risked being isolated and manipulated. When beneficiaries had positive experiences, these were self-reinforcing, both for the participant, their family, and the wider community. In the absence of positive experiences, participants suffered socio-culturally and personally, not just financially.

We therefore view the role of microfinance as being an integrated capacity-building experience that should be framed by three core principles. Microfinance should enable the most vulnerable to become co-contributors to their family and community; empowerment is intrinsic to the positive experiences of women, in particular. Microfinance programmes should aim to include strategies and requirements that assist minority groups or individuals to develop social capital through the development of relevant skills and knowledge. Financial and economic-management experience is cumulative, and has a key role in improving individuals' self-confidence, their households' level of support, and positive wider-community sentiment. Without the integration of these themes, female beneficiaries, in particular, had more negative experiences, and lost what little support or status they previously held. The inter-relationship between these three core themes and household-plus-community attitudes and beliefs has been a core finding of this qualitative systematic review and synthesis. Figure 3 illustrates the integrated nature of the major themes and how they connect with individual beneficiaries, as well as household and community attitudes and beliefs.

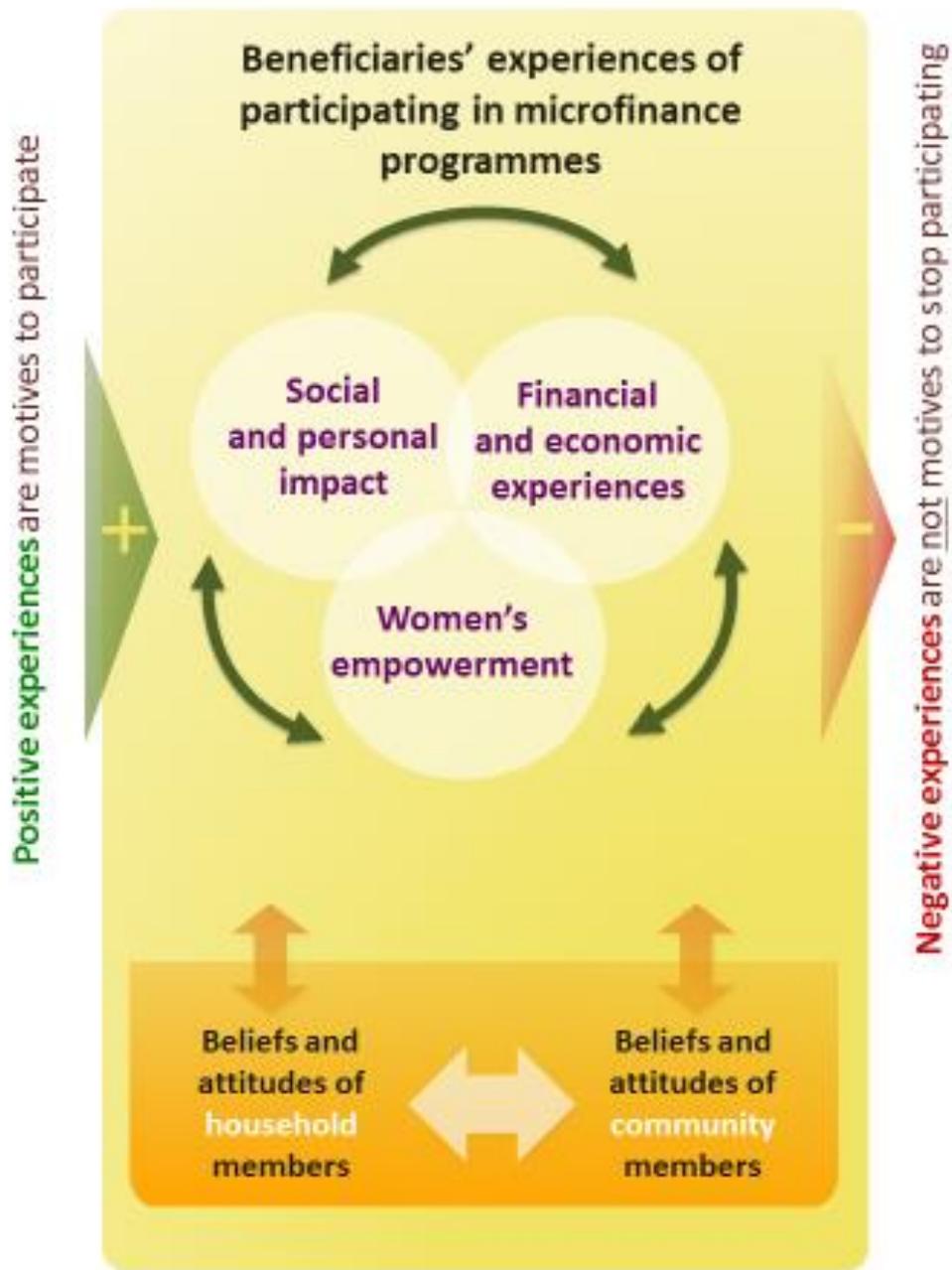


Figure 3: Expression of the synthesis for beneficiaries' experiences of participating in microfinance programmes

6.1 CONCLUSIONS

It is significant to note that positive and negative experiences appeared to be associated with all programmes, from all areas and participant groups, indicating that, whether participants experienced participation as positive or negative, the specific type or content of the programme did not appear to be at issue, nor was it the cause of the type of experience. Rather, it appears to be more likely that issues such as support — or the lack of it — from other household members, the community at large, as well as prevalent social and development issues concerning women's empowerment and poverty, contributed more greatly to whether programme participation was experienced positively or negatively. There were lessons, however, for microfinance organisations in terms of some very specific activities, processes and policies that were not experienced positively; for example, inflexibility of repayment schedules, and policies that tacitly supported asset confiscation and abuse from fieldworkers. Another important lesson appears to be that financial services alone, while experienced positively, do not appear to be as helpful as programmes that also include skills training, knowledge transfer and capacity development. Below, a number of implications for policy and practice are provided, based upon the evidence located by this review.

This review has shown that the beliefs and attitudes of other household and community members may be important factors that motivate people to participate — or not to participate — in the programmes offered by MFIs. On one hand, positive beliefs and attitudes (for example; that women's empowerment is valuable, that children's education and futures are worth investing in, and that participation may afford financial and economic benefits to households and lift them out of poverty) may inspire and motivate women to participate in programmes. Other positive experiences were grounded in the personal development of the individual, with perceptions that microfinance participation may lead to women's improving their knowledge and financial skills, mobility and independence. On the other hand, these personal benefits were not always realised when empowerment was not valued by the household or community, thereby limiting or restricting women's capacity to participate.

Furthermore, the beliefs and attitudes of household and community members also impact the experiences of beneficiaries who participate in microfinance programmes. For example, women beneficiaries who are supported and encouraged by other household members — especially husbands and male family members — in communities that have positive beliefs and attitudes towards beneficiaries of microfinance programmes would be more likely to have positive experiences. These positive experiences were identified by women across the included studies, covering personal and social impact, financial and economic experiences, and empowerment. Likewise, if household members and communities were unsupportive, beneficiaries' experiences were negative. Motivation to continue their participation was found in this systematic review to be predicated upon the views of household and community members.

6.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC EXPERIENCES

Microfinance organisations should consider microfinance as a way of benefiting members psycho-socially, by empowering and facilitating personal growth and development. The value of non-productive assets to a women's socio-cultural experience should not be overlooked. For example, among very poor women living in either a rural or urban environment, investing in home improvements may benefit individuals and households by enhancing social standing and respect in the community, and improving feelings of self-worth and confidence. Quality of life, social mobility, and self-esteem were experienced with the autonomy to make purchasing decisions even in the absence of a direct financial return.

Decision making around the administration of loan terms and conditions should be informed by the understanding that women who had flexibility concerning how they used loans and income generated from microenterprise were better able to manage household and business finances. Punitive or coercive strategies to enforce loan repayments can increase the vulnerability of women living in rural environments; may negatively impact status; and disenfranchise women in the key relationships within the household and community, leading to further financial and economic disempowerment. Repayment strategies should be designed with an understanding of beneficiaries' contexts and circumstances, and explicitly address and minimise damaging loan-repayment enforcement techniques. Increased focus on training in financial literacy and investment, ensuring that individual beneficiaries have adequate skills to use and repay their loans successfully may help beneficiaries to improve their capacity as loan-users.

MFIs could consider offering education and information that highlights the financial and economic risks and responsibilities of participating in microfinance programmes. This sort of information may particularly benefit women living in rural areas prior to their joining, and help them to understand the experiences that they may encounter.

Unforeseen crises, such as natural disasters or family emergencies, have been found to negate the potential benefits of financial and economic security associated with microfinance, and to lead to amplified poverty, particularly in rural areas. Strategies should be considered to provide savings protection, short-term flexibility on loan repayments, and timely access to micro-insurance for the poor to very poor, particularly beneficiaries in rural environments. MFIs may consider implementing programmes that provide social-security services, such as food rations, in times when the very poor are the most vulnerable and tend to use their loans and savings to cover basic needs or emergency costs.

MFIs should consider developing policies that encourage and enable support and engagement, especially from male household members, as female beneficiaries may face negative experiences relating to other household members when managing loans and repayments. By encouraging and supporting an attitude of shared responsibility among household members, MFIs may be able to help women avoid negative experiences linked to

a lack of household support. Identifying the degree of household support for women during loan applications as a mechanism for understanding women's needs and ability to repay loans should be considered as a strategy to ensure that women with a low level of literacy, working in subsistence agriculture, are not disadvantaged by their own, or other household members', attitudes and actions.

The dynamics and operation of self-help and group-lending programmes can be affected by power imbalances, where some women experience domination by more powerful or wealthy members; this experience may relate to caste and/or social standing, and significantly influence the lives of very poor women from low-caste groups. Organisations administering such groups should monitor and ensure that groups have equitable socio-cultural and financial balance for all members.

EXPERIENCES OF EMPOWERMENT AND DISEMPOWERMENT

Loan policies and requirements that are sensitive to the experiences and contexts of low-caste beneficiaries and the very poor can contribute to activities that enable women beneficiaries to experience increased personal liberty, particularly where microfinance includes opportunities or requirements for participatory group processes and engagement. MFIs may be able to support more widespread empowerment for women in South Asian communities and could consider developing strategies that involve women in discussions of women's rights, community, and political and common household problems, in order to facilitate solidarity and a sense of community among women.

Women gain confidence and skill in financial management as they participate over a series of loan cycles. Low self-confidence, which may impact early loan performance, should not rule out future loan considerations. Capacity for group learning in areas of financial, business, vocational and social skills within microfinance programmes should be considered by MFIs as a way to assist women in transitioning to greater self-empowerment. Policies specific to the needs of female participants that encourage group participatory processes for individual, household, business and community decision-making should also be considered. MFIs should offer programmes for developing women's skill and knowledge to assist women towards improving their independence and mobility within the community, in particular for low-caste women, as they tend to experience greater constraints on their physical mobility.

MFIs should examine ways in which to raise awareness on the part of staff of domestic violence facing low-caste women, so that programme membership may capitalise on its potential to protect women from the increased risk of domestic violence and abuse. To help reduce domestic violence as a result of microfinance participation, male household and community members who are supportive and positive regarding women's empowerment could be identified and targeted by MFIs as local 'champions' to assist in motivating other, less supportive men regarding the benefits of women participating in microfinance. Further, MFIs may promote the benefits of microfinance as experienced by all household members as a strategy to reduce domestic violence and abuse. Unsupervised contact with male staff may put women beneficiaries at risk of exposure to damaging rumours and gossip in the

community. MFIs may consider employing women working at community level in socio-cultural contexts, where it may be inappropriate for women beneficiaries to have unsupervised contact with a mostly male staff.

EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL AND PERSONAL IMPACT

To support the involvement of and benefit to adolescent girls and young women from rural backgrounds, MFIs should consider developing policies that support and address adolescent girls' need for recreation within their cultural context. These would enhance normative development and diversity of social interaction for the participants. Current microfinance policies should be reviewed to address and expand the culturally embedded notion of a traditional woman's role and to empower women to participate more fully within their family and the wider community. Women could be encouraged by MFIs to identify and reflect on their personal growth, including interpersonal skills, and knowledge arising from their participation in microfinance.

MFIs should explore methods for improving beneficiaries' access to and knowledge of health and healthcare services.

The actions and behaviour of staff members can have a considerable impact upon the experiences of beneficiaries. MFIs should closely monitor the behaviour and actions of field staff to ensure that practices that adversely affect beneficiaries do not occur and are not being tacitly supported by unhelpful policies, such as enforcing unrealistically high collection targets. MFIs should minimise staff-beneficiary power differentials to engender and sustain members' feelings of being supported.

While still an emerging sub-area of microfinance, organisations involved in green microfinance may examine ways of providing training to beneficiaries tailored to local circumstances and seasonal conditions.

MOTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION

Participation in microfinance programmes may be based upon complex socio-economic needs; no single need was consistently identified as being of greater significance than others. Participation in microfinance programmes may be motivated (or conflicted) by family pressures, religious beliefs, perceived benefits and aspirations. In terms of continuing to participate in microfinance programmes, being able to contribute to children's education was a powerful motivator.

MOTIVES FOR NON-PARTICIPATION

MFIs should understand that non-participation may be due to religious beliefs or existing socio-economic pressures, and does not reflect an individual's capacity for change, particularly for women in rural environments. Programmes seeking to support women's involvement in microfinance should consider addressing the concerns of male household members.

POSITIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF HOUSEHOLDERS

MFIs should explore ways to nurture the support of household members for successful microfinance-programme participation. Programmes that have been developed for improving women beneficiaries' knowledge and skill acquisition, specific to household management, may enable women to become valued knowledge brokers within their households.

POSITIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Household and community beliefs and attitudes interact; therefore, policies that target and seek to reshape negative stereotypes of women in the home and/or community are recommended. Policies to address culturally embedded notions of women's roles should be developed to empower women to participate more fully in both family life and the wider community. People who are especially vulnerable, such as the very poor, women, and lower-caste people, may suffer more from negative beliefs and attitudes from other community members; consequently, policies should be designed to protect vulnerable groups from loss of respect in the community. MFIs can foster positive community attitudes towards beneficiaries by avoiding shaming strategies to coerce repayments. Policies should be developed that facilitate socially valued engagement between adolescent girls, and between adolescent girls and their communities. Practical knowledge and skills are commodities that are valued by poor communities. Microfinance programmes should equip women with this knowledge to influence community views positively.

NEGATIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF HOUSEHOLDS

Screening prospective beneficiaries' applications for the level of family support and implementing strategies that help vulnerable women become socially connected with other women should be considered by MFIs as a way of identifying beneficiaries who may suffer as a result of the negative beliefs and attitudes of other household members. Household members may not value women's participation in microfinance programmes if they do not appreciate or understand the intended application or practical benefit of the skills the women learn through participation. MFIs should ensure that beneficiaries learn practical and applicable knowledge and skills, as knowledge perceived as tokenistic reinforces negative stereotypes of microfinance and of women. Women who face a persistent lack of support from within the home could be offered resilience training by MFIs.

NEGATIVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF COMMUNITIES

MFIs should consider ways of building family engagement as a strategy to promote supportive community beliefs and attitudes. Because community-based hostility is often targeted at the character of microfinance beneficiaries, microfinance policies that are sensitive to socio-cultural norms and the vulnerable place of women within communities can help reduce the manipulation and abuse to which some women are subject.

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

PRIMARY RESEARCH

- The problems generated by the concept of empowerment indicate that measuring women's empowerment may not be a viable method for assessing the success/failure of microcredit programmes. Simply evaluating the short-term changes in the lives of beneficiaries may not usefully or effectively determine whether microfinance achieves its goal of empowering women. Assessing the impact of microfinance on beneficiaries and their families in terms of generational and inter-generational differences may be more effective and show more accurate results.
- Beneficiaries and local-community members may be usefully and effectively included in the development and conduct of research regarding the implementation and impact of microfinance programmes. By focusing on the ways that beneficiaries and communities engage with interventions new ways to both understand them may be developed.
- High repayment rates may indicate social pressures that compel women to access credit on behalf of others in their household. Evaluation of the success/failure of microfinance programmes may be made in terms of how the microcredit loans have been used and whether the source of repayment corresponds with beneficiaries' loan use.
- Past evaluations appear frequently to rely on outcomes alone to measure the impact of microcredit on women's empowerment. This may be insufficient and misleading, as outcome measurement tends to ignore context, including existing gender relations, which are so central to women's well-being and empowerment. Linkages between microfinance and empowerment may be more appropriately and effectively examined by focusing upon the processes involved in beneficiaries' use of microfinance programmes.
- While conflicts, rivalries and competition between women appear to be common, primary studies may usefully examine women beneficiaries' preferences, goals, and the constraints they face in terms of empowerment across diverse contexts. This may aid researchers in establishing what motivates women to cooperate in terms of, for example, collective action, and mutual benefit.
- Primary research explicitly examining people's experiences of microfinance programmes in terms of their experiences of the positive benefits and negative consequences of participation would be useful, in order to more precisely and extensively answer the questions posed by this review.
- Primary research explicitly examining why people choose to participate in, not participate in, and drop out of microfinance programmes would be useful, in order to more precisely and extensively answer the questions posed by this review.

- Primary research explicitly examining the attitudes and beliefs of other household members and community members would be useful, in order to more precisely and extensively answer the questions posed by this review.

6.4 STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE REVIEW

This is one of the first systematic reviews that have attempted to identify, appraise and synthesise, in an explicit and transparent manner, findings from qualitative and mixed-methods studies that have examined people's experiences of participating in microfinance programmes in South Asia. A systematic search of electronic databases and key websites was conducted to identify published and unpublished research, which was supplemented by examining the work of key authors and checking the references of included studies. While a sensitive and comprehensive search was conducted, the review was limited to English-language databases and studies written in English and Modern Standard Hindi, as the resources to identify and include studies written in other languages, in which the review group members were not proficient, were not available. Systematic reviews in international development and microfinance may benefit from further methodological consideration regarding how to systematically identify and synthesise non-English-language studies, in order to not only provide a more exhaustive evidence-base, but one that can provide the contextual detail that is often required when answering review questions relevant to policy-makers and practitioners in this field.

The review benefitted from user involvement in the form of consultation with DFID-SARH policy-makers, the EPPI-SG, and a peer advisory group of practitioners and academics working in this area. The preliminary findings of the scoping exercise were also presented to and discussed with the EPPI-SG and DFID-SARH, to ensure that the full systematic review addressed relevant questions with an adequate evidence base. We were able to incorporate the suggestions we received as we proceeded with the synthesis and the writing up of the review.

While the present review is concerned with people's positive and negative experiences of participating in microfinance programmes, as well as with the motives for their participation, non-participation and other household and community member attitudes and beliefs regarding participants, the scope of the paper included in this review did not explicitly focus upon any of these phenomena of interest. Rather, papers were largely concerned with topics such as examining masculinity, domination, problematising empowerment, and building social capital. As such, this review was limited by the fact that primary research seldom appears to attempt to answer the specific question of 'What are people's experiences of participating in microfinance programmes?'

The review was, therefore, limited to studies that contained — but did not necessarily focus upon — particular phenomena of interest and clear qualitative data collection and analysis concerning women's empowerment, the financial and economic experiences of microfinance participation, and the personal and social experiences of microfinance participation. We may,

therefore, have limited data to aid in understanding which factors fully contribute to people's positive and negative experiences of microfinance, their motives for participation/non-participation, and other household/community members' beliefs and attitudes toward beneficiaries. Therefore, discussions on this topic may require further, more focused evidence from primary research to build a clearer picture of people's experiences of their involvement in microfinance programmes.

6.5 COMPARISONS WITH OTHER WORK

While microfinance programmes targeting populations in low- and middle-income countries have a relatively long-standing history, especially in South Asia — the birthplace of microfinance — previous systematic reviews that have examined other settings have shown mixed evidence in terms of their impact (Armendáriz de Aghion and Morduch 2010, Van Rooyen et al. 2010 and Stewart et al. 2012). It has been suggested that these issues have arisen partly due to the complexity involved in evaluating microfinance interventions, especially due to the interactions that occur between individuals within households, the issues in sampling and group allocation in complex cultural contexts, the variations in income between different regions, as well as the difficulty in objectively measuring interactions and associations between dependent and independent variables (Pitt 2012). Existing systematic reviews that have included qualitative data in a mixed-methods analysis have indicated important limitations; a major consideration is the differences that exist in contexts where various microfinance interventions are deployed. This is a probable reason why research and evaluations have provided mixed conclusions regarding their effectiveness. Stewart et al. (2012.) note that microfinance is an especially challenging area to evaluate with rigorous research designs, which makes it problematic to review systematically. Challenges to reviewing microfinance systematically include both the complexity of microfinance itself, and the difficulties of evaluating a social intervention across varied social and geographical contexts. Past systematic reviews have facilitated a growing understanding of the evidence of the quantitative impact of microfinance interventions. Makina and Malobola (2004) show that current work appears to cover three main outcome groups. Positive impacts may be felt, including improvements to income stability and growth, employment, nutrition, health, education, social networks and women's empowerment, and reduced income inequality and vulnerability (Arfrane 2002, Barnes 1996, Barnes and Keogh 1999, Beck et al. 2004, Hietalahti and Linden 2006, Hossain and Knight 2008, Khandker 2001, Schuler et al. 1996, UNICEF1997 and Wright 2000). Negative impact can also occur, such as exploitation of women, unchanged poverty levels, increased income inequality, workloads, barriers to sustainable social, economic and social situations, and interest rates and loan repayments creating dependency (Adams and Pischke 1992, Bateman and Chang 2009, Buckley 1997, Copestake 2002, Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996, Kabeer 1998 and Rogaly 1996). Other studies show missed impacts, including benefits for beneficiaries who are poor, but not for the poorest (see, for example, Copestake 2002, Hulme and Mosley 1996, Morduch 1998, Mosley and Hulme 1998 and Zaman 2001), or helping poor people to more effectively manage their money (Rutherford 1996, p 2) without directly or sufficiently increasing income or empowering women (Husain et al. 2010, Mayoux 1999 and Rahman 2004).

