

Women Empowerment through Cooperative: A Case Study of Ichangu Mahila Jagriti Multipurpose Cooperative Limited

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Abstract: Women empowerment involves participation of women in political structures and formal decision-making and economic decision-making which is achieved through education, raising awareness, literacy, and training. Co-operatives in general and specifically women-led co-operatives, have played an important role in women empowerment. This study aims to identify the contribution of Ichangu Mahila Jagriti Multipurpose Co-operative Limited (IMJCL) located in Nagarjun municipality Kathmandu on economic, socio-cultural and political aspects of women empowerment who became its member. The study was conducted in Nagarjun municipality Kathmandu among the 124 women inheritors with 10 years of experiences and cooperative activities were randomly selected using lottery method for data collection. Primary data was collected via structured questionnaire, focus group discussion and key informant interviews. For the data analysis paired sample t-test was applied in three different domains of empowerment: economic, socio-cultural and political dimensions. The finding showed there was positive impact on women empowerment with significant difference in socio-cultural, economic and political empowerment of its member. The study shows there were significant changes after involvement in different programmes of IMJCL. Finally, its finding focusses on the crucial role of cooperative in the overall empowerment of women. Extension of cooperative organizations is indispensable for the nation.

Keywords: socio-cultural, economic, political, empowerment, impact on women

Introduction

Empowerment is the process that creates power in individuals over their own lives, society, and in their communities as such that they are able to access the opportunities available to them without limitations and restrictions such as in education, profession and lifestyle. This sort of power and control over one's life comes from allowing individuals to participate in the decision-making process in the socio-political and economic sphere (Bayeh, 2016).

Women's empowerment refers to the processes through which gender-based constraints on women are lifted. These constraints result from gender relations or norms that are disadvantageous to women or from economic or social inequalities. The processes that remove the gender related constraints do so by enabling women who have been denied the ability or the freedom to make independent, well-reasoned choices, to acquire such ability and freedom (Kabeer, 2005; Lecoutere, 2017; Rahman, 2013). Many world leaders and scholars have argued that sustainable development is impossible without gender equality and women's empowerment (Bayeh, 2016).

Microfinance institutions aim to empower women in their community by giving them access to loans that have low interest rates without the requirement of collateral. More specifically, microfinance institutions aim to give microcredit to women who want to be entrepreneurs (Geleta, 2014).

Co-operatives refer to firms owned, controlled, and operated by a group of users for their own benefit. Each member contributes equity capital, and shares in the control of the firm on the basis of one-

member, one-vote principle (and not in proportion to his or her equity contribution) (Ghebremichael, 2013). Co-operatives in general, and women-led co-operatives specifically, have played an important role in women empowerment. Generally, co-operatives are lauded for their potential to improve livelihoods by addressing the economic and social needs of rural populations in developing countries. Co-operatives are also appreciated in rural contexts as they combine business enterprises with a concern for communal welfare. Most importantly, theory and evidence indicate that notwithstanding a number of limitations, there can be significant direct benefits of co-operative membership for women's empowerment and important indirect benefits through socio-economic improvement (Lecoutere, 2017). Studies on the role of co-operatives on women empowerment have shown the positive impact of co-operatives on overall positive development of women. Ghebremichael (2013) conducted a survey among the women beneficiaries of cooperative sector in Mekelle city, Ethiopia regarding the impact of loans through cooperatives on women. Ghebremichael (2013) conclude that cooperatives are playing a very important role in the empowerment of women through various schemes. Lecoutere (2017) studied the impact of agricultural co-operative in women empowerment using the Popular Knowledge Women's Initiative (P'KWI) Farmer to Farmer Co-operative Society in north-eastern Uganda as a case study. The study showed that women's membership of the cooperative has a significant positive impact on enhancing capabilities. Niketha, Sankhala, Prasad, and Kumar (2017) studied empowerment of women through dairy cooperatives in Karnataka, India. The study focused on various dimensions of empowerment. The study showed that women dairy co-operatives played a significant role in different dimensions of women empowerment: social, cultural psychological, economic, political, legal, and technological. Gebremichael (2014) studied the role of agricultural cooperatives in promoting food security and rural women's empowerment using field survey method in Eastern Tigray region of Ethiopia. Similar to studies reviewed above, this study showed that multipurpose cooperative societies do play indispensable roles in providing fundamental benefits to the local communities in promoting food security, provide economic and social benefits, and aid in overall women empowerment. Despite the positive impact of the cooperatives, the study also notes that poor implementation capacity and low managerial, financial and operational competence, the multipurpose cooperatives have not been able to strengthen and expand their business operations as per the expectations.

Objective

General objective

- To study the role of cooperative in women empowerment taking Ichangu Women Jagriti Cooperative as a case study.

Specific objective

- To compare the total empowerment level before and after joining the cooperative.
- To compare the economic empowerment level, political empowerment level, and socio-cultural empowerment level before and after joining the cooperative.

Methodology

Research design: Cross-sectional survey design was in the study.

Sampling: For the study of role of cooperative in women empowerment, among 310 members data was collected from 124 members involved since last 10 years of 'Ichangu Women Jagriti Multipurpose Cooperative' (IWJMC).