Qualitative primary research on the impact of microfinance has contributed to the understanding of important areas that quantitative research designs have struggled to measure; for example, women in a number of studies described experiencing a greater sense of empowerment, explaining that microfinance participation improved their involvement in household and community decision making. This was also a finding in other work, and was linked to women's greater access to and control of resources that facilitated their participation or leading role in decision making (Todd 1996 in Duvendack et al. 2011). The present review and preliminary scoping review have highlighted that a significant body of qualitative evidence exploring the experience of microfinance participation has been published; however, qualitative synthesis of this literature is largely absent, meaning that there is little in the way of similar systematic reviews to which we can compare our results. The present systematic review of qualitative research into people's experience of microfinance participation will help provide insight into the experiences of participants in microfinance interventions, those of their families and their communities. The qualitative studies reviewed here also provide valuable information regarding how people experience incentives to participate and, similarly, what they perceive as incentivising participation. While a number of recent systematic reviews have engaged with questions concerning the impact of microfinance in terms of quantitative impact, few have thoroughly examined the sources of qualitative data to describe and investigate people's views and experiences of delivering and participating in microfinance interventions. Pande et al.'s (2012) systematic review includes several descriptive papers and qualitative studies to provide background information for their review project; these study designs were, however, excluded from in-depth review. Similarly, Duvendack et al. (2011) sought qualitative research, but specifically to scope the literature only. Stewart et al.'s (2012) systematic review of impact evaluations sought comparative studies that measured impact, and extracted and synthesised qualitative data from included evaluations (Stewart et al. 2012). Qualitative research regarding experiences of participation in microfinance were not included, however. While mixed-methods systematic reviews have been conducted, they largely focus upon impact, as opposed to lived experiences of participation. Recent systematic reviews have sought to include qualitative evidence as part of mixed-methods reviews that incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data. For example, in a 2010 review by Stewart et al., impact evaluations of microfinance interventions in SSA are examined for quantitative outcomes, as well as qualitative findings concerning whether or not microcredit or micro-savings were having positive effects upon on the lives of participants. A thematic narrative synthesis was conducted on qualitative study findings from 15 included studies (four RCTs and nine case-control studies). Comparison of the results between this and Stewart et al.'s review is challenging, due to the different nature of the questions posed and methods of synthesis employed. As with the present review, mixed results were found, indicating that some beneficiaries are worse off due to participation in microfinance, while others appeared to have experienced positive benefits.

INCLUDED STUDIES (*PAPERS COMBINED AS REPORTING IDENTICAL EVIDENCE FROM THE SAME STUDY)

- Ahmed, F.E. (2008). Microcredit, Men, and Masculinity. *NWSA Journal* 20(2): 122-155.
- Ashraf Ali, H.M. (2014). Microcredit and power: examining how and why women encounter domination in Bangladesh. *Development in Practice* 24(3): 327-338. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2014.896877>
- Aslanbeigui, N., Oakes, G., Uddin, N. (2010). Assessing microcredit in Bangladesh: a critique of the concept of empowerment. *Review of Political Economy* 22(2): 181-204. doi: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/crpe20>
- Cons, J. & Paprocki, K. (2010). Contested credit landscapes: Microcredit, self-help and self-determination in rural Bangladesh. *Third World Quarterly* 31(4): 637-654. doi: 10.1080/01436591003701141
- Garikipati, S. (2013). Microcredit and women's empowerment: have we been looking at the wrong indicators? *Oxford Development Studies* 41(sup1): S53-S75. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2012.744387>
- *Guerin, I., Kumar, S., Agier, I. (2010). Microfinance and women's empowerment: do relationships between women matter? Lessons from rural Southern India. ULB--Universite Libre de Bruxelles, Working Papers CEB: 10-053. Retrieved from <http://proxy.library.adelaide.edu.au/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eoh&AN=1141515&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
<https://dipot.ulb.ac.be:8443/dspace/bitstream/2013/68292/1/wp10053.pdf>
- *Guerin, I., Kumar, S., Agier, I. (2013). Women's empowerment: power to act or power over other women? Lessons from Indian microfinance. *Oxford Development Studies* 41(sup1): S76-S94. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2013.781147>
- Jones, N., Mukherjee, M., Galab, S. (2007). Ripple effects or deliberate intentions? Assessing linkages between women's empowerment and childhood poverty. UNICEF/Young Lives Social Policy paper 002, May 2007
- Joseph, J.S. (2005). *The relevance of involvement in micro-credit self-help groups and empowerment: findings from a survey of rural women in Tamilnadu*. McGill University.
- Kalyanwala, S. & Sebstad, J. (2006). *Spending, saving and borrowing: perceptions and experiences of girls in Gujarat*. New Delhi: Population Council.
- Khan, M.M. (2014). *An assessment of the green microcredit projects in Bangladesh: livelihood and environmental sustainability*. University of Manitoba.

Krenz, K., Gilbert, D.J., Mandayam, G. (2014). Exploring women's empowerment through 'credit-plus' microfinance in India. *Affilia-Journal of Women and Social Work* 29(3): 310-325. doi: 10.1177/0886109913516453

Lyby, E. (2006). *Microfinance and Gender Roles in Afghanistan*. World Bank Working Paper Series, November 2006.

Ray-Bennett, N.S. (2010). The role of microcredit in reducing women's vulnerabilities to multiple disasters. *Disasters* 34(1): 240-260. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-7717.2009.01127.x

Sanyal, P. (2009). From credit to collective action: the role of microfinance in promoting women's social capital and normative influence. *American Sociological Review* 74(4): 529-550.

Schuler, R., Hashemi, S.M., Riley, A.P., Akhter, S. (1996). Credit programs, patriarchy and men's violence against women in rural Bangladesh. *Soc Sci Med* 43(12): 1,729-1,742.

Shahnaz, R. & Karim, R. (2008). Providing microfinance and social space to empower adolescent girls: an evaluation of BRAC's ELA centres. Working Paper No. 3. Dhaka, Bangladesh: BRAC.

Shetty, S. (2010). Microcredit, poverty and empowerment: exploring the connections. *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 9(3-4): 356-391. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/156914910X499741>

Uddin, M.J. (2014). Microcredit and building social capital in rural Bangladesh – drawing the uneasy link. *Contemporary South Asia* 22(2): 143-156.

Zand, S. (2011). The impact of microfinance programmes on women's lives: A case study in Kabul province. Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit Case Study Series (July).

OTHER REFERENCES INCLUDED IN THE REVIEW

Adam, W. & Von Pischke, J.D. (1992). Microenterprise credit programs: 'déjà-vu'. *World Development* 20(10): 1,463-1,470.

Afrane, S. (2002). Impact assessment of microfinance interventions in Ghana and South Africa: a synthesis of major impacts and lessons. *Journal of Microfinance* 4(1): 37-58.

Amin, R., Becker, S., Bayes, A. (1998). NGO-promoted microcredit programs and women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh: quantitative and qualitative evidence. *Journal of Developing Areas* 32 (Winter): 221-236.

Armendáriz de Aghion, B. & Morduch, J. (2010). *The economics of microfinance*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Barnes, C. (1996). *Assets and the impact of microenterprise finance programs*. Washington, DC: Management Systems International.

- Barnes, C., Keogh E (1999) *An assessment of the impact of Zambuko's microenterprise program in Zimbabwe: baseline findings*. Washington, DC: Management Systems International.
- Barrett, C.B., Reardon, T., Webb, W. (2001). Nonfarm income diversification and household livelihood strategies in rural Africa: concepts, dynamics and policy implications. *Food Policy* 26(4): 315-331.
- Bateman, M. & Chang, H. (2009). *The microfinance illusion*. http://inctpped.ie.ufrj.br/spiderweb/dymask_4/4-1%20Bateman-Chang-Microfinance.pdf (accessed 7 May 2015).
- Beck, T., Demirguc-Kunt, A., Levine, R. (2004). Finance, inequality, and poverty: Cross-country evidence. Policy Research Working Paper 3338. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Boccia, D., Hargreaves, J., Lönnroth, K., Jaramillo, E., Weiss, J., Uplekar, M., Porter, J.D., Evans, C.A. (2011). Cash transfer and microfinance interventions for tuberculosis control: review of the impact of evidence and policy implications. *International Journal of Tuberculosis and Lung Diseases* 15(S2): S37-S49.
- Brau, J.C., Woller, G.M. (2004). Microfinance: a comprehensive review of the existing literature. *The Journal of Entrepreneurial Finance* 9(1): 1-28.
- Buckley, G. (1997). Microfinance in Africa: is it either the problem or the solution. *World Development* 25(7): 1,081-1,093.
- Churchill, C. & Matul, M. (2006). *Protecting the poor: a microinsurance compendium*. Geneva: ILO.
- Copestake, J. (2002). Inequality and the polarizing impact of microcredit: evidence from Zambia's copperbelt. *Journal of International Development* 14(6): 743-755.
- Copestake, J., Johnson, S., Wright, K. (2002). *Impact assessment of microfinance: towards a new protocol for collection and analysis of qualitative data*. Imp-Act: Improving the Impact of Microfinance on Poverty: Action Research Programme, Working Paper 23746. Brighton: University of Sussex.
- Devaney, P.L. (2006). *Microsavings programs: assessing demand and impact: a critical review of the literature*. College Park, MD: University of Maryland, The Iris Center.
- Dickson, K. & Bangpan, M. (2012). *Providing access to economic assets for girls and young women in low-and lower-middle-income countries: a systematic review of the evidence*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

Duvendack, M., Palmer-Jones, R., Copestake, J.G., Hooper, L., Loke, Y., Rao, N. (2011). *What is the evidence of the impact of microfinance on the well-being of poor people?* London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

Ellis, F. (1999) Rural livelihood diversity in developing countries: evidence and policy implications. *Natural Resource Perspectives* 40(April) [no page numbers].
<http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/bitstream/handle/10535/4486/40-rural-livelihood-diversity.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (accessed 7 May 2015).

EPPI-Centre (2001) *Core keywording strategy: data collection for a register of educational research version 0.9.4*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

Fearson, J.D. (2003). Ethnic cultural diversity by country. *Journal of Economic Growth* 8(2): 195-222.

Goetz, A.M., Sen Gupta, R. (1996). Who takes the credit? Gender, power, and control over loan use in rural credit programs in Bangladesh. *World Development* 24(1): 45-63.

Henry, M.G. (2003). 'Where are you really from?' Representation, identity and power in the fieldwork experiences of a South Asian diasporic. *Qualitative Research* 3(2): 229-242.

Hietalahti, J. & Linden, M. (2006). Socio-economic impacts of microfinance and repayment performance: a case study of the Small Enterprise Foundation, South Africa. *Progress in Development Studies* 6(3): 201-210.

Hossain, F. (2002). Small loans, big claims. *Foreign Policy* 12: 79-82.

Hossain, F. & Knight, T. (2008). *Financing the poor: can microcredit make a difference? Empirical observations from Bangladesh*. BWPI Working Paper 38. Manchester: Brooks World Poverty Institute.

Hulme, D. & Mosley, P. (1996). *Finance against poverty*, volumes 1 and 2. London: Routledge.

Hulme, D. (2000). Impact assessment methodologies for microfinance: theory, experience and better practice. *World Development* 28(1): 79-98.

Husain, Z., Mukherjee, D., Dutta, M. (2010). Self-help groups and empowerment of women: self-selection or actual benefits? <http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/20765/> (Accessed 11 November 2014).

Iwata, N. & Buka, S. (2002). Race/ethnicity and depressive symptoms: a cross-cultural/ethnic comparison among university students in East Asia, North and South America. *Social Science and Medicine* 55(12): 2,243-2,252.

Joanna Briggs Institute (2014). *Joanna Briggs Institute reviewers' manual*. Adelaide: The Joanna Briggs Institute.

- Johnson, S. & Rogaly, B. (1997). *Microfinance and poverty reduction*. Oxford: Oxfam.
- Kabeer, N. (1998). The gender poverty nexus. *Grameen Poverty Research* 4(2)[no pages].
- Kabeer, N. (2003). Assessing the 'wider' social impacts of microfinance services: concepts, methods, findings. *IDS Bulletin* 34(4): 106-114.
- Karim, L. (2008). Demystifying micro-credit: the Grameen Bank, NGOs and neoliberalism in Bangladesh. *Cultural Dynamics* 20(1): 5-29.
- Karlan, D.S. (2008). Credit elasticities in less-developed economies: implications for microfinance. *American Economic Review* 93(3): 1,040-1,068.
- Khandker, S. (2001). Does micro-finance really benefit the poor? Evidence from Bangladesh. Paper delivered at: *Asia and Pacific Forum on Poverty: Reforming Policies and Institutions for Poverty Reduction*, Manila, 5-9 February.
- Kurlanska, C. (2011). Ethnographic livelihood studies: the minutiae of microloans. *Ethnology* 50(2): 95-115.
- Ledgerwood, J. (1999). *Microfinance handbook: an institutional and financial perspective*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Liberati, A., Altman, D.G., Tetzlaff, J., Mulrow, C., Gøtzsche, P.C., Ioannidis, J.P.A., Clarke, M., Devereaux, P.J., Kleijnen, J., Moher, D. (2009). The PRISMA statement for reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses of studies that evaluate health care interventions: explanation and elaboration. *PLoS Medicine* 6(7): e1000100.
- Lipton, M. (1996). *Successes in antipoverty*. Geneva: International Institute of Labour Studies.
- Makina, D. & Malobola, L.M. (2004). Impact assessment of microfinance programmes, including lessons from Khula Enterprise Finance. *Development Southern Africa* 21(5): 799-814.
- Matin, I., Hulme, D., Rutherford, S. (1999). *Financial services for the poor and poorest: deepening our understanding to improve provision*. Finance and development research programme working paper no. 9. Manchester: IDPM, University of Manchester.
- Mayoux, L. (1999). Questioning virtuous spirals: microfinance and women's empowerment in Africa. *Journal of International Development* 11(7): 957-984.
- Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J., Altman, D.G. (2009). Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: The PRISMA Statement. *Annals of Internal Medicine* 151(4): 264-269.
- Morduch, J. (1998). *The microfinance schism*. Development Discussion Paper No. 626. Cambridge, MA: Department of Economics and HIID, Harvard University.

- Mosley, P. & Hulme, D. (1998). Microenterprise finance: is there a conflict between growth and poverty alleviation? *World Development* 26(5): 783-790.
- Otero, M. (1999). *The evolution of nongovernmental organisations toward financial intermediation*. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Pande, R., Cole, S., Sivasankaran, A., Bastian, G., Durlacher, K. (2012). *Does poor people's access to formal banking services raise their incomes?* EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.
- Pitt, M.M. (2012). *Gunfight at the NOT OK Corral: reply to High Noon for Microfinance* by Duvendack and Palmer-Jones (Uncut version). *J Dev Stud* 48: 1,886-1,891.
- Rahman, A. (1998). *Hardcore poor and NGO intervention*. Mimeo. Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.
- Rahman, A. (2004). Microcredit and poverty reduction: trade-off between building institutions and reaching the poor. In: Lont, H. & Hospes, O. (eds) *Livelihood and microfinance: anthropological and sociological perspectives on savings and debt*. Delft: Eburon, pages 27-42.
- Rashid, T. & Makuwira, J. (2014). Global financial crisis and women's micro-lending innovations in Pakistan and Malawi. *Development in Practice* 24(1): 39-50.
- Robinson, M. (2001). *The microfinance revolution: sustainable finance for the poor*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Rogaly, B. (1996). Micro-finance evangelism, 'destitute women', and the hard selling of a new anti-poverty formula. *Development in Practice* 6(2): 100-112.
- Rutherford, S. (1996). *A critical typology of financial services for the poor*. London: ActionAid and Oxfam.
- Schreiner, M. (2001). Informal finance and designing of microfinance. *Development in Practice* 11(3): 637-640.
- Skoufias, E. (2003). Economic Crises and Natural Disasters: coping strategies and policy implications. *World Development* 31(3): 1,087-1,102.
- Stephens, B., Tazi, H. (2006). Performance and transparency: a survey of microfinance in South Asia. *Microbanking Bulletin* April: 22-34.
- Stewart, R., van Rooyen, C., Dickson, K., Majoro, M., de Wet, T. (2010). *What is the impact of microfinance on poor people? A systematic review of evidence from sub-Saharan Africa*. Technical report. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

Stewart, R., van Rooyen, C., Korth, M., Chereni, A., Rebelo Da Silva, N., de Wet, T. (2012). *Do micro-credit, micro-savings and micro-leasing serve as effective financial-inclusion interventions enabling poor people, and especially women, to engage in meaningful economic opportunities in low- and middle-income countries? A systematic review of the evidence*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

Thomas, J., Brunton, J., Graziosi, S. (2010). *EPPI-Reviewer 4.0: Software for research synthesis*. EPPI-Centre Software. London: Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

Todd, H. (1996). *Women at the centre*. Dhaka: University Press Limited.

Tong, A., Flemming, K., McInnes, E., Oliver, S., Craig, J. (2012). Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research: ENTREQ. *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 12(1): 181.

UNICEF (1997) *Give us credit*. Geneva: Division of Evaluation, Policy and Planning, UNICEF.

Van Rooyen, C., Stewart, R., De Wet, T. (2012). The impact of microfinance in sub-Saharan Africa: a systematic review of the evidence. *World Development* 40(11): 2,249-2,262.

Woller, G. (2004). A review of impact assessment methodologies for microenterprise development programmes. In Nolan, A. (ed.) *Evaluating programmes and policies for local development: how to assess what works among programmes and policies*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 389-436.

Woolcock, M. & Narayan, D. (2000). Social capital: implications for development theory, research and policy. *The World Bank Research Observer* 15(2): 225-249.

Wright, G. (2000). *Microfinance systems: designing quality financial services for the poor*. London: Zed Books.

Yoong, H., Rabinovich, L., Diepeveen, S. (2012). *The impact of economic resource transfers to women versus men: a systematic review*. Technical report. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

Zaman, H. (2001) *Assessing the poverty and vulnerability impact of micro-credit in Bangladesh: a case study of BRAC*. Unpublished background paper for World Development Report 2000/2001. Washington, DC: World Bank.

APPENDIX 1.1 AUTHORSHIP OF THIS REVIEW

Authors

MDJ Peters,¹ C Lockwood,¹ Z Munn,¹ S Moola,¹ RK Mishra²

¹The Joanna Briggs Institute, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Adelaide, Australia

²Institute of Public Enterprise, Osmania University Campus, Hyderabad, India

Contact details:

Associate Professor Craig Lockwood

The Joanna Briggs Institute

Faculty of Health Science

University of Adelaide

1/115 Grenfell Street

Adelaide

SA 5005

+61883034880

craig.lockwood@adelaide.edu.au

This report should be cited as:

Peters MDJ, Lockwood C, Munn Z, Moola S, Mishra RK (2016) People's views and experiences of participating in microfinance interventions: A systematic review of qualitative evidence. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London.

Review Group

This group is made up of staff from the Joanna Briggs Institute and a member of the Institute of Public Enterprise, Osmania University Campus.

Expert Advisory Group

The advisory group consisted of members as advised by EPPI-Centre and the South Asia Research Hub, the Department for International Development (DFID):

- Michael Harper, Emeritus Professor, Cranfield School of Management, UK
- Shahnila Azher, Growth and PSD, DfID, Bangladesh
- Ragini Chaudhary, Private Sector Development, DfID, India
- Natarajan Jeyaseelan, CEO, Hand in Hand, India
- Sankar Datta, Azim Premji University, India

Conflicts of interests

None of the authors has any financial interests in this review topic, nor has been involved in the development of relevant interventions, primary research or prior published reviews on the topic.

Professor Mishra is joint author of *Microfinance and Financial Inclusion*, Academic Foundation, New Delhi, 2012.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the EPPI-Centre, our funder, the South Asia Research Hub, DFID, and our peer reviewers, as well as the researchers whose work we draw on in the review.

APPENDIX 2.1: SEARCH STRATEGY

The following search strategy was used to search PubMed and adapted for the other electronic databases.

In all cases, we sought only literature published since January 1990.

To illustrate our planned approach to searching, our initial proposed search string for the key concepts around microfinance interventions is presented below. This was tested and refined, and adapted as necessary for different electronic databases. The complete search strategies for two databases are provided below. The detailed search strategies for all other databases will be available upon request. Many of the key journals on microfinance were catalogued in electronic databases. However, a number of institutions publish potentially relevant grey literature, which was not available in this way, so we searched the websites of a number of institutions listed below. Search strategies were amended according to the search facilities available in each source.

Microfinance terms [all fields] search:

(Microfinance[all] OR Micro-finance[all] OR (Micro[all] AND finance[all]) OR microcredit[all] OR micro-credit[all] OR (micro[all] AND credit[all]) OR micro-loan*[all] OR micro-lending[all] OR (micro[all] AND (loan[all] OR loans[all] OR lease[all] OR loaning[all] OR lending[all])) OR "microenterprise*" [all]) OR micro-enterprise* [all] OR (micro[all] AND enterprise* [all]) OR microinsurance[all] OR micro-insurance[all] OR (micro[all] AND "insurance" [all]) OR (micro[all] AND (saving[all] OR "savings" [all])) OR credit program* [all] OR group lending[all] OR micro-franchising[all] OR micro franchising[all])

Recommended sources for the search included:

- 3ie's Databases of Systematic Reviews and Impact Evaluations - <http://www.3ieimpact.org/>
- Afghanistan Microfinance Association (AMA) - <http://www.ama.org.af/>
- Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED) - <http://www.acted.org>
- Akhuwat (Pakistan) - <http://www.akhuwat.org.pk/>
- Asasah - <http://www.asasah.org/>
- Asian Development Bank (ADB) - <http://www.adb.org/>
- Asian Journals Online - <http://www.ajouronline.com/>
- British Library for Development Studies E-Resources – <http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/123456789/3>
- Campbell Library - <http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/lib/>
- Centre for Global Development - <http://www.cgdev.org/>
- Centre for Micro Finance - <http://www.ifmrlead.org/cmfi/>
- Centre for Microfinance (CMF), Nepal - <http://cmfnepal.org/>
- China/Asia on Demand – via EBSCO
- Cochrane Library - <http://www.thecochranelibrary.com/>
- Community Support Concern (CSC) - <http://www.cscpk.org/>
- Credit and Development Forum (CDF) - <http://www.cdfbd.org/new/>
- DAMEN (Development Action for Mobilization and Emancipation) - <http://www.damen-pk.org/>

- DFID's Research for Development (R4D) <http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/>
- ECONLIT (Database of economic literature) - via EBSCOHOST
- ELDIS - <http://www.eldis.org/>
- EPPI-Centre Evidence e-Library - <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/>
- Evidence Aid - <http://www.evidenceaid.org/>
- Foundation for International Community Assistance (FINCA) - <http://www.finca.org/>
- Health Systems Evidence - <http://www.healthsystemsevidence.org/>
- IDEAS Economics and Finance Research - <https://ideas.repec.org/>
- IDRC Digital Library - <http://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/>
- IMF eLibrary - <http://www.elibrary.imf.org/>
- Indian Citation Index - <http://www.indiancitationindex.com/>
- Innovations for Poverty Action - <http://www.poverty-action.org/>
- International Fund for Agricultural Development - <http://www.ifad.org/>
- International Labour Organisation (ILO), Social Finance Unit - <http://labordoc.ilo.org/>
- JOLIS Catalog - <http://external.worldbankimflib.org/>
- J-PAL Publications and Evaluations <http://www.povertyactionlab.org/>
- Kashf Foundation - <http://kashf.org/>
- Lanka Microfinance Practitioners' Association - <http://www.microfinance.lk/>
- Microfinance Connect Pakistan Microfinance Network - <http://www.microfinanceconnect.info/>
- Microfinance Gateway - <http://www.microfinancegateway.org/>
- Microfinance Information Exchange (MIX) - www.themix.org
- Microfinance Institutions Network (MFIN) - <http://mfinindia.org/>
- Orangi Charitable Trust (OCT) - <http://www.oppoct-microcredit.com/>
- Overseas Development Institute - <http://www.odi.org/>
- Policy Pointers - <http://www.policypointers.org/>
- PsycINFO - <http://www.apa.org/pubs/databases/index.aspx>
- PubMed (MEDLINE) - <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed>
- Sa-Dhan Association of Community Development Finance Institutions - <http://www.sa-dhan.net/>
- Small Enterprise Education and Promotion (SEEP) Network - <http://www.seepnetwork.org/>
- Social Assistance in Developing Countries Database - <http://www.chronicpoverty.org/>
- Sociological Abstracts – via Proquest
- South Asian Microfinance Network (SAMN) - <http://www.samn.eu/>
- South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics – <http://www.sandeeonline.org/>
- South East Asia Index - <https://anulib.anu.edu.au/sasi/index.html>
- The Environmental Evidence Library - <http://www.environmentalevidence.org/>
- The UK Department for International Development - <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Media-Room/Publications/>
- UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) - <http://www.unCDF.org/>
- UNDP Poverty Centre - <http://www.undp.org/>
- UNESCO Open Access Repository - http://en.unesco.org/open-access/search_unesdoc
- USAID - <http://www.usaid.gov/>
- Wasil Foundation (formerly CWCD) - <http://wasil.org.pk/>

- Web of Science, which incorporates Science Citation Index, Social Science Citation Index and Arts and Humanities Citation Index - apps.webofknowledge.com
- WHO Library Database (WHOLIS) - <http://www.who.int/library/databases/en/>
- World Bank - <http://www.worldbank.org/>
- World Bank- <http://datacatalog.worldbank.org/>
- World Development Bank (Data, Open knowledge repository, worldwide indicators and world development report).
- Worldwide Political Science Abstracts – via Proquest

Example search strategies

Campbell Library – searched 15 December 2014

Microfinance OR Micro-finance OR microcredit OR micro-credit OR micro-loan OR microloan OR microloans OR microlease OR microloaning OR microlending OR microenterprise OR micro-enterprise OR microinsurance OR micro-insurance OR microsaving OR microsavings OR microcredit program OR microcredit programme OR microcredit programs OR microcredit programmes OR group lending OR microgroup lending OR microfranchising OR micro-franchising

PsycINFO – searched 15 December 2014

microfinance.mp. OR micro-finance.mp. OR microcredit.mp. OR micro-credit.mp. OR microloan.mp. OR micro-loan.mp. OR microloans.mp. OR microlease.mp. OR microloaning.mp. OR microleasing.mp. OR microleased.mp. OR microloaned.mp. OR microlender.mp. OR microlenders.mp. OR microlending.mp. OR microenterprise.mp. OR micro-enterprise.mp. OR microenterprises.mp. OR microenterprising.mp. OR microinsurance.mp. OR micro-insurance.mp. OR microsaving.mp. OR microsavings.mp. OR microcredit program.mp. OR microcredit programme.mp. OR microcredit programs.mp. OR microcredit programmes.mp. OR group lending.mp. OR microgroup lending.mp. OR microfranchising.mp. OR micro-franchising.mp.

APPENDIX 2.2: EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Papers were assessed progressively according to the following criteria and excluded when they failed on any one. The first criterion for exclusion was recorded for each.

- **Language:** Not in English or Modern Standard Hindi.
- **Publication date:** After 1989.
- **Geographical location:** Not based in at least one South Asian country or a country that has been deemed relevant based upon agreed relevance criteria.
- **Intervention:** The intervention does not include microcredit or micro-savings (alone or as part of a broader microfinance service). Studies that report upon non-financial services alone, such as training in financial literacy and skills-development programmes, will be excluded.
- **Population:** People who are neither beneficiaries nor involved in the delivery of microfinance interventions.
- **Study design:** Papers that do not clearly describe the approach to qualitative-data collection and analysis.
- **Reporting data:** Papers that do not report on participants' experiences of their involvement with microfinance interventions.

APPENDIX 2.3: CODING FRAMEWORK

1. Basic description of the paper
 - 1.1. Title
 - 1.2. Author/s
 - 1.3. Date of publication
 - 1.4. Language
 - 1.5. Stand-alone paper or one of a series
2. Description of the intervention studied
 - 2.1. Intervention (tick all that apply)
 - 2.1.1. Microcredit
 - 2.1.2. Micro-savings
 - 2.1.3. Micro-leasing
 - 2.1.4. Micro-insurance
 - 2.1.5. Money transfers
 - 2.1.6. With other non-microfinance services
 - 2.2. Provider of intervention
 - 2.2.1. Formal bank
 - 2.2.2. Government
 - 2.2.3. National or international NGO
 - 2.2.4. Local NGO
 - 2.2.5. Community organisation/self-help group
 - 2.2.6. Informal providers
 - 2.3. Population
 - 2.3.1. Gender
 - 2.3.2. Income/poverty level
 - 2.3.3. Age
 - 2.3.4. Unspecified
 - 2.3.5. Beneficiary or provider
 - 2.4. Country
 - 2.4.1. Specify which country(ies)
 - 2.4.2. Specify whether other, non-South Asian countries were included in the study
 - 2.5. Setting
 - 2.5.1. Urban
 - 2.5.2. Rural
 - 2.5.3. Unspecified
3. Study design
 - 3.1. Systematic reviews with qualitative component(s) and data
 - 3.2. Qualitative studies
 - 3.2.1. Phenomenology
 - 3.2.2. Feminist research
 - 3.2.3. Ethnography
 - 3.2.4. Grounded theory

- 3.2.5. Action research
- 3.2.6. Qualitative unspecified
- 3.3. Mixed-methods study
- 3.4. Programme evaluation with qualitative component(s) and data
- 3.5. Does the study also include a process evaluation? (that is, examining how microfinance works, not just whether it works)
- 4. Focus of the study (phenomena of interest/experiences relating to microfinance involvement)
 - 4.1. Wealth
 - 4.1.1. Income
 - 4.1.2. Expenditure/consumption
 - 4.1.3. Other wealth indicator
 - 4.1.3.1. Assets
 - 4.1.3.2. Housing
 - 4.1.3.3. Savings
 - 4.1.3.4. Other
 - 4.2. Health
 - 4.3. Food security
 - 4.4. Empowerment
 - 4.4.1. Of women
 - 4.4.2. Of men
 - 4.5. Education
 - 4.6. Other foci

Any other experience relating to microfinance service beneficiary or provider described in the study

 - 4.7. Community
 - 4.7.1. Social cohesion
 - 4.7.2. Building community institutions
 - 4.8. Local economy
 - 4.8.1. Job creation
 - 4.9. Lending organisation
 - 4.9.1. Profits
- 5. Sampling methods employed
 - 5.1. Population from which sample is drawn
 - 5.2. How sample was selected
 - 5.2.1. Methods of identification of population from which participants are selected
 - 5.2.2. Methods used to identify the participants from this population
 - 5.2.3. Sample size
 - 5.3. How people were recruited into the study
 - 5.4. Whether consent was sought, how and from whom
 - 5.5. Data-collection methods
 - 5.5.1. Types of data collected
 - 5.5.2. Details of data-collection methods or tool(s)

5.5.3. Who collected the data?

5.5.4. Where were data collected?

5.5.5. How did the study team ensure that the data-collection methods were trustworthy, reliable and valid?

6. Data-analysis methods

6.1. Which methods were used to analyse the collected data?

6.2. How did the study team ensure that the analysis was trustworthy, reliable and valid?

7. Findings

7.1. In relation to each of the outcomes reported in 4 above, what did the study find?

APPENDIX 2.4: CRITICAL-APPRAISAL CHECKLIST FOR ASSESSMENT OF METHODOLOGICAL QUALITY

JBI QARI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Interpretive & Critical Research

Reviewer Date

Author Year Record Number

	Yes	No	Unclear	Not Applicable
1. Is there congruity between the stated philosophical perspective and the research methodology?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the research question or objectives?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the methods used to collect data?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the representation and analysis of data?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the interpretation of results?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Is there a statement locating the researcher culturally or theoretically?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Is the influence of the researcher on the research, and vice-versa, addressed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Are participants, and their voices, adequately represented?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Is the research ethical according to current criteria or, for recent studies, and is there evidence of ethical approval by an appropriate body?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Do the conclusions drawn in the research report flow from the analysis, or interpretation, of the data?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Overall appraisal: Include Exclude Seek further info.

Comments (Including reason for exclusion)

APPENDIX 2.5: CHARACTERISTICS OF INCLUDED STUDIES (OBJECTIVES AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE INCLUDED STUDIES

Study	Objective	Conclusions
Ahmed 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To identify which masculinities support patriarchy in Bangladesh and which masculinities rebel against it. • To examine how a spectrum of masculinities is used by microcredit practitioners to empower low-income women and men. • To understand what kinds of field-based interventions the Grameen Bank should undertake to stop domestic violence. 	<p>The first step of a poverty-alleviation strategy might use men to change other men. ‘High-minded’ men and masculinity should be rewarded and abusive men and masculinity need to be transformed. Recommendations are provided for the Grameen Bank that explore ways in which high-minded men can be identified, supported and rewarded to facilitate social change agents to prevent domestic violence within households and community.</p>
Ashraf Ali 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To examine how and why NGOs create power inequalities between fieldworkers and female borrowers, and why the fieldworkers dominate groups of women borrowers. • To examine why these women continue to participate in microcredit programmes, despite these experiences. 	<p>The relationship of women with both microcredit NGOs and male relatives is characterised by dependency and subordination. Gendered power relations, embedded in NGO practices and socio-cultural gender norms influence female borrowers to accept the domination of the microcredit fieldworkers and their own male relatives.</p>
Aslanbeigui, Oakes, Uddin 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explore the problematic debate around the idea of empowerment employed in the microcredit literature. • To argue that the idea of empowerment is vulnerable to a number of logical criticisms and cannot serve as a sound basis for determining the value of microcredit to borrowers. Evaluating the impact of microcredit by examining its effects on the life histories of borrowers and their families. 	<p>The idea of empowerment employed in the literature of microcredit-programme assessment is vulnerable to a number of logical criticisms and should not be viewed as an unproblematic basis for determining the value of microcredit to beneficiaries. Assessment of the impact of microcredit impact in terms of empowerment should include consideration of the generational and inter-generational differences it</p>

Study	Objective	Conclusions
<p>Cons and Paprocki 2010</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explore and re-evaluate the implications of microcredit's cultural and economic intervention in the lives of beneficiaries in rural Bangladesh, in light of recent critiques suggesting that microcredit in Bangladesh, and elsewhere, is failing to achieve its promises. • To build upon critiques of microcredit's centrality to the neoliberal development project and studies that highlight gaps between microcredit's public transcripts and practised realities. 	<p>makes in the lives of beneficiaries and their families.</p> <p>The cultural and economic template that many MFIs superimpose on communities both fails to map lived realities, and reinforces the same problems that microfinance often claims to address. Microcredit and other 'self-help' development strategies are found to operate through idealised notions of poverty and rural life. By restoring the voices of recipients to debates that seek to shape their futures, microcredit interventions may be transformed. Through an exploration of the ongoing debate over microcredit in the field site and reflection on how re-routing debates over development in specific places, the authors suggest that such debates may move from questions of 'self-help' to grounded and historicised projects of self-determination.</p>
<p>Garikipati 2013</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To focus on the different ways of measuring empowerment in light of the past literature, where the impact that microcredit has on women's empowerment has been much debated and has tended to focus on outcomes as opposed to processes. Earlier studies find mixed effects: negative, positive and no effect. • To comment on the suitability of outcomes versus processes as measures of women's empowerment. 	<p>Measuring empowerment in terms of outcomes alone — as most impact assessments do — is not only insufficient, but may actually be misleading. A more robust understanding of the linkages between lending to women and their empowerment might be achieved by focusing on processes surrounding loan use and repayment, as opposed to outcomes.</p>
<p>Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explore how the notion of 'empowerment' in the microfinance field is often valued as a means by which to encourage female emancipation 	<p>Women continually position themselves between their household and community in a context where dependence upon men is considered natural</p>

Study	Objective	Conclusions
	<p>from male domination, by drawing on women's testimonies and narratives to highlight the fundamental importance within these processes of women's relationships with one another, both in terms of female subjectivity and agency.</p>	<p>and the norm. Microcredit beneficiaries are shaped by and constitutive of the relationships between women, including power relationships and differentials. This study suggests that the usual opposition between power as domination and power as agency may be revised, as, in many cases, women's agency necessitates or implies their domination of other women.</p>
<p>Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2013</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explore how the notion of 'empowerment' in the microfinance field is often valued as a means to encourage female emancipation from male domination by drawing on women's testimonies and narratives to highlight the fundamental importance within these processes of women's relationships with one another, both in terms of female subjectivity and agency. 	<p>Women continually position themselves between their household and community in a context where dependence upon men is considered natural and the norm. Microcredit beneficiaries are shaped by and constitutive of the relationships between women, including power relationships and differentials. This study suggests that the usual opposition between power as domination and power as agency may be revised, as, in many cases, women's agency necessitates or implies their domination of other women.</p>
<p>Jones, Mukherjee, Galab 2007</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To examine the common assumption that empowering women will improve household well-being, lead to better outcomes for children and promote social-capital development and community involvement in poverty-alleviation initiatives by assessing inter-generational impacts of women's participation in micro-credit programmes and the transmission mechanisms through which children's well-being is affected by different 	<p>Women's empowerment through micro-credit programmes shows some positive impact on children's well-being in terms of women's intra-household decision-making power translating into greater investment in children's nutrition, health and education; greater access to information about child-care practices and uptake of government services; and some collective-action efforts to monitor decentralised service delivery for children.</p>

Study	Objective	Conclusions
	<p>dimensions of women's empowerment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To examine to what extent are linkages between women's participation and children's well-being due to ripple effects or the result of deliberate policy intentions to tackle childhood poverty. 	<p>These positive outcomes may be stunted by insufficient and infrequent loans and loans not being used for productive investment.</p> <p>Women's ability to take action to improve service provision for their children is constrained by limitations of available capacity-building initiatives, time constraints and, in some sites, a lack of group unity. While ripple effects between women's empowerment and improved well-being of children were identified, other positive changes resulted from explicit programme aims, rather than direct synergies.</p>
<p>Joseph 2005</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To establish the extent to which female beneficiaries' involvement in various activities of microcredit SHGs impact upon their socioeconomic empowerment by studying the socio-economic empowerment impact factors (evidences) in female members of microcredit SHGs in rural India upon the self, the family and the community. The hypothesis was that there are significant differences in income, savings, assets, expenditure, basic amenities, as well as attitudinal and behavioural changes in the rural women before and after their group membership. 	<p>One of the positive contributions that SHG-based lending models make to women's empowerment is the opportunity for women to gain experience in making decisions, leading and influencing others. Groups provide a means for women to know and be known by other women; a forum for learning leadership and public-speaking skills; and a basis for development of trust, friendship, and financial assistance.</p> <p>Group membership can help foster a sense of equality among women and break down social barriers, such as caste, as well as gender.</p>
<p>Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gain an improved understanding of the savings patterns of adolescent girls and young women; the barriers they face to saving; and the control they exercise in operating their accounts and determining the use of their savings. 	<p>Young girls and women in these resource-poor settings often have access to money, either by way of wages and/or gifts. Adolescents and young women have limited decision-making authority or control over economic resources, with</p>

Study	Objective	Conclusions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To examine the potential for increasing the involvement of adolescent and young women in savings activities and for designing appropriate and acceptable savings options and services for them. 	<p>regard to their accounts in particular. Young females were only superficially involved in opening their own accounts, and rarely played an independent role in operating the account or in drawing loans on the basis of the account. While exceptions exist, mothers, fathers and husbands were the main decision-makers.</p>
Khan 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To examine the livelihood practices and the livelihood capital of the green microcredit borrowers by analysing changes in the borrowers' levels of capital. 	<p>Green microcredit is becoming more popular among the natural-resource-dependent borrowers. It was also apparent that the green microcredit borrowers have greater social and human capital than the conventional microcredit borrowers. Strengths and weaknesses of green microcredit were identified and recommendations put forward.</p>
Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To explore the potential of microcredit-plus models to facilitate pathways of individual and collective empowerment in light of the view that empowerment, when reduced to the provision of financial resources and services, is unlikely to lead to wider changes in gender inequality unless programmes strategically combine credit with other vital services. 	<p>Emergent themes of empowerment were enhanced socio-emotional well-being, increased economic assets, and improved household gender equity. Credit-plus participation demonstrated positive changes to individual, household and collective-agency dynamics.</p>
Lyby 2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To support gender equality as a policy objective for microfinance organisations operating in Afghanistan, by providing them with information to assist them in designing or realigning rural and urban development programmes that enhance the economic and social empowerment of women. 	<p>Microfinance influences the livelihoods of female beneficiaries in a number of ways. Livelihood strategies vary between households, and the impact of access to microfinance differs accordingly. The lessons from this study are related to the different types of assets, or capital, that comprise a</p>

Study	Objective	Conclusions
		livelihood, including: human capital, social capital, physical capital, financial capital and natural capital.
Ray-Bennett 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explore the relationship between microcredit and reduced vulnerability of woman-headed households in 'multiple disasters'. • To explore whether microcredit can both facilitate recovery of livelihood assets in a multiple-disaster context and reduce everyday vulnerability of woman-headed households. 	Microcredit is a useful tool to replace women's livelihood assets that have been lost in multiple disasters. Inefficient microcredit delivery may lead to debts and exacerbate caste, class and gender inequalities among female beneficiaries. It is suggested that microcredit delivery cannot achieve vulnerability reduction for women in multiple disasters, unless it is complemented by effective financial services, integrated policy planning, and disaster management between government, NGOs and the community.
Sanyal 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To answer whether economic ties can positively influence social relations and actions and, if so, how does this influence manifest itself? • To examine whether structuring socially isolated women into peer-groups for an explicitly economic purpose, such as access to credit, has any effect on women's collective social behaviour. 	Improvements in women's social capital and normative influence appeared to foster women's capacity for collective action. Several factors contributed, including economic ties among members, the structure of the group network, and women's participation in group meetings. Microfinance groups may have the potential to promote women's social capital and normative influence, thereby facilitating women's collective empowerment. There is a need to refine understandings of social capital and social ties that promote normative influence among women microfinance beneficiaries.
Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter 1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explore the relationship between domestic violence against women and their 	Group-based credit programmes may have the potential to reduce men's violence against women by

Study	Objective	Conclusions
	<p>economic and social dependence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To describe some of the common situations in which violence against women occurs in Bangladeshi society, analyse its larger context, and identify factors that appear to lessen its incidence. 	<p>making women's lives more public. However, the problem of men's violence against women is deeply rooted, and extensive interventions are probably required to significantly undermine it.</p>
Shahnaz and Karim 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To assess the usefulness of the approach of combining financial and social interventions by setting up Employment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) centres. 	<p>The programme appeared useful in reducing the chances of early marriage, engaging the participants in economic activities, increasing their mobility and involvement in extracurricular reading. Girls who are in a disadvantaged position in terms of education and parents' openness to girls' empowerment are less likely to participate in the programme. Skill-development training components should include a generic module on financial literacy, focusing on budgeting, financial management and insurance schemes.</p>
Shetty 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To establish whether microcredit helps to alleviate poverty. To understand the impact credit has on participants' lives. To explore whether credit empowers or whether it is the manner in which credit is delivered that is empowering. 	<p>Loans do not permanently move participants out of poverty; however, they do reduce some of the vulnerabilities associated with poverty. While credit has much greater impact when it is tied with other services, credit is, in itself, important, because it can provide a buffer for families living at subsistence level.</p>
Uddin 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based upon a perceived necessity to mobilise social factors in the alleviation of poverty and social solidarity using group-based microcredit models as an effective policy instrument for increasing women's access to financial capital and for strengthening their social capital at local level, 	<p>The relationship between participation in group-based microcredit programmes and the facilitation of social capital at local level appears ambiguous. The assumed association between microcredit membership and building social capital (social networks, norms of reciprocity</p>

Study	Objective	Conclusions
	<p>this paper seeks to contribute to the continuing debate concerning how or whether group-based microcredit facilitates the formation of social capital at local level in Bangladesh.</p>	<p>and collective identity and action) is much less prominent than commonly suggested by many previous scholars and development practitioners.</p>
<p>Zand 2011</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To examine the effects of women’s participation in microfinance programmes in terms of gender roles and relations within the household and the local community. Specifically, the project explores women’s participation in the National Solidarity Programme’s (NSP) Community Development Councils (CDCs), as well as NGO-initiated microfinance groups under the Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan (MISFA). 	<p>The multifaceted nature of empowerment means that microfinance participation can only contribute to this process. Bringing changes in gender relations will necessitate the coming together of many different initiatives in different spheres of Afghan society. Microfinance has the potential to be one of these contributing initiatives, but participation alone cannot improve gender relations.</p>

APPENDIX 2.6: CHARACTERISTICS OF INCLUDED STUDIES (CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MICROFINANCE PROGRAMMES IN INCLUDED STUDIES)

Paper	Type of programme	Provider/s	Country	Region/district	Setting
Ahmed 2008	Microcredit	Grameen Bank	Bangladesh	Satkhira district	Village (rural/urban unstated)
Ashraf Ali 2014	Microcredit	Multiple NGOs (Association for Social Advancement – ASA, Building Resources Across Communities – BRAC, the Proshika Human Development Center – Proshika, Grameen Bank, Green Hill, Integrated Development Foundation – IDF, Shakti Foundation, Center for Community Research and Development – CCDR, Podokhep)	Bangladesh	Chittagong Hill Tracts	Village (rural/urban unstated)
Aslanbeigu, Oakes, Uddin 2010	Microcredit	Grameen Bank	Bangladesh	Manikgonj, Dhaka, Gazipur	(rural/urban unstated)
Cons and Paprocki 2010	Microcredit	BRA, Grameen Bank, ASA, Islamic Relief, Asset, Thengamara, Krishi Bank, Proshika as mohajans (local village moneylenders)	Bangladesh	Rural Northern region ('Arampur' village is a pseudonym)	Rural

Paper	Type of programme	Provider/s	Country	Region/district	Setting
Garikipati S 2013	Microcredit Self-Help-Group (SHG) Programme	National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development (NABARD)	India	Mahabubnagar district, Telangana region - Andhra Pradesh (Rural region)	Rural
Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010	Microcredit (SHG model)	KRCDS and DET India	India	Villages in two districts in Tamil Nadu (rural South India): Vellore and Thiruvallur districts	Rural
Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2013	Microcredit (SHG model)	KRCDS and DET India	India	Villages in two districts in Tamil Nadu (rural South India): Vellore and Thiruvallur districts	Rural
Jones, Mukherjee, Galab 2007	Microcredit (SHG model)	Velugu (World Bank), Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), as well as a variety of SHG independent and bank-initiated sources	India	Four sites in Andhra Pradesh state: Amrabad mandal, Mehboobnagar district, Telangana region (South), Atlur mandal, Cuddapah district, Rayalaseema region, Seethampeta mandal, Srikakulam district, Coastal Andhra region, and Anantapur mandal, Anantapur district,	Rural and urban
Joseph 2005	Microcredit and micro-savings with an SHG model	Grama Vidiyal run by Activists for Social Alternatives (ASA)	India	Four rural branches in the district of Tamil Nadu: Somarasampettai, Chozhan	Rural

Paper	Type of programme	Provider/s	Country	Region/district	Setting
				Nagar, Manikandam and Manaparai	
Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006	Micro-savings and microcredit	Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)	India	Ahmedabad (urban), Kheda and Banaskantha (rural), Gujarat, New Delhi	Rural
Khan, 2014	Microcredit (Specifically 'green' microcredit' = 14 green-microcredit sponsored projects)	Center for Natural Resource Studies (CNRS), NGOs, MFIs, and commercial banks (unspecified)	Bangladesh	Arpara, Magura district, and Barlekha, Moulvibazar district	Rural
Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam 2014	Credit Plus	Annapurna Pariwar	India	Mumbai	Urban
Lyby 2006	Microfinance (including various services offered by several different MFIs, including: microcredit, micro-savings, micro-insurance and micro-enterprise programmes)	BRAC, FINCA, CARE, CHF Afghanistan Microfinance Initiative (AMI), and Afghanistan Rural Microcredit Programme (ARMP)	Afghanistan	Rural and urban sites in Herat, Balkh, Bamyan and Kabul provinces	Rural and urban
Ray-Bennett 2010	Microcredit (SHG model)	Action Aid (AA) Bhubaneswar and Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS)	India	Tarasahi, Balikuda block, Jagatsinghpur districts, Orissa	Rural
Sanyal 2009	Microcredit (group-lending model)	NGOs (Self-Reliance and Sisterhood)	India	Rural West Bengal	Rural
Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter 1996	Microcredit	Grameen bank and BRAC	Bangladesh	Six villages in two regions (further details unstated)	Village (rural/urban unspecified)

Paper	Type of programme	Provider/s	Country	Region/district	Setting
Shahnaz and Karim 2008	Microcredit plus (education and skills training, social space...)	BRAC via Employment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) centres	Bangladesh	10 randomly selected regions	Rural and urban
Shetty 2010	Microcredit and group micro-saving	Guild of Services-PLAN (GOS-PLAN) and Women's Working Forum (WWF)	India	Chennai	Urban
Uddin 2012	Microcredit SHG Program	Grameen bank and BRAC	Bangladesh	Three villages (Zelegaon, Nodigaon, and Shantigaon in Sylhet)	Rural
Zand 2011	Microcredit (individual and group-lending models)	National Solidarity Programme's (NSP) Community Development Councils (CDCs) and Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan (MISFA)	Afghanistan	Village in Qarabagh district Kabul	Rural and urban

APPENDIX 2.7: CHARACTERISTICS OF INCLUDED STUDIES (PARTICIPANTS OF THE MICROFINANCE PROGRAMMES IN INCLUDED STUDIES)

Paper	Population size (planned/actual)	Gender	Income/poverty level	Age (years)	Secondary population
Ahmed 2008	73, including men household members and women beneficiaries (exact numbers unclear)	Women	'low-income' (meaning unclear)	-	150 household and community members (exact numbers unclear)
Ashraf Ali 2014	166, including 46 men and 103 women	Men and women	-	-	17 Community members
Aslanbeigui, Oakes, Uddin 2010	10	Women	Unstated	34-60	-
Cons and Paprocki 2010	150	Men and women	-	-	-
Garikipati S 2013	397	Women	Avg. monthly net per capita = 219.61 rupees (district poverty threshold = 262 rupees); 52.1% of participants below district threshold	34.2 (SD=10.86)	-
Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010	170	Women	Avg. annual income = 10,153 rupees (low-caste), 8,335 rupees (middle-caste) 50% no income	-	Household and community members
Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2013	170	Women	Avg. annual income = 10,153 rupees (low-caste),	-	Household and community members

Paper	Population size (planned/actual)	Gender	Income/poverty level	Age (years)	Secondary population
			8,335 rupees (middle caste) 50% no income		y members
Jones, Mukherjee, Galab 2007	-	Women	Regional poverty rankings = 2nd (lowest number below poverty line), 19th, 20th and 21st. (Unclear what ranking system based on).	-	Community members
Joseph 2005	240/230 (10 qualitative participants)	Women	-	28-45	-
Kalyanwala and Sebstad, 2006	76	Women (girls and adolescents)	5-300 rupees/day	13-25	-
Khan 2014	8 (but unclear)	Men and women	-	-	-
Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam 2014	10	Women	'Poorest of the poor'... 'slum residents'	18-55	-
Lyby 2006	Unclear (135 households, 77 women, 42 men, 16 'mixed')	Men and women	-	-	Household and community members
Ray-Bennett 2010	12	Women	-	24-59+	Community members
Sanyal 2009	400	Women	Income index (scored 0-1) = (West Bengal Human Income Index = .43, Gender Related Development Indices = .27) 'very low'	-	-

Paper	Population size (planned/actual)	Gender	Income/poverty level	Age (years)	Secondary population
Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter 1996	1,305	Men and women	-	Percentage of sample 14-19 = 10% 20-29 = 44% 30-39 = 32% 40+ = 22%	Community members
Shahnaz and Karim 2008	1,183 (first-round interviews), 949 (second-round). Most of analysis based on 559	Women (girls, adolescents and young women)	-	11-25 years	Household members
Shetty 2010	54	Women	-	-	
Uddin 2012	151	Women	-	-	Household and community members
Zand 2011	10	Women	-	21-55	Household and community members

APPENDIX 2.8: CHARACTERISTICS OF INCLUDED STUDIES (IDENTIFICATION OF PARTICIPANTS AND DATA-COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS METHODS)

Paper	Identification of population	Identification of participants	Collection methods/ tools	Data-analysis method/ approach	Location data collected	Who collected data?
Ahmed 2008	Pilot study and familiarity with district/village	Snowballing, theoretical sampling, geographic proximity	Participant observation, videotaped focus groups, interviews	Grounded theory	-	Author and trained local interviewer
Ashraf Ali 2014	Preliminary contact and household census	Purposeful snowballing	Participant observation, semi-structured focus-group interviews with interview guide and voice recorder, ethnographic notes	ATLAS.ti.6.2 qualitative-data-analysis software, cross-checked findings with participants	Local community spaces	Author
Aslanbeigui, Oakes, Uddin 2010	Preliminary contact with MFIs	Identified by MFIs representative based on geographic proximity and history of microfinance participation	Interviews with standardised questionnaire, including open-ended questions	Thematic analysis	Homes	Author and interpreter
Cons and Paprocki 2010	-	Recipients of microcredit loans	'Community-based oral testimony' fieldwork, including semi- and unstructured interviews with voice recording	Thematic analysis	-	Local people trained in qualitative research
Garikipati 2013	-	SHG members who had completed at	Fieldwork, survey, focus groups, unstructured	Thematic analysis	-	Six male and female enumerators, author

Paper	Identification of population	Identification of participants	Collection methods/ tools	Data-analysis method/ approach	Location data collected	Who collected data?
		least one loan cycle	interviews with random participants			(fluent in dialect) present at over 1/3 of inter-views and all focus groups
Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010	Area where micro-finance has developed significantly over past decade and author familiarity with area	Author familiarity and aim for representative /random sample of programme membership	Fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, group discussions, questionnaire-based survey	Thematic analysis	-	-
Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2013	Area where micro-finance has developed significantly over past decade and author familiarity with area	Author familiarity and aim for representative /random sample of programme membership	Fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, group discussions, questionnaire-based survey	Thematic analysis	-	-
Jones, Mukherjee and Galab 2007	Community poverty status and human development indicators, composite social capital index capturing group membership, access to social support, and involvement	Programme members and non-members. One village chosen for majority of interviews and case studies	In-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups	Thematic analysis	-	Local research assistants

Paper	Identification of population	Identification of participants	Collection methods/ tools	Data-analysis method/ approach	Location data collected	Who collected data?
	in collective action					
Joseph 2005	Region where the selected micro-finance organisation operates	Programme members of ASA in randomly selected branches. Participants chosen purposively – not a member for longer than three years (first round) and randomly (second round) sampled	Questionnaire-based semi-structured, open-ended interviews	Thematic analysis	-	Trained research assistants
Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006	Eligible participants selected	Quota-sampling strategy	Tape recorded, in-depth interviews	Thematic analysis	-	Trained interviewers
Khan 2014	Location selected on the basis of the presence of green micro-finance operations	Purposive and random sampling on the basis of green-microfinance participation	Mixed methods, including focus groups, interviews, case studies, questionnaire survey and observation	Thematic analysis with Department for International Development UK (DFID)'s sustainable-livelihood framework	-	Author
Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam 2014	-	Staff member distributed recruitment flyers, participants identified/ screened by micro-finance	Face-to-face interviews, with survey	Feminist/thematic analysis	-	Research assistant and professional translator

Paper	Identification of population	Identification of participants	Collection methods/ tools	Data-analysis method/ approach	Location data collected	Who collected data?
		programmes. Convenience sample of screened participants with over one year participation				
Lyby 2006	Locations selected to represent a variety of cultural and environmental settings, excluding the South and South-Eastern areas, and the Pakistan border zone	Beneficiaries sought at their weekly meetings with micro-finance organisations	One-off household interviews, key-informant interviews, case histories and focus groups. Interview guides	Thematic analysis with an analytical framework	-	Author, a trained senior research assistant, and four trained research assistants
Ray-Bennett 2010	Selected location due to local risk of natural disasters	Women-headed households	Participant observation with field notes and diary, semi-structured formal and informal tape-recorded interviews	Thematic analysis	-	Author
Sanyal 2009	Location selected on basis of comparability with previous studies and familiarity of author	Participants selected from a stratified random sample. on the basis of being participants of two different micro-finance organisations	Semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews	Thematic analysis based on causal networks	Homes	Author

Paper	Identification of population	Identification of participants	Collection methods/ tools	Data-analysis method/ approach	Location data collected	Who collected data?
		in different districts				
Schuler, Hashem, Riley, Akhter 1996	Location of overarching study using random, multi-stage cluster design	Participants involved in incidents of men's violence against women	Mixed methods, including ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation and in-depth interviews)	Thematic analysis	-	Trained local researchers
Shahnaz and Karim 2008	BRAC's Employment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) programme participant, location selected on basis of achieving a range of locations with 'city influence'	Multi-stage cluster sampling, including a comparison group. Participants randomly selected for interviews	Mixed methods, including in-depth interviews, case studies, and focus groups	Thematic analysis	-	-
Shetty 2010	Via micro-finance organisation involvement	Snowballing after introductions to key informants	Taped, in-depth interviews guided by a list of questions; unstructured, informal interviews	Thematic analysis	-	Author
Uddin 2012	Location selected on the basis of the length of time micro-finance organisations had been operating	Women beneficiaries who had been beneficiaries for one or more years	Ethnographic fieldwork, including observation, in-depth interviews, case studies	Thematic analysis	-	Author

Paper	Identification of population	Identification of participants	Collection methods/ tools	Data-analysis method/ approach	Location data collected	Who collected data?
Zand 2011	Location selected on basis of presence of particular micro-finance operations. Consciously chose not to enter community affiliated with micro-finance organisations ; rather approached village elders	Women beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries selected after gaining entry into community	Semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus groups, informal and formal conversations	Thematic analysis	-	Trained research team of local researchers

APPENDIX 2.9: METHODOLOGICAL QUALITY OF INCLUDED STUDIES

	Critical Appraisal Criteria									
	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5	Question 6	Question 7	Question 8	Question 9	Question 10
Ahmed 2008	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	NA	Y
Ashraf Ali 2014	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Aslanbeigui, Oakes, Uddin 2010	NA	Y	N	Un	Un	N	N	Y	N	Y
Cons and Paprocki 2010	Un	Y	Y	Un	Un	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Garikipati 2013	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y
Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010	Un	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y
Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2013	Un	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y
Jones, Mukherjee, Galab 2007	Un	Un	Un	Un	Un	N	N	Y	N	Y
Joseph 2005	Un	Un	Un	Un	Un	N	N	Y	N	Y
Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006	NA	Un	Un	Un	Un	N	N	Y	N	Y
Khan 2014	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam 2014	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Lyby 2006	NA	Un	Un	Un	Un	N	N	Y	N	Y
Ray-Bennett 2010	Un	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Un	N	Y
Sanyal 2009	Un	Un	Un	Un	Un	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter 1996	Un	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Shahnaz and Karim 2008	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	N	N	N	N	Un
Shetty 2010	NA	Un	Un	Un	Un	N	N	Un	N	Y
Uddin 2012	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Zand 2011	Un	Un	Un	Un	Un	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
%	55	60	55	50	50	55	25	75	15	95

Percentages indicate proportion of questions answered Yes (Y).

Y = Yes; N = No; Un = Unclear; N/A = Not applicable

Critical-appraisal criteria for qualitative studies: Is there congruency between: 1) -the stated philosophical perspective and the research methodology? 2) the research methodology and the research question or objectives? 3) the methods used to collect data? 4) the representation and analysis

of data? 5) the interpretation of results? 6) Is there a statement locating the researcher culturally or theoretically? 7) Is the influence of the researcher on the research, and vice-versa, addressed? 8) Are participants and their voices adequately represented? 9) Is the research ethical according to current criteria or, for recent studies, is there evidence of ethical approval by an appropriate body? 10) Do the conclusions drawn in the research report appear to flow from the analysis or interpretation of the data?

APPENDIX 2.10: STUDY FINDINGS BY PHENOMENA OF INTEREST, THEME, SUBTHEME AND CATEGORY

Study		Ahmed 2008	Ashraf Ali 2014	Aslanbeigu, Oakes, Uddin 2010	Cons and Paprocki 2010	Gariki-pai 2013	Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010	Jones, Mukherjee, Galab 2007	Joseph 2005	Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006	Khan 2014	Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam 2014	Lyby 2006	Ray-Bennett 2010	Sanyal 2009	Schule, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter 1996	Shahnaz and Karim, 2008	Shetty 2010	Uddin 2012	Zand 2011		
Quality of Evidence*		9/10	9/10	3/10	6/10	7/10	6/10	2/10	2/10	2/10	10/10	9/10	2/10	5/10	3/10	9/10	0/10	1/10	8/10	4/10		
Theme	Experiences of positive benefits (17 studies)	Financial and economic benefits (11 studies)	Savings, security, and planning for future costs and crises	X			X		X			X	X					X				
			Income contributions and investment in income-generating activities			X		X		X	X	X	X	X					X			
			Asset repair and accumulation								X			X	X					X		
			Lower interest rates and reduced reliance on money lenders										X							X		
	Empowerment of women (15 studies)	Improved mobility and independence	X						X	X				X		X			X		X	
		Improved financial, business, vocational, and social skills	X				X	X		X			X						X		X	
		Improved involvement in decision making						X	X	X			X	X								
		Reduced domestic abuse and violence	X													X	X					
		Improved social and household status and respect			X			X		X			X	X			X				X	
		Greater social solidarity and support						X	X				X	X	X	X			X	X	X	
Improved confidence and self-esteem								X	X			X	X		X			X		X		
Empowerment of girls and adolescents									X							X						
	Diet								X													

Study		Ahmed 2008	Ashraf Ali 2014	Aslanbeigu, Oakes, Uddin 2010	Cons and Paprocki 2010	Gariki-pai 2013	Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010	Jones, Mukherjee, Galab 2007	Joseph 2005	Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006	Khan 2014	Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam 2014	Lyby 2006	Ray-Bennett 2010	Sanyal 2009	Schule, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter 1996	Shahnaz and Karim, 2008	Shetty 2010	Uddin 2012	Zand 2011	
Experiences of Negative Consequences (13 studies)	Positive social and personal impact (7 studies)	Improved children's education, expenses, and aspirations						X	X		X	X	X					X		X	
		Access to and knowledge of health services								X									X		
		Social space for members' voices to be heard							X			X									
		Knowledge of sustainable resource use										X									
		Study	Ahmed 2008	Ashraf Ali 2014	Aslanbeigu, Oakes, Uddin 2010	Cons and Paprocki 2010	Garikipati 2013	Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010	Jones, Mukherjee, Galab 2007	Joseph 2005	Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006	Khan 2014	Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam	Lyby 2006	Ray-Bennett 2010	Sanyal 2009	Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter	Shahnaz and Karim, 2008	Shetty 2010	Uddin 2012	Zand 2011
	Negative financial and economic consequences (10 studies)	Lack of household support		X			X			X							X				
		Debt, repayment and failed investments		X		X								X	X						
		Dominati on by and subjugati on to other members		X				X	X						X					X	
	Disempowerment of women (6 studies)	Hampere d decision making				X	X											X			X

Study		Ahmed 2008	Ashraf Ali 2014	Aslanbeigu, Oakes, Uddin 2010	Cons and Paprocki 2010	Gariki-pai 2013	Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010	Jones, Mukherjee, Galab 2007	Joseph 2005	Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006	Khan 2014	Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam 2014	Lyby 2006	Ray-Bennett 2010	Sanyal 2009	Schule, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter 1996	Shahnaz and Karim, 2008	Shetty 2010	Uddin 2012	Zand 2011	
		Increased domestic abuse	X		X											X					
		Reduced social status and respect					X														
	Negative social and personal impact (8 studies)	Obligations and workload								X			X								
		Negative impact on children												X							
		Poor treatment by micro-finance staff		X		X															
		Unsupportive micro-finance practices, processes													X					X	
		Sinfulness of interest under Islamic Law																			X

Study		Ahmed 2008	Ashraf Ali 2014	Aslanbeigu, Oakes, Uddin 2010	Cons and Paprocki 2010	Gariki-pai 2013	Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010	Jones, Mukherjee, Galab 2007	Joseph 2005	Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006	Khan 2014	Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam 2014	Lyby 2006	Ray-Bennett 2010	Sanyal 2009	Schule, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter 1996	Shahnaz and Karim, 2008	Shetty 2010	Uddin 2012	Zand 2011		
Motives for deciding to participate/not participate (12 studies)	Motives for deciding to participate (8 studies)	Male domination		X																		
		To escape poverty		X					X							X					x	
		Debt cycles		X																		
		Domination of others						X														
		Benefit to children							X													
		Access to health insurance											X									
		Preferred over other sources of credit												X					X			
	Motives to not participate (8 studies)	Avoid objection and conflict in the home	X													X						
		Loans with interest seen as sinful																			X	X
		Problems with	X						X				x					X		X		

Study			Ahmed 2008	Ashraf Ali 2014	Aslanbeigu, Oakes, Uddin 2010	Cons and Paprocki 2010	Gariki-pai 2013	Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010	Jones, Mukherjee, Galab 2007	Joseph 2005	Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006	Khan 2014	Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam 2014	Lyby 2006	Ray-Bennett 2010	Sanyal 2009	Schule, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter 1996	Shahnaz and Karim, 2008	Shetty 2010	Uddin 2012	Zand 2011
		micro-finance organisations, operations, obligations and products																			
		Reduced employment and household status					X														
		Study	Ahmed 2008	Ashraf Ali 2014	Aslanbeigu, Oakes, Uddin 2010	Cons and Paprocki 2010	Gariki-pai 2013	Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010	Jones, Mukherjee, Galab 2007	Joseph 2005	Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006	Khan 2014	Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam 2014	Lyby 2006	Ray-Bennett 2010	Sanyal 2009	Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter 1996	Shahnaz and Karim, 2008	Shetty 2010	Uddin 2012	Zand 2011
Beliefs and attitudes of other household and community members towards programme participants (5 studies)	Positive beliefs and attitudes of householders (2 studies)	Women's empowerment and equality							X									X			
	Positive beliefs and attitudes of community members (2 studies)	Women's empowerment and equality							X												
		Knowledge and financial skills							X												X

Study		Ahmed 2008	Ashraf Ali 2014	Aslanbeigu, Oakes, Uddin 2010	Cons and Paprocki 2010	Gariki-pai 2013	Guerin, Kumar, Agier 2010	Jones, Mukherjee, Galab 2007	Joseph 2005	Kalyanwala and Sebstad 2006	Khan 2014	Krenz, Gilbert, Mandayam 2014	Lyby 2006	Ray-Bennett 2010	Sanyal 2009	Schule, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter 1996	Shahnaz and Karim, 2008	Shetty 2010	Uddin 2012	Zand 2011
																	X			
	Negative beliefs and attitudes of householders (3 studies)	X						X					X							
	Independence and mobility	X						X												
	Use of loans only							X												
	Negative beliefs and attitudes of community members (1 study)	X																		

* 'Quality of evidence' has been determined by study based upon the number of criteria met out of a possible 10 in the JBI methodological-appraisal tool for qualitative studies.

This appendix provides a comprehensive list of each of the findings extracted from the primary studies included in the present review. The findings have been ordered by theme and subtheme. Furthermore, findings are grouped within themes and subthemes by whether they were ‘apparent’ (‘actual experiences of negative consequences as a result of microfinance-programme participation’) or ‘perceived’ (‘perceived negative consequences of microfinance-programme participation’). Individual findings from the same study are separated by spaces. Findings could be presented in the words of the author, in the words of participants, in the form of quotes, or a combination. In order to categorise findings by theme, the authors carefully read each paper and the information presented around the particular finding.

1. Beneficiaries’ experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits/negative consequences of participating in microfinance programmes

1.1. Beneficiaries’ experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes

1.1.1. Financial and economic benefits

1.1.1.1. Savings, security and planning for future costs and crises

APPARENT

Ahmed FE (2008)

Grameen Bank has empowered Mehrun in terms of financial security and social mobility: she gained entrepreneurial and leadership skills and has savings in the bank, which contributed to the household economy.

Garikipati S (2013)

In such cases, having access to credit did save these families from entering an exploitative debt relationship and/or avoid a catastrophic outcome. However, it is also apparent that the absence of any security net or insurance can greatly diminish the effectiveness of microcredit as a tool for development and women’s empowerment.

Joseph JS (2005)

None of the members had savings of their own before joining the ASA group. Now all of the members have regular weekly savings and have developed a regular savings habit. In addition, six of them had voluntary savings other than compulsory weekly savings. The members reported that they feel more confident because they have their own money. Many of them reported that having savings helped them to repay their loans, meet household expenditures, and build assets in their own names.

Krenz et al. (2014)

The loans disbursed through Annapurna's microfinance project help to increase women's access to capital assets, improve financial management skills, and reduce both household and individual vulnerability. Though all of the respondents continue to live in poor, densely populated urban areas and work in the informal sector, their stories indicate reduced levels of poverty and signs of long-term stability. While low-interest loans alone are enough to provide short-term stability, the savings provision allows women to plan for the future, invest in longer term endeavours, and handle unexpected expenses without falling deeper into poverty.

Lyby E (2006)

Farooqa became head of an SHG with BRAC and got a loan of USD 100, which she used for different purposes: the main project was to help the sons expand their shop with USD 20, but she also spent USD 40 on food and 30 on notebooks and pens for the children. She finds MF has somehow helped but without making the big difference. However, she manages to make some savings. She thinks it is good that MF goes to the women, as "they are more creative". The members of her group help each other and maintain good relations. Fatimah says that the forced savings made her understand household economics, and she feels comfortable that her savings are kept with BRAC for a lean season when she may need it.

Shetty S (2010)

For the GOS-PLAN participants, the savings program itself led directly to asset accumulation and played a pivotal role as a buffer against the high cost of borrowing in the private market. It also had symbolic importance as a safety net of the women's own making.

PERCEIVED

Ray-Bennett NS (2010)

In the absence of men, they could sell the milk produced locally with minimum trading skills. Hence, the micro-credit offered was instrumental in giving the respondents the chance to recover the cows and goats that they had lost in the super-cyclone.

1.1.1.2. Income contributions and investment in income generating activities

APPARENT

Aslanbeigui N, Oakes G, Uddin N (2010)

Long-term economic success, which was achieved by cash income based on loans, as the factor that produced the most significant changes in their lives.

Garikipati S. (2013)

If the loans were not available, many households would be worse off in terms of their incomes, while substantial numbers could have plunged into a consumption crisis.

Joseph JS (2005)

In fact, seven respondents noted that their family income had certainly increased after their membership in the SHG and receipt of three or more loans.

Khan MM (2014)

She worked with CNRS in the nature conservation project. Along with seasonal fishing activities and working with CNRS, she took more loans and started to carry out small-scale terrestrial agriculture on leased-in land.

'If I can do this and make [a] profit, people will follow me and start doing organic agriculture, and I will be a role model for the country.'

Krenz et al. (2014)

After securing their basic needs, study respondents reported using loans to repay debts from other lenders, purchase materials to enhance their current income-generating activities, pay for their children's education, and invest in new businesses. Several women had also begun saving to purchase a new house.

In addition to educating their children, the women aspired to obtain work, improve upon their current income-generating activities, and start new businesses.

Starting a new business or moving into another (more desirable) field of work appears to be more difficult for women who are sole or primary earners, or who possess fewer resources and capabilities. Nonetheless, nearly all of the study participants report higher levels of employment and increased income due to their utilization of Annapurna Pariwar's microfinance services.

A few participants noted significant changes in their husband's behaviour over the course of their involvement with Annapurna. Before, many of the families were struggling to meet basic needs and were under chronic stress due to income instability. Women who depended entirely on their husband's wages were extremely vulnerable to income fluctuations and violence.

Lyby E (2006)

Her new husband, a clergyman, mostly relies on the tailoring that Zainab is doing for the income of the household. They have received a group loan from BRAC, which they feel has been helpful to them since there is no other way they are able to earn an income. She goes to the bazaar twice a month and brings back USD 25-30 worth of fabric material. After

preparing clothes to sell in the bazaar, on average she is making five pieces of clothing per day and has some USD 150 net income monthly from the tailoring.

Fatimah heard about BRAC and went to their office asking to join the MF programme. She became the VO president and got a loan of USD 120, which she used for food and clothes, as well as for her daughters' education – she is now able to send them for extra courses in English and computer training. Fatimah says that the forced savings made her understand household economics, and she feels comfortable that her savings are kept with BRAC for a lean season when she may need it. She also says that repayment of the loan forced her 16-year old son Agha Gul, who dropped out of school, to get a job in a construction company, for which he receives a monthly wage of USD 56. Fatimah controls the family economy and she does not have any problems with repaying her loan. She wants a second loan for her son to establish his own construction business, and to buy a tailoring machine for her daughters.

Kalyanwala S and Sebstad J (2006)

Several study participants described the general poverty of the household and the practice of contributing towards food and other basic needs on the one hand, and towards household emergencies on the other.

'It happened recently, on Navratri [festival of dance]; it [my contribution] was Rs. 170 we had to go and buy things for the house. She [mother] asked for it. No, they [parents] will not give it back. Once they have taken it, there is no question of them returning it.' (Joint account holder, age 17, Ahmedabad)

'I give it all [my earnings] to my mother. She buys food grains with it.' (Mandal account holder, age 15, Banaskantha)

'My mother's financial situation is very bad and we are an added expense for her; I give her all my money so that she can meet the expense.' (Mandal account holder, age 22, Kheda)

'I had saved money to buy a book, but I had to give the money to buy medicines for my mother. (Mandal account holder, age 17, Kheda)

Exceptions did exist. At least six study participants from Ahmedabad, aged 20 and above, reported that they had taken a loan from their account to improve their own livelihoods.

'I took the loan to improve my beauty parlour. When girls come for bridal make-up, they insist on good-quality make-up. I had to buy a lot of material for this to keep my customers happy. For this reason I had taken the loan.' (Individual account holder, age 20, Ahmedabad)

'I had to buy an embroidery machine.' (Individual account holder, age 22, Ahmedabad)

Shetty S (2010)

For the women who reported increased income, interviews showed that this was not only because of access to loans but also because of access to small capital grants. The women put the money they borrowed from the GOS-PLAN to a variety of uses. Although all the women interviewed had taken at least one loan to use for their businesses, other loans were used to pay school fees and school-related expenses, such as books and clothes; to host relatives or visitors from their native villages; for religious celebrations; on medical expenses for themselves or a family member; for house repairs; and to pay off other debts. One woman borrowed money to go to her home village to see an ailing relative. Women who had these assets did not move into a higher class or accumulate a great number of other assets, but had a larger and more stable source of income than they would have had otherwise.

PERCEIVED

Joseph JS (2005)

While the majority of the members had in the past no concrete plans for themselves, having joined the SHG and received a loan, they are now able to plan for their future and take control of their own destiny. Their dreams and plans for the future include starting income-generating activities, constructing their own house, purchasing assets, sending 144 children to school, purchasing land, adding more facilities in the house, expanding the business and creating jobs for others in the village. There is a tremendous change of attitude in the respondents that they can achieve their plans and this confident attitude was absent before joining the group.

Krenz et al. (2014)

Although many committed more time to income-earning activities since joining the organization, they did not note a subsequent decrease in time spent on unpaid work within the home.

Krenz et al. (2014)

Since taking their very first loan, the women document a gradual process of transformation in themselves and their surroundings. Their testimonies suggest an increased awareness of possibilities and assurance about their own ability to succeed in future endeavours.

1.1.1.3. Asset repair and accumulation

APPARENT

Joseph JS (2005)

Home ownership also allows owners to create their own assets. However, all respondents invariably reported that there is no such improvement in housing condition, as had been expected. One of them has bought land for future house construction. AH respondents wish to have either a new house or to repair their house to improve their living conditions. Not

only the physical condition of the house but also the facilities and assets are considered to be an important factor for the household's status in society. Four respondents said that they had purchased additional assets and improved electric or water supply in their homes. Examples include purchase of a radio, television, grinder, electric and water facilities.

Krenz et al. (2014)

Women use loans first to stabilise household consumption and make needed household repairs.

Lyby E (2006)

Loans registered as purely for consumption include food, clothing, house improvements, school expenses, repayment of previous debt, bride price and weddings, i.e. items that are not related to a business.

Shetty S (2010)

The women put the money they borrowed from the GOS-PLAN to a variety of uses. Although all the women interviewed had taken at least one loan to use for their businesses, other loans were used to pay school fees and school-related expenses, such as books and clothes; to host relatives or visitors from their native villages; for religious celebrations; on medical expenses for themselves or a family member; for house repairs; and to pay off other debts. One woman borrowed money to go to her home village to see an ailing relative.

For the GOS-PLAN participants, the savings programme itself led directly to asset accumulation and played a pivotal role as a buffer against the high cost of borrowing in the private market. It also had symbolic importance as a safety net of the women's own making.

PERCEIVED

Joseph JS (2005)

While the majority of the members had in the past no concrete plans for themselves, having joined the SHG and received a loan, they are now able to plan for their future and take control of their own destiny. Their dreams and plans for the future include starting income-generating activities, constructing their own house, purchasing assets, sending children to school, purchasing land, adding more facilities in the house, expanding the business and creating jobs for others in the village. There is a tremendous change of attitude in the respondents that they can achieve their plans and this confident attitude was absent before joining the group.

1.1.1.4. Lower interest rates and reduced reliance on money lenders

APPARENT

Khan MM (2014)

In rural Bangladesh, one of the major sources of social capital for the poor is linked with their relationships with social elites and political leaders since these largely influence their access to macro-institutional supports for farming, post-disaster events, and access to schemes such as vulnerable-group feeding, post-disaster housing support, and food-for-work programmes. Locally, poor people tend to look for opportunities from extended kinships framed in the form of self-help groups, CBOs, NGOs and MFIs because the informal and non-governmental sectors have been more successful in quickly reaching the doorsteps of the rural poor compared to the formal government sectors.

Since the emergence of the NGOs and MFIs, borrowers have had the freedom to get loans at much lower interest rates compared to those of moneylenders.

Shetty S (2010)

For the GOS-PLAN participants, the savings programme itself led directly to asset accumulation and played a pivotal role as a buffer against the high cost of borrowing in the private market. It also had symbolic importance as a safety net of the women's own making.

Greatly reduced dependence on moneylenders and employers for loans. It immediately reduces the class-related vulnerability to money-lenders' collectors, who will forcibly take a poor male defaulter's belongings just as quickly as they will a poor woman defaulter's.

1.1.2. Empowerment of women

1.1.2.1. Improved mobility and independence

APPARENT

Ahmed FE (2008)

Grameen Bank has empowered Mehrun in terms of financial security and social mobility: she gained entrepreneurial and leadership skills and has savings in the bank, which contributed to the household economy.

Jones et al. (2007)

Interestingly, this 'power within' dimension was highlighted more by upper-caste than lower-caste women. Whereas Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) respondents focused on their economic empowerment, Backward Caste (BC) and Other Caste (OC) women tended to emphasise changes in their physical mobility that the self-help group programmes had facilitated. This is probably because access to credit is relatively more important to lower-caste women than to their upper-caste counterparts, whose households can be expected to have more options for borrowing money through their social networks. It is also likely linked to the fact that BC and OC women typically face more constraints on their physical mobility.

Joseph JS (2005)

Six of the respondents acknowledged that there was a change and improvement in the quantity and quality of their clothing and another four were able to wear gold in the forms of necklaces, nose-rings, and earrings.

Selvi reported:

'I was least interested about the type and the kind of the dress I wore before joining the group. I was totally confined either to my house or to my village and the type and the kind of dress and gold in the form of necklaces, nose-rings, and earrings I wore meant nothing for me, as my outside mobility was restricted to a great extent. Now, they have become very important, as there is tremendous increase in my outside mobility. I take extreme care now in the selection of my dress and gold ornaments before I go anywhere.'

Mobility is another indicator of personal empowerment (Mayoux 2001). The ability to travel alone for a long distance may be an indicator of members' improved self-confidence. The question about mobility was asked regarding six activities: going alone to the theatre, to their relatives' houses, to buy groceries, to meet ASA staff, to attend meetings, and to meet government officials. Five of the respondents answered that their mobility had been positively affected. Three reported that they were not able to go out alone, and two said that they had been able to travel alone even before joining the group.

Laila stated the following on behalf of the group:

'We no more depend upon men for money. We consult, but we can spend on our own also. Now, we are seen as one who saves, has self-confidence, solves problems, is mobile, has outside contact, knows a lot of information, and gets loans for the benefit of the family.'

Generally, after the women's parents see the benefits of the activities of the groups, there is no opposition from them to the women's participation. Instead, they show a lot of interest, inquiring on their own about group activities.

'Parents also encourage us to attend the meetings and raise our hopes. In-laws do not speak against us. Actually, they share our work. They even take over our work if we have to go out. They speak proudly of our group. Even our children tell proudly, 'my mother is in a group'

Lakshmi expressed the following:

'My husband gives me more value since my membership in the group and my income. I know, because now he hands all his earnings to me. If I had not become a member in the group, not gone to the meeting, not taken a loan, not learnt the work, I would not get the value I have now, I would have to continue to ask my husband for everything in total dependency. My husband knows I am very busy, so he washes our clothes and dishes and cooks for us and I think it is because I am helping him financially.'

Lyby E (2006)

Respondents were asked if women's mobility had increased with the advent of microfinance. Male respondents rarely thought any change had occurred. Some women said the same, which was in some case because they were already quite mobile before MF. The most important factor was seen as being member of an SHG and attending meetings there, which could lead to other things beyond the weekly meeting.

For women, just being part of a group is empowerment: they leave their houses regularly for VO meetings and meet other women of the neighbourhood. This sharing helps them realize that their problems are perhaps personal but common within their community.

Sanyal P (2009)

The strengthened mutual identification fostered by these frequent face-to-face interactions motivated the women to help each other. Group-based lending strategies regularly bring many women into contact with each other, making them part of non-kinship associations and expanding their social networks. A group member described the remarkable difference this had made:

'Before I didn't know anyone; we never used to go to each other's houses. But now, through the group I can get to know many more people... I like it that now the 20 of us can get together in one place and discuss different things. If we didn't have this group, then we'd have to spend this time at home.' (Aparna)

The presence of multiple groups in adjacent neighbourhoods dramatically expands the number of women who can mobilize for large-scale actions. Moreover, nesting these groups into village-based clusters further facilitates organization across neighbourhood lines.

Group membership allows women to interact more freely and with a wider circle of people, including men, outside the monitoring gaze of their husbands and in-laws. According to many women, this freedom of expression produces feelings of psychological well-being and deepens social relationships.

Schuler et al. (1996)

After she joined BRAC her mobility increased but her husband stopped beating her. She now controls and invests her own income, and pays for her own health care despite once having been beaten for doing so. She told one of the researchers:

'My husband used to beat me up and take my money. Now he can beat me a thousand times and I won't give him my money. I tell him, 'you had better not beat me too much I can live without you!''

Shetty S (2010)

GOS-PLAN has created a structure through which participating in the community is easier.

Zand S (2011)

Of the participating families, three acknowledged a change in their mobility.

Two other women in the study feel pride in contributing to the well-being of their family and releasing their men from being dependent on other members of the family, or people outside their home. Sabzina, a woman in her mid-fifties, took the loan for her sons to have their own metal shops, rather than having to work for other people. She believes that her existing confidence was what persuaded her to take the loan but the sense of pride in her contribution to the well-being of the family, including engaging her son, illustrates an increase in her confidence, an essential step in the process of empowerment:

'I made my own and my families' life better. Other people should also take a loan and improve their life. I want others to take loans as I did. They should work like me... Since I took the loan I built my house, engaged my son and also bought some livestock.'

Shamsiah, a young woman in her thirties who lives with her parents and brothers-in-law, gave her loan to her husband to have a separate mechanic shop from his single brothers. She envisaged that once his brothers got married, the lack of financial clarity in their shared business would be a source of dispute. Therefore, it would be wise for her husband to have a separate shop and be financially independent from them. She is very happy that she has been able to release her husband from the likely future financial conflict in the family. In addition, it can be assumed that having separate expenses from her in-laws has not only released her from being financially dependent on them, but also allowed her to avoid possible disputes with her future sisters-in-law.

1.1.2.2. Improved financial, business, vocational and social skills

APPARENT

Ahmed FE (2008)

Grameen Bank has empowered Mehrun in terms of financial security and social mobility: she gained entrepreneurial and leadership skills and has savings in the bank, which contributed to the household economy.

Garikipati S (2013)

Each of these women perceived a positive change in their statuses as a result of running their own businesses. They spoke about their newly found confidence in their ability to earn incomes independent of their husbands and without recourse to wage labouring. They felt a change not only in the attitudes of their family members but also society at large. In such cases, there is little doubt that credit has had a positive impact on the women concerned.

Guerin et al. (2010)

Even when husbands or in-laws exert control or take over loans, the fact that women are the official beneficiaries facilitates their ability to negotiate in other areas afterwards.

Joseph JS (2005)

Two of the participants interviewed also affirmed that in spite their increased workload and responsibilities, they felt a great deal of pride and personal satisfaction (good determinants) in being able to make a substantial economic contribution to their household.

Krenz et al. (2014)

During monthly group meetings, women also learn good financial practices, like budgeting, saving and investing. This knowledge is invaluable for women with minimal education and little experience managing their own money.

Shetty S (2010)

Women gained formal money-management skills.

Participants have invested heavily in their children's education. This is not only through loan-related income; the organization also provides partial grants towards books and fees. GOS-PLAN's other services have also allowed investment in more intangible assets like vocational training for interested women and children over age 16.

Women have a greater awareness of banks and bank policies and a much greater awareness of the exploitative rates of interest charged by private moneylenders. WWF has an explicit feminist philosophy, and the one-day training program addresses issues of gender inequality. While group leaders, staff members, and some younger members report having made changes based on a new awareness, most participants said that they had made little change.

Zand S (2011)

Another important point raised by Marina, the tailor, is the process of learning negotiation skills after she dealt with different customers.

1.1.2.3. Improved involvement in decision making

APPARENT

Guerin et al. (2010)

The very fact that women are the official beneficiaries can positively lead to an improved household status, experienced directly by women in terms of recognition and the ability to take decisions in strategic areas such as children's education or ceremonies.

Jones et al. (2007)

As a result of greater economic independence, they had been able to assert some decision-making power over issues such as their children's — and especially their daughters' — education, household consumption, access to health services and their children's marriage partners.

Although husbands are still reported to have the final say on most matters and in some cases forced their wives to reverse their decisions in cases where they had taken these without

consulting their spouse, participation in decision-making in and of itself is viewed as a significant change and should therefore not be underestimated.

Joseph JS (2005)

Information about decision-making revealed that seven of the interviewees were not able to intervene in decisions affecting their lives before joining the group. In contrast, at present, five of them decide for themselves and four of them in consultation with their husbands. One respondent was a widow who made all decisions independently, which may also indicate her ability to take control over her life. Five respondents had become able to make decisions in all aspects at all three levels: individual, household and business. The kinds of decision they make include the purchase of dresses, jewels, groceries, household items, actions relating to children's schooling, getting loans and use of loans. Five of them now say they are aware of their rights and make their own decisions on whom to vote for in local elections; they add that this was impossible before their membership in the group.

Most of the respondents said that previously their husbands were the ones who brought earnings to the family and thus made all the decisions dealing with money. Now, they either directly or in consultation with their husbands, decide how to allocate money. In one case, the husband even gave his earnings to the woman, and she decided how much to spend and on what.

Krenz et al. (2014)

Since taking loans, the women did report increased control over household resources and financial decision making, as well as more egalitarian intra-household gender relations.

A few participants noted significant changes in their husband's behaviour over the course of their involvement with Annapurna. Before, many of the families were struggling to meet basic needs and were under chronic stress due to income instability. Women who depended entirely on their husband's wages were extremely vulnerable to income fluctuations and violence.

The women's testimonies establish a pattern in which increased financial assets precipitate a reduction in poverty-related stress and vulnerability, improve long-term security, and result in healthier relationships and more cooperative decision making:

Lyby E (2006)

On a question whether MF has contributed to changes in decision-making in the family, about two-thirds of the respondents said that their involvement had increased.

'There is definitely an increase in the overall level of respect women get within the household, since the men realize that they have to go through the women to get to the money.' (KBL, 20)

Focus group of female clients:

'Yes, because women participate in the decisions on how to spend money. They cannot overrule their husband's decisions completely but at least they have begun to participate in the decision making process.'

1.1.2.4. Reduced domestic abuse and violence

APPARENT

Ahmed FE (2008)

Robi stopped beating Salma as a result of these interventions.

Early in the marriage, Kamal would fly into a temper and beat her. Resentful of her prowess, male neighbours instigated the violence, hoping to ensure that Kamal would keep her "in her place". But after she joined the women's group and started earning money, Alveera was able to confront the men and the beating stopped.

Sanyal P (2009)

Consequently, group membership offered women, who were otherwise confined to their homes, an opportunity to participate in an array of associational activities.

Internal domestic violence against women (5); against a group member's husband for engaging in an extramarital affair (1); annulling underage marriage (1); external domestic violence against women (4); men's sexually permissive behaviour; attempted polygamy (3); extramarital affair (1); community-wide anti-liquor campaign (3); anti-gambling campaign (1); acquiring public goods (4); organizing community events (2).

Shuler et al. (1996)

After she joined BRAC her mobility increased but her husband stopped beating her.

She now controls and invests her own income, and pays for her own health care despite once having been beaten for doing so. She told one of the researchers:

'My husband used to beat me up and take my money. Now he can beat me a thousand times and I won't give him my money. I tell him, "you had better not beat me too much I can live without you!"'

1.1.2.5. Improved social and household status and respect

APPARENT

Aslanbeigui et al. (2010)

Cash income and wealth accumulated over decades of borrowing are tightly linked to status in the household and community as well as mobility beyond the bari.

"Money brings respect."

Joseph JS (2005)

The participants believed that their financial contribution had helped them earn greater respect from their parents, husbands and their children. They were not only happy to have reduced their dependency on their husbands but were also pleased to be able to help them. They also reported that such improvements in their life condition have resulted in more respect from the community.

However, as a result of participation in the group and the economic activities undertaken, some respondents reported receiving more respect from the family members and helped with household work, as a result of improved status based on their bringing more money to the family. As a result, these women said that this allowed them to focus more on their businesses and go out of their house and participate in public meetings and village events.

Roseline stated:

'Now, I enjoy special respect at home and better mobility. My opinions are sought and respected. I am able to think and act independently. I am able to go wherever I want to go. I get permission from my husband easily go out for various reasons. Now, it is even enough if I just cook the food. My husband eats by himself, and also feeds the children. Sometimes, as we commence cooking, some visitor might come. I ask my husband to complete cooking, and he does without objecting. He understands, cooperates and shares in my work. He washes at least his own clothes, if not the children's, and sometimes mine. He reminds me now to go and attend the meeting on time. He has realised that there is benefit in my being member of the group.'

All respondents participated in the meetings organised by the group and seven of them stated that they participated not only in the meetings organised by the SHG but also in other public meetings and functions organised by the villages. All respondents except one said that they were in the past not able to make any decisions at the community level, such as organizing village meetings and functions. Three of them even said that they are invited to local governing body meetings and religious gatherings. Sumathi reported:

"Undoubtedly, my capabilities have been enhanced after joining the group: I can conduct meetings, and pass resolutions, I have learnt to work together as a group, I can maintain registers and accounts, I can meet outsiders (even men) without being shy, I can speak boldly, I can take part in any meeting conducted by outsiders, I can visit government officials without fear, I can meet with high officers and interact with them and I can petition regarding village issues."

Rajathi expressed that she had been invited to participate in and speak at village meetings after her membership in the self-help group, whereas before she would have been ignored: 'I have been invited to participate in community meetings because I am now in a position to contribute to the local governance.'

Women are beginning to advise neighbours in business, family, health, and community matters.

In contrast, some respondents said clearly that after joining the group, they could attend centre meetings, international women's day and other common activities together regardless of their caste. Many of them also stated that they sit together regardless of their caste and talk to each other. According to them, significance of penetration of caste-inclusion included Dalit and non-Dalit members visiting each other's houses, sharing food, and celebrating festivals together. This attitude shows a major change in the caste structure in the villages. However, it is extremely difficult to change the mindset of the people in a culture where caste discrimination has existed for 3000 years. Therefore, the impact of the SHGs in reducing caste discrimination may not prove highly significant, although there is some change.

SHG members are clearly positive about their changing role and status in the community: 'Before, people didn't know me, but now everywhere I go, people are calling my name Selvi Aunty.' (Selvi)

'A lot of people know me, and everywhere that I reach and I need help I receive help, so I feel very happy about it and to be part of ASA.' (Manickam)

'Some people even marvel at what ASA has done for us. If you are with ASA SHGs, there is no way you have to look down upon yourself.' (Sumathi)

One of the participants (Roseline) expressed her opinions about the positive and negative aspects of community level empowerment on behalf of the group in the following ways: 'We have established very good contact with ASA, as well as government offices. We are able to go out freely to represent the community, its problems and issues. We take up issues as a group, and not as individuals. We have learnt to work as a group. The group can take up community and women's issues. We are invited to the Gram Sabha (village governance) meetings and are given special respect. There is a general acceptance in the village that the work we are doing is useful. We are now seen as one who gets programs from the government and non-government sources. Our direct contact with higher officials enhances empowerment. We feel empowered just by being part of our own group. However when the group members stand in election, the political parties threaten to break the group. Personal safety is also questioned when we get back late from meetings and training program.'

Krenz et al. (2014)

Positive social interactions and increased respect from neighbours, relatives and other acquaintances seem to reinforce the women's self-esteem. Based on interview data, the ability to interact more comfortably with people in positions of power may ultimately enhance the women's social capital and access to resources. This pattern is likely strengthened by women's enhanced self-respect, social competence, and social networks. Though gendered responsibilities remain largely unchanged, the women appear to have increased voice and social standing within personal relationships and in public. On the community level, Annapurna Pariwar helps to sustain healthy families, leading to more positive community functioning with fewer social problems.

Lyby E (2006)

She is the leader of the group and meetings take place in her house. There have been no defaults in the group, but Khanum Gul has occasionally advanced money for repayment from other members. She has taken in some of the women to train them in tailoring without charge. She is her own boss, and microfinance has helped increase her status (which was already quite high before joining MF). She thinks microfinance should go to women so that they can have their business and also make sure the children are healthy and educated.

Shuler et al. (1996)

The loans and the social dimensions of credit programs may help to inhibit violence against women. Bringing home a resource that benefits men can protect women from violence. Rather, it appears that violence against women diminishes when the women bring home a resource (in this case the loan money), regardless of who actually uses the money... when a man appropriates his wife's loans, there is some acknowledgment that she is the source of this benefit and this improves her position in the house.

Zand S (2011)

Women's contributions to improving their families' economic well-being are a source for increasing the respect they are shown, from their immediate and extended families to the community more widely. Despite the limitations of credit in expanding women's scope of decision-making, participation has given one of the clients more voice in her household and enabled her to assert more authority. As discussed earlier, Anita is helping her husband with his vegetable selling and gives herself credit for working as hard as her husband toward the economic well-being of the family. She acknowledges her value in the household is due in part due to the supporting words of the loan officer, who reminds her of being the partner in the business her husband has. This has made her more assertive in voicing her concerns. She has expressed her dissatisfaction with her husband's late arrival back home after work, and her husband changed his behaviour accordingly.

1.1.2.6. Greater social solidarity and support

APPARENT

Guerin et al. (2010)

SHG membership is also a means to reinforce female financial networks, both in terms of solidarity but also in terms of conflict factors... Women say they regularly exchange microloans (64% of our sample), either giving part of their loan to another group member or repaying more quickly in order to allow others to benefit from their loan before the final repayment date.

Jones et al. (2007)

Several women themselves also cited good examples of joint action to tackle child poverty issues, including chipping in to support the costs of emergency healthcare for the child of a

group member and challenging an abusive husband collectively rather than leaving it to local police.

Krenz et al. (2014)

Whether they formed groups with friends or strangers, all of the women noted increased cohesiveness and high levels of trust among their groups. Apart from reminding each other of repayment dates and relaying what was said at larger group meetings, the women discuss personal issues and topics unrelated to microfinance within their groups. Some women mentioned finding out about new resources, like a nearby day care centre, by participating in group discussions. For those who did not know group members before joining Annapurna, the new relationships were a welcome expansion in social and material resources.

Considering their willingness to discuss personal issues and rely on each other in difficult times, the group-based microfinance model may facilitate group discussion and action against other personal and public injustices.

If one person cannot make a loan payment, other group members are compelled to cover that person's share.

Lyby E (2006)

Farooqa became head of an SCG with BRAC and got a loan of USD 100, which she used for different purposes. The main project was to help the sons expand their shop with USD 20, but she also spent USD 40 on food and 30 on notebooks and pens for the children. She finds MF has somehow helped but without making the big difference. However, she manages to make some savings. She thinks it is good that MF goes to the women, as "they are more creative". The members of her group help each other and maintain good relations.

In cases where they are members of groups such as BRAC's VOs, they may reap social benefits.

She is the leader of the group and meetings take place in her house. There have been no defaults in the group, but Khanum Gul has occasionally advanced money for repayment from other members. She has taken in some of the women to train them in tailoring without charge. She is her own boss, and microfinance has helped increase her status (which was already quite high before joining MF). She thinks microfinance should go to women so that they can have their business and also make sure the children are healthy and educated.

Her new husband, a clergy, mostly relies on the tailoring that Zainab is doing for the income of the household. They have received a group loan from BRAC, which they feel has been helpful to them since there is no other way they are able to earn an income. She goes to the bazaar twice a month and brings back USD 25-30 worth of fabric material. After preparing clothes to sell in the bazaar, on average she is making 5 pieces of clothing per day and has some USD 150 net income monthly from the tailoring.

Ray-Bennett NS (2010)

Nevertheless, the respondents showed their keenness to keep the SHG intact, because the SHGs gave them the opportunity to get together and share their experiences during the meetings – something which did not occur in their daily lives. Mobilising this collective spirit and the strengths of the SHGs could prove useful if the catalyst NGOs drew on them in distributing relief, participating in the community kitchen, negotiating the milk rate with the Milk Store, or organising emergency veterinary camps, fodder management and training on cattle care during and after the multiple disasters. Activities like these in Tarasahi could have helped to relax the prevalent strict social norms and gender spheres and could have facilitated women's socio-economic development.

Sanyal P (2009)

Consequently, group membership offered women, who were otherwise confined to their homes, an opportunity to participate in an array of associational activities.

Internal domestic violence against women (5); against a group member's husband for engaging in an extramarital affair (1); annulling underage marriage (1); external domestic violence against women (4); men's sexually permissive behaviour; attempted polygamy (3); extramarital affair (1); community-wide anti-liquor campaign (3); anti-gambling campaign (1); acquiring public goods (4); organising community events (2).

The strengthened mutual identification fostered by these frequent face-to-face interactions motivated the women to help each other. Group-based lending strategies regularly bring many women into contact with each other, making them part of non-kinship associations and expanding their social networks. A group member described the remarkable difference this had made:

'Before I didn't know anyone; we never used to go to each other's houses. But now, through the group I can get to know many more people... I like it that now the 20 of us can get together in one place and discuss different things. If we didn't have this group, then we'd have to spend this time at home.' (Aparna)

The presence of multiple groups in adjacent neighbourhoods dramatically expands the number of women who can mobilise for large-scale actions. Moreover, nesting these groups into village-based clusters further facilitates organisation across neighbourhood lines. Frequent interactions via face-to-face deliberations facilitate the identification of common problems and the formulation of strategies to tackle them. Participation in regular group meetings, monthly cluster meetings and training sessions provides women with opportunities to cross the familiar boundaries of their households and neighbourhoods. Through these experiences, women acquire increased social exposure and greater habituation with independent physical mobility and social interactions across kinship, class and gender divides. Increased mobility and interactions increase women's confidence in their capabilities.

Shetty S (2010)

Rather than just tapping into an existing community, these programs helped create it for the women who participated in them. The women were not a particularly close-knit group before, despite living close to each other.

Uddin MJ (2014)

Some women who do regularly visit the centres for credit instalment payments. Those who do attend say that they feel good about the opportunity to talk with other women and to inquire about other people's news. They share ideas and develop acquaintances with women outside their kinship groups or hamlets.

Zand S (2011)

Respondents expressed how much they value their informal gatherings on their rare visits to the loan office to make repayments. They reported that such spaces enable them to learn from each other, share their experiences and consequently gain self-confidence and courage – two preliminary steps in the process of women's empowerment. Women in the study have all expressed great satisfaction in finding spaces where they can share, "learn" and find "courage" through talking with fellow women.

1.1.2.7. Improved confidence and self-esteem

APPARENT

Jones et al. (2007)

This new-found sense of self-confidence was discussed by a number of respondents. One focus group member from Atlur, for example, poetically noted that before participation in self-help groups, "women were like a frog in a well". Another self-help group member from Amrabad emphasised how membership had empowered her and her counterparts to overcome deep-seated feelings of fear and inferiority.

Joseph JS (2005)

In other indicators of expanded self-confidence and self-worth, five respondents reported an increase in their level of knowledge about issues that affected them, three reported an increase in their business knowledge, and eight had become sufficiently confident to plan a better future not only for themselves but for their family members as well. Finally, it was observed that the greater the number of years of participation in the program, the higher the confidence of the woman in planning for her future.

Krenz et al. (2014)

Since taking their first loans over 2 years ago, study participants described themselves as "better", "more confident", and "happy". Their responses reflected subthemes of improved self-confidence, self-efficacy, and social relationships. In general, they noted feeling more self-assured and capable in their work and their daily interactions, particularly in social situations they previously avoided

Many women described not only confidence but happiness resulting from their ability to contribute to household income, control loan usage, save money, support their children's education, and improve their family's well-being. Happiness was also correlated with reduced stress due to improved living conditions. New and safe social spaces for observation, interaction, and personal development. Spaces that foster group inclusion and non-hierarchical relationships between poor and less poor individuals seem to be particularly successful in improving feelings of self-worth. The larger organisation-wide meetings also serve to reassure clients that they are not alone in their struggles. Bolstered by a belief in their essential worth and capabilities, the women felt bold enough to interact more freely in public and pursue different kinds of work.

Lyby E (2006)

Their confidence has risen with the possibility to get access to resources in their own name, and the money is also important. The gradual building up of savings is seen as important by many, as it reduces their vulnerability and provides them with some security against external shocks. The savings are in their name, which is also important.

'I am really appreciated in my home, by the men. I feel even more confident, and I feel that they see me as trustworthy- to help and make decisions. I am in charge of the household, and even though my husband spends money, I advise him.'

Sanyal P (2009)

Frequent interactions via face-to-face deliberations facilitate the identification of common problems and the formulation of strategies to tackle them... Participation in regular group meetings, monthly cluster meetings, and training sessions provides women with opportunities to cross the familiar boundaries of their households and neighbourhoods. Through these experiences, women acquire increased social exposure and greater habituation with independent physical mobility and social interactions across kinship, class, and gender divides. Increased mobility and interactions increase women's confidence in their capabilities.

Shetty S (2010)

The mere fact that they have access to an independent source of credit was important to all the respondents. There is a sense of pride in their exclusive access to credit, even when the loan is not put to a "productive" or business-related use.

In both cases, the process of participating in the microenterprise program enlarged the physical space within which the women were comfortable. Unlike in some other parts of South Asia, the women did not lack mobility. Women on the streets, in markets, or on buses are a common sight. Some women regularly travel to the wholesale market and have experience conducting transactions with seasoned businessmen.

Zand S (2011)

Respondents expressed how much they value their informal gatherings on their rare visits to the loan office to make repayments. They reported that such spaces enable them to learn from each other, share their experiences and consequently gain self-confidence and courage – two preliminary steps in the process of women’s empowerment.

The most evident change brought about by women’s access to microfinance is an increase in an individual woman’s sense of self-worth. The female respondents have always been engaged in the social reproduction work in their house, which receives less recognised value by the family and the women themselves than men’s work. However, taking a loan has placed a monetary value on their contribution which has resulted in their sense of value.

Two other women in the study feel pride in contributing to the well-being of their family and releasing their men from being dependent on other members of the family or people outside their home. Sabzina, a woman in her mid-fifties, took the loan for her sons to have their own metal shops, rather than having to work for other people. She believes that her existing confidence was what persuaded her to take the loan but the sense of pride in her contribution to the well-being of the family, including engaging her son, illustrates an increase in her confidence, an essential step in the process of empowerment:
‘I made my own and my families’ life better. Other people should also take a loan and improve their life. I want others to take loans as I did. They should work like me... Since I took the loan I built my house, engaged my son and also bought some livestock.’

Shamsiah, a young woman in her thirties who lives with her parents and brothers-in-law, gave her loan to her husband to have a separate mechanic shop from Hissing brothers.

She envisaged that once his bothers got married, the lack of financial clarity in their shared business would be a source of dispute. Therefore, it would be wise for her husband to have a separate shop and be financially independent from them. She is very happy that she has been able to release her husband from the likely future financial conflict in the family. In addition, it can be assumed that having separate expenses from her in-laws has not only released her from being financially dependent on them, but also allowed her to avoid possible disputes with her future sister-in-laws.

Shamsiah, a client in her thirties who gave her loan to her husband, has shown her assertiveness by confidently spending the money her husband earns. This is mainly due to the fact that she feels taking the loan has given her ownership of the money her husband makes and therefore entitles her to spend it.

1.1.2.8. Empowerment of girls and adolescents

APPARENT

Joseph JS (2005)

Bringing up girls in equality with boys is considered in the interviews. Akkamma said: 'Previously, I thought that education up to primary level was sufficient for a girl because studying more would involve her going to a school outside the village. Now, I am educating the girl children more, even if it involves going outside the village and I want them to study at least up to higher secondary. I am sending them to schools outside the village even after their coming of age. I want them to go to college to become a doctor or a collector. Before, I bought two sets of dresses for boys and only one set for the girls. Now, I buy equally for both. Previously, I did not wish to spend money for treating our own and our girl children's illnesses. Importance was given to the husband and the boys. Now, even if our treatment is expensive, I take a loan from the SHG and take proper treatment. I have opened savings accounts in the bank in the name of girl children, and am depositing amounts. Previously, I did not want to give equal rights to girls. Now I am becoming aware that they are equal to boys and that they must be given equal rights. Our girls ride cycles like boys. The society has come to accept it.'

Shahnaz R and Karim R (2008)

Girls expressed an overwhelming desire to continue their education. They even reported having arguments with their parents in order to continue their education. A few of them were exemplified as utilizing their loans in order to pursue higher education. For example, a Centre member named Shereen in Sylhet claimed:

'I received IGA training and utilised the loan to rear poultry in order to earn money and finance my own education.'

The girls interviewed showed a keen understanding of the importance of education in one's life and its ability to help the girls to realize their potential and ambitions. Some of the girls participating in the FGD said:

'Only with a good education could the girls seek qualified husbands, eradicate dowry practices, and seek job opportunities.'

Adolescents with more education were inherently more aware of social issues and played an active role in disseminating.

An evaluation of BRAC's ELA centres information to their friends. Members of the ELA who received APON training were reported of taking brisk initiatives in circulating information that they had learned there. Many of them were found to act as mentors to weaker and younger students.

When credit is successfully utilised, girls are able to scale up self-initiated activities, invest in education, expand her area of work and exercise considerable leverage in key decisions in her own life:

'I have opened two DPS (deposit pension scheme) for my future education and marriage.'

They reported of escalating confidence to express to their guardians about their decision not to commit early marriage. But not all were confident in avoiding dowry in their own marriage. One of the participants commented on the prevalence of such practice and said:

'It's not possible to get married without it. Although we are being taught that it's illegal to take dowry but it is still being practiced. There is nothing we can do about this. We are compelled to give dowry. The government law is ineffective. The parents are not just going to sit with their daughter having them unmarried.'

All the respondents reported of having an increased number of friends, in fact many claimed to have as many as fifteen or twenty new friends, and reported an increased access to socialization with peers. The FGD participants said:

'Earlier we could not meet up that often with friends but now due to centres we can meet regularly.'

In Bangladesh, girls typically are not allowed to leave their homes, go to the marketplace alone, especially in rural areas, after puberty begins. Members who had received APON training reported about thinking differently on mobility, being able to go to specific places within their communities without accompanies, and about considerable improvements in their mobility. The girls informed that they became much more confident of themselves, travelled in groups to go out of the village and enjoyed trips to the city-market, cinema, fair, concert and circus.

One of the many acquired skills demonstrated by the girls of the ELA Centres (both with and without APON) was that of management. These girls informed that they formed their own groups and played in-door games in rotations provided in the centre. The girls showed that they now had more control over their lives and life decisions. For instance, they were able to better manage their loans and repay on time and they could manage household work better on the days they went to the centre.

ELA Centre members (both with and without APON) reported of becoming the agents of economic change for their families, through borrowing and their involvements in income generating activities. Their self-involvement in such issues gave evidence to these claims; they became able to protest and report incidences of abuse and early marriage to the chairperson.

'I want to use the money for family use. I have to save as much as I can because I want to make new dresses and buy ornaments for myself.'

Being an intermediary to access credit and agents of economic change through their involvement in IGA. They also became empowered in the outer world through their increased socialization and regular interaction with BRAC staff and peers, and expanded mobility from centre to outside the village. ELA girls were found ambitious and eager to participate fully in the public realm. During discussions of the future, the adolescents' ambitions ranged from professions such as doctor, lawyer, BRAC staff, to other NGO staff members, and the desire become a "good official". Most of the adolescents wished to move outside of the traditional female role and have aspirations to become engaged in a job or career.

When adolescent girls of the ELA Centre first began their involvement at the centre, it

reported that they attended mainly in order to receive training for income generating activities and tailoring in particular. Now, they had also started appreciating the opportunity to acquire knowledge about various social issues that were available in the books at the centre.

'Earlier our knowledge about centres was vague and unclear but now it is not so. We knew about some of the other members before going to the centres but due to the regular interaction in the centres our friendship has deepened. We now try to help each other in every possible way.'

1.1.3. Financial and economic benefits

1.1.3.1. Diet

APPARENT

Joseph JS (2005)

The interviewees' households were able to eat either rice without curry or with a simple curry prepared once a day, either in the morning or evening, but eaten twice a day. Seven of the respondents have increased their eating to three times a day and improved their food intake by adding milk, vegetables, beans and meat. Two of them said that they have not only improved their food quality, but also have their own source for food. With the earning from their loans, they were able to secure their own sustainable source of food, such as livestock for meat and milk supply, and land to grow rice, vegetable and fruits.

1.1.3.2. Improved children's education, expenses and aspirations

APPARENT

Jones et al. (2007)

A substantial number of our respondents confirmed that they invested the money they had access to as a result of self-help group membership – either from group savings or loans from banks or government programmes – in covering child-related expenses.

Joseph JS (2005)

Three women interviewed were particularly proud of their financial contribution to their children's education not only because it helped them earn the respect of their husbands but also because it gave them the opportunity to ensure the best possible education for both their daughters and their sons. Women are putting what they have learned from their involvement in self-help groups into practice by educating both their sons and daughters. Two of them even said that they are sending their children to college and trade schools. They are thus, expanding better opportunities for educating their children for a bright future.

Khan MM (2014)

Many of the borrowers also do not want their children to take up the traditional family livelihood practices. They want their children to be educated and migrate to larger urban areas. As expressed by one borrower:

'I could not finish school due to the liberation war, and after the war I had to work in the field with my family to support ourselves. But I want my sons to be educated and have a better life. They are in the big city now for better education. I will support them even if I have to work hard.'

Krenz et al. (2014)

Unable to afford higher quality private schools, the women enrol their children in local municipal schools and use loans to purchase books, supplies, and uniforms.

PERCEIVED

Jones et al. (2007)

Although involvement in some of these initiatives was initially mandatory, our results suggest that, over time, women did seem to develop a genuine interest in government programmes and what they could offer their children.

Joseph JS (2005)

While the majority of the members had in the past no concrete plans for themselves, having joined the SHG and received a loan, they are now able to plan for their future and take control of their own destiny. Their dreams and plans for the future include starting income-generating activities, constructing their own house, purchasing assets, sending 144 children to school, purchasing land, adding more facilities in the house, expanding the business and creating jobs for others in the village. There is a tremendous change of attitude in the respondents that they can achieve their plans and this confident attitude was absent before joining the group.

Lyby E (2006)

Loans registered as purely for consumption include food, clothing, house improvements, school expenses, repayment of previous debt, bride price and weddings, i.e. items that are not related to a business.

Fatimah heard about BRAC and went to their office asking to join the MF programme. She became the VO president and got a loan of USD 120, which she used for food and clothes, as well as for her daughters' education – she is now able to send them for extra courses in English and computer training. Fatimah says that the forced savings made her understand household economics, and she feels comfortable that her savings are kept with BRAC for a lean season when she may need it. She also says that repayment of the loan forced her 16-year old son Agha Gul, who dropped out of school, to get a job in a construction company, for which he receives a monthly wage of USD 56. Fatimah controls the family economy and she does not have any problems with repaying her loan. She wants a second loan for her son to establish his own construction business, and to buy a tailoring machine for her daughters.

Shetty S (2010)

The women put the money they borrowed from the GOS-PLAN to a variety of uses. Although all the women interviewed had taken at least one loan to use for their businesses, other loans were used to pay school fees and school-related expenses, such as books and clothes; to host relatives or visitors from their native villages; for religious celebrations; on medical expenses for themselves or a family member; for house repairs; and to pay off other debts. One woman borrowed money to go to her home village to see an ailing relative.

Participants have invested heavily in their children's education. This is not only through loan-related income; the organization also provides partial grants towards books and fees. GOS-PLAN's other services have also allowed investment in more intangible assets like vocational training for interested women and children over age 16.

Zand S (2011)

Social interaction with loan officers, women who have paid jobs, has been a motivation for her to have the same aspiration for her daughter.

1.1.3.3. Access to and knowledge about health services

APPARENT

Joseph JS (2005)

Regarding access to healthcare (another indicator), six respondents said that they either do not have any serious health problems or they had been able to access healthcare even before their participation in the group. Eight of the respondents who were not able to access specialised healthcare beyond the traditional and local medical shops, reported that they are now able to access healthcare at the district level. For example, Elangiam had suffered from asthma and was only taking tablets for temporary relief. Since her income increased she went to the district headquarters and received proper medical care. It is evident that the participation in ASA groups has contributed to improved access to health by enabling participants to have more and better food. Many of them also acknowledged that they had a greater awareness of health services available in the village, and at union and district levels.

Shetty S (2010)

The women put the money they borrowed from the GOS-PLAN to a variety of uses. Although all the women interviewed had taken at least one loan to use for their businesses, other loans were used to pay school fees and school-related expenses, such as books and clothes; to host relatives or visitors from their native villages; for religious celebrations; on medical expenses for themselves or a family member; for house repairs; and to pay off other debts. One woman borrowed money to go to her home village to see an ailing relative.

One of the impacts participants cite is the knowledge and skills that they gain that are only tangentially related to taking a loan. WWF has a training program that covers issues of health, family planning, social issues (such as dowry, alcohol and substance abuse, and inter-caste marriages), and gender issues (such as gender equality, the need for women to take care of their own health, the myth of ritual impurity that prevents women from entering the kitchen at a certain time, and cultural strictures against widows).

1.1.3.4. Social space for members' voices to be heard

APPARENT

Jones et al. (2007)

Although this greater involvement in community affairs can be seen as a positive development (and some women interviewed welcomed this new role as a sign of recognition of their group within the village community), it simultaneously raises important questions about the time and capacity of members to meet these expectations. In the communities where we carried out fieldwork, none of the women had received any capacity-building relating to these new functions. If local women lack the requisite capacities to effectively carry out this work, there is thus a risk that women's empowerment initiatives may be undermined as a result of these new demands.

Khan MM (2014)

On the one hand, these multiple memberships helped the borrowers to get more money when they needed it to support their livelihoods. These NGOs have replaced the traditional moneylenders and given the poor access to a formal system of banking. On the other hand, borrowing from multiple sources often forces people who are economically marginalized to fall into a dependency trap through getting involved in a borrowing "treadmill". In the long run, such a mechanism could create a vicious cycle of poverty. Due to the fact that the structured formal sources of lending do not directly consider humanitarian dimensions, they lack the merits of the local moneylenders or relatives as sources of borrowing who often provide moral and logistical support to families in crises. However, dedicated NGOs are not only a good source for the villagers to borrow money; they are a good platform for the minorities to have their voices heard. Their ability to communicate directly with government institutions and the social elites has given NGOs a special social space that used to be held primarily by the local elites.

1.1.3.5. Knowledge of sustainable resource use

APPARENT

Khan MM (2014)

Changes in livelihood cannot be measured only in terms of increased earning; rather changes

can also be seen and measured in the ways the borrowers approach their livelihood. Such a change was evident when Dipti Rani (Nunua, Borlekha) said:
'We don't harvest all the murtha. We leave the small ones and only harvest the mature ones.'

Similarly, Bulu Rani (Arpara) said:

'People look for my vegetable because it tastes good even though it is smaller in size.'

People are seeing the impact of alternative sources of energy for cooking. The impact of biogas plant was well summarised by Shayedhul Islam (Bhatoail):
'I did not have to cut trees or buy firewood last year and also can use the by-product from the plant as fertilizer. I am saving money from two sides.'

1.2. Beneficiaries' experiences of the perceived or apparent benefits of participating in microfinance programmes

1.2.1. Negative financial and economic consequences

1.2.1.1. Lack of household support

APPARENT

Ashraf Ali HM (2014)

Hasi's husband's discriminatory attitude (e.g., abandonment, not providing financial support) pushed Hasi into multiple cycles of debt. Hasi did not benefit from her microcredit participation.

Garikipati S (2013)

In addition, as a result of peer pressure, hostile at times, G5W12 had to sell her copper vessels and V4W9 her goat. Their families did not consent to these sales and both women are suffering the consequences. For instance, G5W12 is not allowed to keep money from sale of crops or her husband's wages, both of which she controlled prior to the incident. She has even lost control over her own wages, which her husband now collects directly from her employer to stop her from using it to repay the loan. Although not common, women were also actively punished for what was seen as acts of defiance. For instance G7W2 and V4W9 experienced deliberate negligence from their families with respect to their food consumption during particularly lean periods. Testimonies suggest that, prior to procuring loans, these women had a greater say over household decisions and incomes, which then diminished lest they try to divert resources away from the household. Some women also experienced abuse and coercion in their struggle to repay loans.

Joseph JS (2005)

In contrast to these accounts, five respondents were not able to say that there was any change in family role. Roseline expressed that her earnings (economic independence) has led to a problem:

'My husband's contribution to the household decreased once I began to earn more income and became able to cover more of the household's expenses. Occasionally, my husband withdrew his support to the extent that I was forced to my loan primarily to meet consumption needs instead of investing in my business.'

Participants had also expressed some constraints at the family level of empowerment. A few of them stated that their husbands take control of their loans, yet they themselves retain responsibility for paying off the loans, thus increasing their level of stress and dependency.

Shuler et al. (1996)

Some of the women who join credit programs face similar problems. In one village, which happened to be a problem village for the credit program, the ethnographers explained: 'Every one of the husbands thinks the wife's loan money is rightfully his..., and this attitude [sometimes] gives rise to disputes. There are no disputes if the men invest the loan money and [give enough to the wife to] pay instalments regularly. But those who misuse the loans for gambling or pleasure, and do not have regular earnings themselves, cannot pay the instalments. The [credit program staff] pressure the woman, she demands the money from her husband, they start arguing, and it reaches a point where he beats her up. The women never tell the [credit program staff] about these incidents.'

1.2.1.2. Debt, repayment and failed investments

APPARENT

Ashraf Ali HM (2014)

'I borrow some loans from IDF for my husband. My husband invested these loans in a poultry project. We could not benefit from this effort. We faced a loss because of the death of some of the hens. Once I could not repay some loan to BRAC. One day, the loan officer came to my house accompanying the group leader and some members. They insulted us using shaming language. They confiscated a television and some furniture. Even they forced us to sell the corrugated tins of our house.'

This account shows NGOs forcing a borrower to sell her furniture, TV, and corrugated tin panels of her house in order to collect on a defaulted loan. Both the fieldworker and a group of women insulted Mohi using shaming language, asking questions such as "why can't you pay if you can eat?" This is the most common shaming question used to hurt the borrowers psychologically. The use of such questions along with negative bodily gestures or facial expressions often hurts borrowers emotionally and is used when they fail to make repayments on time. Sometimes the fieldworkers themselves behave very indecently with the senior female borrowers. My informant Rekha described such a visit:

'They [fieldworkers] are so indecent that they behave unscrupulously with the senior women. They use slang language, which is very disturbing and embarrassing for us. If a senior woman can't manage her loan instalment the fieldworker may ask, 'Why don't you pass a night with someone? You can easily manage this amount of money by having sex with somebody?' Sometimes, the fieldworker asks the group leader to 'bring the [defaulting] woman grasping her hair, uncovering the cloth from her body.'

Cons J and Paprocki K (2010)

Many respondents suggested that they preferred loans from Mohajans because of their ability to provide terms that map to local conditions. As one observed:

'The Mohajan is better. I take loans from him without any hassle. I don't need to think about repaying his money for one month. But there are a lot of hassles with the NGO. You have to be its member, learn the 16 decisions and keep up with the instalments tightly'

Beyond ease of use, many observed that, although they charge high interest rates, Mohajans provide loans that conform to the agricultural realities of Arampur.

Recipients find themselves in positions of greater dependency, reduced self-sufficiency and indebtedness through microcredit participation.

'How could there be any change or improvement in our lives?'

One person owes four or more organisations at a time and has to pay instalments every week. They take loans from one organisation to repay the loans of the other organisations. Their financial condition keeps deteriorating. They can't even eat as much as they could before. They can't even think of having nutritious food and clothes due to the tension of making repayments. The influx of MFIs into Arampur have undermined livelihoods and increased insecurity. This situation is compounded by the influx of more MFIs. Indeed, recipients suggest that not only are other institutions ready to offer them loans to pay back old debt, but that loan officers often encourage their clients to take out loans from 'competing' institutions to meet repayment schedules.

The pressures of repayment often have negative effects on standards of living, requiring borrowers to prioritise loan payments over a broad range of other needs, including school supplies and nutritious foods for their children. As one respondent observed:

'Education requires a lot of things. If we send children to school, they need money or books, notebooks, pencils, pens, examination fees and many other things... But where will we get money? We cannot give it to them even if we have money in pocket as we have to pay a loan instalment the day after tomorrow.'

A number of borrowers reported taking their children, especially girls, out of school in order to continue making loan payments. Even more recounted their children going hungry the night before a loan payment was due, when they could not afford both food for the family and the following day's payment.

'We used to take loans from the Mohajans to cultivate crops. We paid the loans by selling the crops at the end of the harvest, or if there was a delay, we would ask them for more time and they would allow us to pay them back later. But these NGOs are not that flexible. They take the instalments at any cost.'

Failure to tailor loan repayment systems to agricultural cycles is one example of this. A potentially more serious example is the failure to adapt programmes around Monga, a seasonal hunger that falls between the two annual rice harvests. During this period landless families who rely primarily on agricultural labour face difficulties in securing enough employment to provide food. As one respondent described it:

'During Monga, for three months, we meet our need for food with a loan. Becoming indebted to microcredit loan programmes, we struggle through these disasters. But if any member of this loan programme is not able to pay an instalment in time, just after the deadline, NGO workers come to her house and ask for it very inhumanly. They force us to pay at any cost.'

This lack of flexibility causes difficulties for recipients in and outside the context of seasonal hunger. As one respondent described the situation:

'Say I tell the field officer 'I can't give you the instalment today, my child is sick.' And then I bring the doctor to my house. Then the field officer comes and says 'why can you buy medicine for your child, but you can't give me the instalment?''

The adherence to a strict repayment schedule and to the financial discipline of weekly repayment forces many recipients deeper into debt. This condition worsens as more MFIs enter Arampur and residents struggle to meet more and larger weekly repayments.

Regular shortfalls, which, in turn, often lead to unauthorised, though tacitly accepted, asset confiscations. One woman, a landless labourer, shared a story of such a confiscation. She had been ill and unable to work to earn a day wage. She asked for a week-long extension in her payment schedule and was refused.

'Then they sent a message to other field officers in town to seize my husband's rickshaw. When they found him, they stopped him, and told him that he could get the rickshaw back when he repays the instalment. Then it was even harder! We had nothing to eat, and yet we had to somehow find the money to pay them back.'

Such asset confiscation is driven by donor pressure to maintain high repayment rates.

Lyby E (2006)

After much struggle and efforts, she was accepted to receive a loan and, in consultation with her family she bought a cow. Unfortunately the cow was stolen shortly after purchase. The family now finds itself in a difficult situation since they have to repay the loan but do not have any means by which to repay it.

'I was not afraid in the beginning because I could purchase the cow with my loan, so I was optimistic about repayment. But I am very scared now. They stole my cow, and without it how can I pay back?'

Ray-Bennett NS (2010)

The rest of the women, who were in possession of their cows and calves, reported that credit repayment on a monthly basis becomes extremely difficult due to inadequate and uncertain income earned from livestock. The credit repayment was even more difficult for those respondents (as mentioned in the previous section) who did not own cows anymore. Unsurprisingly, women who were already poverty stricken and vulnerable were now additionally burdened with debts. The experiences of each group are discussed in more detail in the ensuing sections. The microcredit programme further entrenched their poverty and vulnerability. The respondents who were already poor were now overburdened with debt.

Ray-Bennett NS (2010)

'Selling milk I repay the loan, deposit the chanda and also buy kunda [processed food] and chokodo for the cow. Ultimately after all these expenses I end up with nothing to fend for myself. So often I fail to pay the credit to the SHG.' (Tarasahi, December, 2003.)

Unsurprisingly, the women-headed households in this study were the poorest of the poor and failed to pay their instalments regularly due to the sporadic and insufficient income they derived from cattle rearing. Therefore, the economic empowerment of these respondents remained a far-fetched concept.

1.2.1.3. Domination and subjugation by other members

APPARENT

Ashraf Ali HM (2014)

Fieldworkers empower group leaders to enforce the repayment obligations for NGOs, and thus they create a space for a group of women to dominate other female borrowers in the village.

Guerin et al. (2010)

The reinforcement of existing hierarchies between women is also likely as an outcome of unequal distribution of microcredits, as some women frequently appropriate others' microcredit. Ultimately, some women are nothing more than puppets, whilst others have appropriated the system remarkably.

Jones et al. (2007)

We learned that two OC women had organised tens of independent groups in the area and

were keeping a margin of the loans they secured from the banks. In this case, keeping their lower-caste 'clients' passive, ignorant and fearful of more active participation was in the organisers' best interests.

Ray-Bennett NS (2010)

Withdrawal of money from the savings account also required the consent of the group members. In reality, when the respondents attempted to withdraw some cash from the revolving fund to meet their contingencies after the disasters, the group members denied them access to it. The reasons given by the respondents are telling. In this instance I quote Chumki Bhoi and Lolita Nayak. Chumki Bhoi (42+) is a low-caste respondent and a mother of four children – two daughters (one married and one aged 13) and two sons (20 and 16). Chumki is a day-wage earner. Her husband died after the super-cyclone due to prolonged ill-ness. According to Chumki:

'Whenever I have asked for some help [extra credit], they have refused repeatedly. They say, 'Why shall we give you five rupees?' This is because they do not get the sahasbol [confidence] to give me money. So they have not lent to me.' (Tarasahi, December, 2003.)

Lolita Nayak, an upper-caste Khandayat widow also received a similar comment. Lolita (45) is a mother of three daughters (two married elsewhere) and lives with her youngest daughter (15) in the village. According to Lolita:

'Women in my group are not good and it is virtually impossible to get credit because they will always ask, 'Can she really return the money because she has not returned the loan yet. So there is no guarantee that she could return this one.' (Tarasahi, December, 2003.)

This research suggests that in the process of denying extra credit, the arena of the SHG recreates power dynamics based on class and gender between the women from both men- and women-headed households... In doing so the former group, which included eight of my respondents across six SHGs, encountered extreme hostility from the least vulnerable members due to their exclusion from the livelihood fund. In order to run the savings account and the revolving fund effectively, the SHG co-ordinators and the least vulnerable members, who were in large numbers in each group, exerted extreme pressure on the respondents to deposit their savings and repayments regularly, irrespective of their personal difficulties. When my respondents failed to pay their monthly instalments they reported that they were met with verbal abuse and fiery argument. Here, the gender and class of the respondents acted as an impediment to their regular repayment of the credit and savings because they were poor, largely landless, involved only in family based occupations, and had no male members to support them (Ray, 2006). Incidentally, none of the respondents were able to receive any further credit from the savings fund either to mitigate or recover from the effects of the foods in 2003 or for their daily consumption due to their socio-economic vulnerability. Rather it was reported by one of the respondents (Lolita) that the amount saved by her group, along with a loan from the bank, was distributed among the less vulnerable members, which in turn helped to reduce the regular disturbances and pressure that... The role of

microcredit in reducing women's vulnerabilities they exerted on the activities. In so doing, the methodology of the credit delivery reproduced and re-intensified local gender and class hierarchies, with more privileged women receiving far greater benefit than the poorer respondents burdened by the 'triple role' of women-headed households.

Uddin MJ (2014)

In order to recover instalments at the due times without facing any obstructions, they disburse credit through guarantors and the group leader. Some of my respondents declared that when a member defaults, the NGO officials use a group of women to recover instalments, which causes conflicts, alienation and destroys prevailing social relationships.

1.2.2. Disempowerment of women

1.2.2.1. Hampered decision making

APPARENT

Cons J and Paprocki K (2010)

The vicissitudes of MFI membership have thus made women subject to a range of vulnerabilities and exploitations. The experiences of recipients in Arampur do not definitively answer the question of whether microcredit is empowering or not. Yet they do cast considerable doubt on strong assertions of microcredit's empowering potential that are central to the global imagination of microfinance. As importantly, the experiences of recipients raise questions about the impact of microcredit on issues such as dowry which are often subsumed within the empowerment debate. Microcredit continues to be an ongoing point of tension in the gender politics of Arampur. One woman observed:

'Women are in so much trouble now. They have to deal with all of the hassles of the repayment of microcredit loans. MFI workers don't go to the husband for the loan instalments. They go to the wife, as she's the one who took the loan. Thus women have to tolerate the torture from both their husbands and the NGO workers. They are now under tremendous pressure.'

Many women describe this increasing financial pressure as a constriction of choice and options, rather than as an expansion of them. Loans are often spoken of by recipients as things that they are compelled to take, either through pressure from family members or because of necessity in times of crisis, even though they are often not the primary users of loans. Many others report that their husbands, or other male household members, pressured them into taking a loan. Many respondents described not only being held responsible for finding ways to meet the costs of weekly loan repayments, but also being liable for the loans if their husbands defaulted. Women thus often become conduits for, rather than controllers of, credit.

Rather than eliminating dowry practices, community researchers and the recipients they interviewed argued that microcredit was effectively reinforcing dowry practices in the village. As one respondent observed:

'My daughter is coming of age. How will we get her married? So many things need to be given... Everything needed to set up a house. In some cases 50 000 taka [about \$720] is not enough. I expect I will need to take a loan again.'

Recipients argue that the ready availability of loans within Arampur has had the paradoxical effect of inflating dowry prices. Many cited dowry rates dozens of times greater than only one or two generations previously. Numerous respondents reported that they had used their loans to pay for their daughters' dowries, often requiring multiple loans from different MFIs to cover the costs. Respondents recounted stories of women who, after spending a year or more in their in-laws' homes after their marriage, were sent back to their parents' homes with demands to take another microcredit loan as additional dowry

Garikipati S (2013)

Women who have their loans diverted to meet family needs suggest that credit can have a detrimental effect on the women concerned in terms of constraining their livelihood options and their influence over household decisions.

Shahnaz R and Karim R (2008)

The girls of the ELA VO group did not receive skill training and showed little initiative for future plans. After taking loans, they gave away their money to their families to support the brother or father's businesses. Thus, the level of control retained by the individual ELA member over the money disbursed by BRAC varied.

Zand S (2011)

Marina's experience is an example of the lack of any increase in women's influence over decision-making as a result of participation in a microfinance programme. Despite having her independent income through tailoring, she was not able to prevent her brothers and husband from stopping her daughters going to school. When they discovered that she had secretly sent the girls to school, her brother and her husband threatened to kill the girls if they continued going.

1.2.2.2. Increased domestic abuse and abuse

APPARENT

Cons J and Paprocki K (2010)

The introduction of loans into women's lives does not, in and of itself, lead to more household bargaining power or scope for financial decision making. As one woman described the situation:

'My husband said that he would pay the instalments. He also said that if I didn't take a loan, I was not a good wife. He said that I had to do it to help the family, and that I was worthless. He abused me in this way.'

Shuler et al. (1996)

For those who do become involved in independent income-generating activities, it may take considerable time for the activity to generate profits and as the woman's income increases there is often a period of struggle for control over it, which may be associated with increased violence.

Fundamentalist groups across the country have issued fatwa against women working, or participating in credit programmes and other organised groups outside of the home. Local landlords, money lenders and power brokers, who see in women's increased mobility a limit to their own control over them, have used such fatwa as a basis to intimidate women.

PERCEIVED

Ahmed FE (2008)

The household is better off, but the loanee is more vulnerable to violence... Faced with violence (and the possibility of being beaten to death), the wife struck a patriarchal bargain and was eventually forced to hand over the loan to her husband. Allowing male relatives to control the loan is a woman's way of managing a status imbalance in the household that could otherwise result in domestic violence. In extreme cases, re-subordination helps her stay alive.

1.2.2.3. Reduced social status and respect

PERCEIVED

Garikipati S (2013)

Before obtaining SHG loans, many of them worked on family farms or within their households, but now they work as wage labourers mainly to meet repayments (many of them compelled to do so). Measuring women's empowerment in terms of outcomes alone would have indicated an improvement in their status as they are now employed in the market economy. However, interviews with these women indicate that a shift from home to market economy was perceived as a fall in status and several were resentful about this.

1.2.3. Negative social and personal impact

1.2.3.1. Obligations and workload

APPARENT

Joseph JS (2005)

Three reported that there is an increased workload and responsibilities as a result of their work. At the same time, another three were of the opinion that in spite their workload and responsibilities, they feel a great deal of pride and personal satisfaction in being able to make a substantial economic contribution to their household.

Krenz et al. (2014)

Some respondents had difficulty attending meetings knowing they would miss out on at least two hours' worth of income.

PERCEIVED

Joseph JS (2005)

Governance meetings and are given special respect.

'There is a general acceptance in the village that the work we are doing is useful. We are now seen as one who gets programmes from the government and non-government sources. Our direct contact with higher officials enhances empowerment. We feel empowered just by being part of our own group. However when the group members stand in election, the political parties threaten to break the group. Personal safety is also questioned when we get back late from meetings and training program.'

1.2.3.2. Negative impact on children

APPARENT

Lyby E (2006)

She borrowed USD 500 from CHF and spent it on the purchase of five lambs for fattening in five months and then selling them up to the Eid holidays. The idea came from her son Qiamuddeen who is 12 years, and who is doing most of the work with the lambs as a herdboys. Keeping livestock is difficult and risky, but they are managing, however the work keeps Qiamuddeen out of school.

'Most of the kids go to school, but if more of them went who would then look after the animals?'

1.2.3.3. Poor treatment by microfinance staff

APPARENT

Ashraf Ali HM (2014)

'I borrow some loans from IDF for my husband. My husband invested these loans in a poultry project. We could not benefit from this effort. We faced a loss because of the death of some

of the hens Once I could not repay some loan to BRAC. One day, the loan officer came to my house accompanying the group leader and some members. They insulted us using shaming language. They confiscated a television and some furniture. Even they forced us to sell the corrugated tins of our house.'

This account shows NGOs forcing a borrower to sell her furniture, TV, and corrugated tin panels of her house in order to collect on a defaulted loan. Both the fieldworker and a group of women insulted Mohi using shaming language, asking questions such as "why can't you pay if you can eat?" This is the most common shaming question used to hurt the borrowers psychologically. The use of such questions along with negative bodily gestures or facial expressions often hurts borrowers emotionally and is used when they fail to make repayments on time. Sometimes the fieldworkers themselves behave very indecently with the senior female borrowers. My informant Rekha described such a visit:

'They [fieldworkers] are so indecent that they behave unscrupulously with the senior women. They use slang language, which is very disturbing and embarrassing for us. If a senior woman can't manage her loan instalment the fieldworker may ask, 'Why don't you pass a night with someone? You can easily manage this amount of money by having sex with somebody?' Sometimes, the fieldworker asks the group leader to 'bring the [defaulting] woman grasping her hair, uncovering the cloth from her.'

Consequences of such oppressive NGO practices may be devastating for the poor women and their families who have no income or saleable assets to repay default loans. In 2009, for example, a poor woman allegedly committed suicide for failing to repay the loans to NGOs. My informant Promila, who was living in the same neighbourhood, described this:

'There was a woman in our neighbourhood who committed suicide by taking sleeping pills for failing to repay the loans. She borrowed loans from several NGOs for her husband, but her husband abandoned her with two teenage daughters and he did not cooperate [with] her financially. Fieldworkers and a group of women continued to insult her. She was living with mental stress and anxiety, as she did not have enough income to manage her household needs and repayments One night she took some sleeping pills and in the next morning she was found dead.'

Cons J and Paprocki (2010)

These pressures create incentives for field officers to use any practice to recover loans. Villagers in Arampur described physical and sexual abuse by male field officers

1.2.3.4. Unsupportive microfinance practices and processes

APPARENT

Ray-Bennett NS (2010)

However, according to one AA worker, two respondents (Lolita and Him-Sheetol) who lost their cattle in the floods of 2001 and 2003 respectively have finally claimed their insurance

(e-mail correspondence with AA, 2008). This demonstrates that respondents did not receive their insurance when they needed it most.

Uddin MJ (2014)

Most borrowers repeatedly report that both GB and BRAC are now reluctant to follow their own rules and regulations. All the respondents of their respective villages unanimously stated that they had not seen their organizations calling any meetings (karmoshala) at the centres for several years. Microcredit programmes in the present study's research area fail to facilitate group meeting norms, fail to develop social conscientisation activities and do not promote a sense of solidarity among the borrowers.

Most of the women expressed the view that credit relationships cannot bring any mutual or shared benefit, or engender any collective identity or norms of reciprocity. For example, Jesmin (39 years old) admitted that she knew most of the group members because she got involved in microcredit when the BRAC started its operation in her area. She actively worked to develop this centre and has tried to maintain good relations with other members, but she feels isolated.

Defaulters generally rely on kin and close friends rather than on fellow members to pay instalments. Most members do not consider their guarantors or groups as mutual helpers; instead, they view them as pressure groups. The nature of the relationship between the microcredit borrowers and the officers is hierarchical and built on an unequal division of power, for instance that of the creditors and the powerful and that of the weak debtors.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents in this study declared that they do not have the economic ability for reciprocity. Because of their appalling economic situations they cannot get involved in such relationships.

'I found that altruistic help (shahaja) among the borrowers is rare.'

1.2.3.5. Sinfulness of charging interest under Islamic Law

PERCEIVED

Zand S (2011)

All the participating families, especially the male members of the family, feel they have committed a sin by taking the loan but say that their economic desperation left them with no choice. In their opinion, sudh can take away the barakat (blessing) of the money and leave clients in more misery. MFI field staff emphasised that when they first entered the community, the MFI programme was welcomed by community members as a vehicle to address their economic needs. Nevertheless, later there was a large decline in the number of their clients in Qarabagh, mainly because mullahs started preaching about perceived sin of loans with interest.

2. Motives for deciding to participate/not participate or drop out of a microfinance programme

2.1. Motives or reasons to participate

2.1.1. Male domination

APPARENT

Ashraf Ali HM (2014)

Male domination together with household poverty may force women to continue with microcredit programmes. This can be explained with the following two ethnographic examples.

2.1.2. To escape poverty

APPARENT

Ashraf Ali HM (2014)

Male domination together with household poverty may force women to continue with microcredit programmes. This can be explained with the following two ethnographic examples.

Jones et al. (2007)

Women were initially attracted to self-help groups because of the promise of income-generating opportunities, a number of them expressed their frustration at the paucity of loans, limited loan amounts and a lack of employment opportunities. We ask them [officials]: "You told us that belonging to the group will lead to work but you did not provide us with any work. We saved a lot of money but the value hasn't increased. 'If you give us some work, we will work as a group and save money', like that we will ask them.'

(Member)

For a sizeable number of women the group was useful for accessing credit but served no wider purpose.

Sanyal P (2009)

Monetary incentives (i.e. loans and the opportunity to save) may facilitate women's continued participation in these groups, even in the face of family objections.

Uddin MJ (2014)

She claimed that since all her neighbours were poor they also came forward to access the credit programme. In fact, when the centre was established in Suchona's house, she had also encouraged some of her neighbours to take out credit, otherwise the centre may not have been established here. When microcredit started its operation, the NGO's staff encouraged some local people and then these people encouraged their neighbours to take credit.

The kinship networks and neighbourhood relationships are the key resources which, to a large extent, influence local people's participation in the microcredit programmes. Poverty, immediate economic constraints and natural calamities pushed rural people to be the members of microcredit programmes.

2.1.3. Debt cycles

APPARENT

Ashraf Ali HM (2014)

Three factors – male domination, household poverty, and multiple cycles of debts – simultaneously explain why these poor women continue their microcredit participation, despite negative social, psychological, and economic experiences and consequences.

2.1.4. Domination of others

APPARENT

Guerin et al. (2010)

Women would deliberately use development programmes (here, microfinance) to dominate other women; this does however take place.

2.1.5. Benefit to children

APPARENT

Jones et al. (2007)

'We are surviving in this group not just for the sake of the loans but to benefit my children in the future. For that purpose we keep the money I save in the self-help group for the development of our children. We are poor people and work as daily labourers. We save one rupee each day. We will develop by doing so. It helps our children's education and health.'
(Member, Anantapur)

2.1.6. Access to health insurance

APPARENT

Krenz et al. (2014)

Additionally, as part of their monthly loan repayments, the women can pay toward health insurance for themselves and their family members. Through Annapurna's microinsurance programme, women receive health counselling; assistance and referral services; financial assistance on events like hospitalization, death, and disability; and awareness training on issues like health and hygiene. A majority of the women cited the health insurance program as the deciding factor in their choice to take a loan from Annapurna Pariwar.

2.1.7. Preferred over other sources of credit

APPARENT

Lyby E (2006)

The members in the group either have tailoring jobs, or are cooks. There is no shop to sell the items, rather they sell it in the market. The group is on its second loan, for about 200 dollars now. They are grateful to borrow from an MFI, rather than use informal credit. As women they feel that they have been able to take charge of the money, and be the decision makers along with their husbands. Zainab has been tailoring for 25 years, and feels that it is the best occupation for her. She says:

'When I get my next loan, I want to continue tailoring.'

Shetty S (2010)

Members seem to be attracted to loans offered by WWF primarily because the rate of interest and ease of access compare favourably to those of other possible sources, such as a bank.

2.2. Motives or reasons to participate

2.2.1. Avoid objection and conflict in the home

APPARENT

Ahmed FE (2008)

Peace at home is all important; Mehrun quit the bank because she did not want to jeopardize it. His objections made it difficult for her to access the Grameen Bank housing loan, targeted exclusively for women loanees.

Sanyal P (2009)

Even though these groups promised financial benefits, many women had to overcome severe household objections when enrolling.

2.2.2 Loans with interest seen as sinful

APPARENT

Uddin MJ (2014)

The religious people (Mawlana or Imam in the mosque) used to avoid credit programmes because they had maintained that it is strictly prohibited in the Islamic religion to take or give loans with interest. However, even they send their female family members to take credit now. I found this to be a significant change in religious structure at a local level.

Zand S (2011)

The interest attached to a loan and the fear of committing a sin was one of the important reasons for the non-participating families not joining the loan programme. Three people were identified who had opted out once they realised there was interest involved in the credit.

2.2.3. Problems with microfinance organisations, operations, obligations and products

APPARENT

Ahmed FE (2008)

Poor management within the NGO compelled them to leave and join the Grameen Bank.

Jones et al. (2007)

Non-members who had previously been self-help group members but had withdrawn either because of their disappointment about limited access to loans or because they had been unable to cope with the repayment schedules.

The key obstacle to participation by mothers with young infants is the lack of childcare possibilities to allow these women to attend meetings. One mother from Amrabad noted: 'If I go out to attend the meeting of the group then who is going to take care of my child, all other women in the group have big children, so they have free time. I may think of becoming a member once my child grows up.'

Krenz et al. (2014)

Many women remarked on the exploitative practices of other lenders and financial institutions that extend loans at exorbitant interest rates with little regard for borrower's ability to pay.

Shahnaz R and Karim R (2008)

A negative correlation was found between involvement in school/college and loan intake and getting involved in IGA. The underlying reason behind this relation was found to be the adolescent girls' fear that their involvement in IGA will immensely hamper their study. Furthermore, adolescents from very poor families shared their fear of not being able to repay loan and thus reported of no experience and future plan of taking loan.

Uddin MJ (2014)

Because of the collateral mechanism, the guarantors and the group leaders work to facilitate the programmes by collecting instalments from the defaulters and by disciplining the members. This sometimes causes scuffles and cultivates isolation and alienation among the members. As a result, leadership roles are generally unpopular among the rural women, who do not want the 'headache' of chasing up loans from their neighbours.

2.2.4. Reduced employment and household status

APPARENT

Garikipati S (2013)

In addition, the women found that their need to make repayments had severely eroded their bargaining positions in the labour market, and several of them had to exchange their labour for very low wages. It is not surprising then that G3W11 expressed the desire to discontinue SHG membership so that she could stop working as a wage labourer. Not only is women's bargaining power in the labour market diminished but their household status is also threatened.

3. Beliefs and attitudes of other household and community members towards microfinance-programme participants

3.1. Positive beliefs and attitudes within households

3.1.1. Women's empowerment and equality

APPARENT

Jones et al. (2007)

As one grown son from Seethampet eloquently argued:

'The problems [women can address] are not just relating to their families but also to national development, national financial development. When families are economically strong how can they be spoiled? Women are going out, attending meetings, learning many things, undergoing training, sending their children to school... Because women are the key of the family, it is important that they should be empowered financially.'

Many of the women interviewed reported that their awareness of, and access to, information about child-rearing practices and uptake of public services had improved as a result of their self-help group participation. Focus group discussions with members' male partners confirmed this finding, although some noted that women's empowerment has also been enhanced through exposure to media and by affirmative-action programmes for women instituted by local governments. Importantly, however, a closer analysis of our data revealed that women involved in Velugu and DWCRA self-help groups, and especially those supported

by the international NGO, CARE, were more likely to have been exposed to new child-related knowledge than their independent counterparts.

Shahnaz R and Karim R (2008)

The males interviewed were contemporaries of the ELA members, often their brothers, relatives or neighbours. Their responses to ELA were continuously positive, and they clearly displayed approval for the activities carried out by ELA members. The centre participants also reported that the adolescent boys started appreciating their activities (adolescent girls' issues, their incidents of get together etc.). They claimed this to be a by-product of their enhanced voice. Some of the centre participants' brothers initially objected to their participation, insisting that their sisters should remain home in order to assist their mothers. One of the FGD participants cited a few cases; she said:

'The attitude of the boys has changed. My brother used to think that girls should remain home and not goes outside. Initially he disagreed to the idea of the girls' going to centres.'

She further added that her brother said to her: 'Why mother should work home while you go outside' but now his behaviour has changed. Other participants said: 'Now they also play with us and think that we are good girls.'

Discussion with adolescent girls as well as parents and community members revealed that since the beginning of the ELA Centre intervention, parents had become more aware and more accepting toward issues regarding adolescent girls. They now started realizing that, like their sons, their daughters also needed recreation and leisure. Mothers of the centre members became aware about the issues that their daughters discussed and learnt at the centre, which included household work, healthcare and hygiene, and childcare. Parents were now generally much more accepting of mobility, allowing their daughters to venture out of the village because of a growing confidence in their daughters' abilities. Daughters were now asked for their opinions on family matters, as parents wanted to see what daughters had learned and understood at the centre. Perhaps the most salient change of perception was the growing dependency that parents now had on their daughters due to IGA training and loan intakes. Steadily, the daughters were being given more responsibility in the family; their potential for economic productivity was now being given some worth.

3.2. Positive beliefs and attitudes of community members

3.2.1. Women's empowerment and equality

APPARENT

Jones et al. (2007)

One child development and protection officer from Cuddapah explained the transformation as follows:

'You may ask me why she did not have that capability [to make decisions] when she didn't have money to invest. She had to adjust to whatever her husband has given and to follow whatever her husband says. But now, she too is earning something. Now she is thinking 'why can't I build my family and my children'. She is coming to know all those things.'

3.2.2. Knowledge and financial skills

APPARENT

Jones et al. (2007)

A government officer in the same mandal stressed that financial prudence was a distinguishing characteristic of self-help group members: 'Non-members spend money without thinking, they don't know how to save. Members look for savings, saving every rupee. They know the value and don't spend on unnecessary things... They make strong decisions that lead to the stability and the development of the family.'

Zand S (2011)

Male respondents in the study also either feel very positive about these all-women spaces or have no objection to them. One of the male respondents believe that interaction of women with each other, especially with those who are 'educated' and 'experienced', can be a process toward gaining individual knowledge that can then be passed to others. People's collective knowledge can ultimately build the community.

For four of the respondents, the enhanced respect is not limited to the family and is expanded to the wider community. Marina, the tailor, owes the respect of her neighbours and family to the service she offers them. Her customers respect her for her skill and the ability to make her own money. They show their appreciation to her by bringing her food and giving her special respect by placing her at the top of the room in weddings. Sabzina, who gave her loan to her sons to start businesses with, notes that her neighbours regard her as a smart woman who has improved the well-being of her family. They come to seek her advice on how to improve their own families' economies.

3.2.3. Normative gender development for girls

APPARENT

Shahnaz R and Karim R (2008)

When the ELA Centres were first opened, community members generally opposed the idea of allowing adolescent girls to waste their time with recreation while they should be concentrating on their studies or household chores. They were also afraid that the girls would learn inappropriate things and become too mature for their age. Now, community members became more accepting of the centre and APON programmes, engendering positive attitudes due to successful outcomes of the adolescent girls. In particular, they appreciated the fact

that the centre members had become well mannered, neater, and cleaner. Some of the FGD participants said:

'Initially people used to think that we go to the centres only to gossip but now they remind us to go there when it's time.'

3.3. Negative beliefs and attitudes of householders

3.3.1. Knowledge and financial skills

APPARENT

Ahmed FE (2008)

Resentful of Mehrun's growing entrepreneurial skills and status, Ibrahim wanted her to quit being a Grameen Bank loanee.

Jones et al. (2007)

Most surprisingly, however, there was little mention of literacy training – indeed, some men pointed out that the programmes were using the rhetoric of literacy but in reality this was very superficial and women were only learning how to sign their names for loans.

Lyby E (2006)

The more harmonious families where the wife would be a full party to all major decisions, were not necessarily also the most prosperous ones. Better-off households with successful businesses often were run by men who adhered to strict and restrictive rules about female behaviour. In such cases, the woman might get a loan and give the money to the husband without any trace of empowerment could be observed. They both argue that there is no need for their wives to take a loan or any other professional employment for that matter because the burdens of household chores is so great. They subscribe to the old view that men are the only bread winners in the family. For them, it is incomprehensible that women would undertake productive employment not because they need to but because they want to.

3.3.2. Independence and mobility

APPARENT

Ahmed FE (2008)

Robi made it clear that he would not allow Salma to own property in her name, even if it was bought with her earnings, because this might give her enough economic independence to leave him – a common male nightmare in rural Bangladesh.

Jones et al. (2007)

One Seethampet self-help group member's husband complained:

'Because of self- help groups women have become spoiled. Now they are not taking care of the needs of children and men. They are even confronting men in some cases.'

One male focus group discussion in Seethampet, for example, questioned the extent of women's new economic empowerment:

'Most of the women ask before taking loans, how can they take without asking us?'

(Respondent 1)

'From where can a woman get the money? She is not doing any job, not doing any work, how can she repay, anyways we have to help them, always men are in leading.' (Respondent 2)

'Who is getting money? Only men are getting money. Before, taking loans women discuss, only with the help of their husbands are they taking and repaying loans, otherwise how can they repay? From where will she get the money?' (Respondent 3)

3.3.3. Use of loans only

APPARENT

Jones et al. (2007)

Rather than rethinking gender roles more fundamentally, some male partners appear to value women's participation in SHGs only for the loans that they might secure. One woman member from Atlur, for example, noted that her husband threatened to stop her involvement in the group when she was not allocated a loan in the first year of attending SHG meetings.

3.4. Negative beliefs and attitudes of community members

3.4.1. Women's empowerment and equality

APPARENT

Ahmed FE (2008)

Female loanees are accused of going to the all-male local Grameen Bank office to have affairs.