Data collection tool: Each participant responded to two questionnaire including same statements related to economic empowerment, political empowerment, and sociocultural empowerment, where one included statement regarding their time before joining the cooperative and one after joining the cooperative. The respondents responded with either 'Yes' or 'No' to the statements, where 1 point was assigned to 'No' and 2 point was assigned to 'Yes' response.

Data analysis: The total score for all three domains of empowerment for both before and after questionnaire was calculated by adding points obtained in each statement of the domain, and total empowerment score was calculated by adding scores in all three domains. Higher score represented higher level of empowerment. Paired sample t-test was conducted to study if there was significant difference in the empowerment level in all three domains and total empowerment score before and after joining the cooperative. Focus group discussion and key informant interview was conducted.

Results

The result obtained from paired sample t-test has been presented in table below:

Table 1: Paired sample t-test for mean score of before and after joining cooperative among domains of empowerment

Domain	Before cooperative		After cooperative		<i>t</i> (123)	<i>p</i>
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
Total empowerment	31.31	8.86	49.03	2.19	-21.45	<0.05
Economic empowerment	11.31	3.12	17.58	0.81	-21.74	<0.05
Political empowerment	10.05	2.83	15.72	0.73	-21.51	<0.05
Sociocultural empowerment	9.96	3.10	15.73	0.93	-19.45	<0.05

Source: Field study, 2019

As indicated in the table above, significant difference was observed in before and score for all domains of empowerment and total empowerment score. Significant difference was observed in the scores for total empowerment before ($M = 31.31$, $SD = 8.86$) and after joining cooperative ($M = 49.03$, $SD = 2.19$), $t(123) = -21.45$, $p < 0.05$. Significant difference was observed in the score for economic empowerment before ($M = 11.31$, $SD = 3.12$) and after joining cooperative ($M = 17.58$, $SD = 0.81$), $t(123) = -21.74$, $p < 0.05$. Significant difference was observed in the score for political empowerment before ($M = 10.05$, $SD = 2.83$) and after joining cooperative ($M = 15.72$, $SD = 0.73$), $t(123) = -21.51$,

$p < 0.05$. Significant difference was observed in the score for sociocultural empowerment before ($M = 9.96$, $SD = 3.10$) and after joining cooperative ($M = 15.73$, $SD = 0.93$), $t(123) = -19.45$, $p < 0.05$.

Ichangu Women Jagriti Multipurpose Cooperative had 40 founding members and currently there are 340 members. Members include women from low socio-economic class to medium economic class. It organizes regular meeting every 2nd Saturday of each month and during that meeting there is mandatory collection of fund from members – minimum 200 and maximum 500 rupees. Among the members, it was reported that 155 members deposit 500 and 185 members deposit 200 rupees during the monthly meeting.

According to the Chairperson of the cooperative, the main objectives of the cooperative are: to collect the scattered money, to provide loans to members, to provide to increase cooperation and good relationship among members, participation in social work, and providing different types of training (like knitting, driving, pickle-making, bread making, leadership, kitchen gardening, etc.). The cooperative works in co-ordination with municipality and local development office for the different activities. Some of the activities of the cooperative include celebration of women's day, programs against women trafficking, felicitation of senior citizens among others.

The chairperson, in addition to the discussion about ongoing activities and success of cooperative, also shared about plans to increase the capital. However, she raised concern about going forward with the plan. Although the cooperative has helped its members in economic aspect, chairperson maintained that the economic status of the general members has not been sufficiently better to increase the amount of mandatory saving imposed on the members. Due to this reason, the chairperson said, that loan allocation process had to be restricted to only few members at a time and as such, sometimes some members might not get the loan when needed (in cases where there are women with much priority on the loan allocation list). Information about economic status of the cooperative was collected from the treasurer. The cooperative provides loan (membership collateral) at 12% interest rate and provides 8% interest rate in savings. Maximum amount provided as loan is 0.2 million rupees, which has to be returned within 6 months after the loan is provided, with considerations based on personal judgment of related authority. The loan is provided on the basis of priority and demand form filled by the members. The total capital of the cooperative till date is 7.6 million rupees (of which 1.5 lakh is share capital and rest of it, i.e., 6.1 million rupees is saving capital). The loans provided by the cooperative are under the following heading:

Table 2: Loans provided under different headings

Heading	Amount in rupees (×1000)	Percentage
Education	3100	40.79
Business	1600	21.05
Agriculture	600	7.89
Livestock	800	10.53
Foreign employment	1500	19.74
Total	7600	100

Source: Field study, 2019

Interview with secretary of the cooperative provided details about the activities and trainings focused on women empowerment. The total number of beneficiaries of the trainings among the members has been provided below in Table 2. According to the secretary, due to limited economic resource for trainings, only few members are selected for one training session based on the interest of the members and on a turn-wise rotation basis among the members to ensure equal opportunity for participation in training activities.

Table 3: *Trainings conducted by the cooperative for its members*

Training	Beneficiaries	Percentage of member
Business awareness	51	15
Sewing and knitting	26	7.65
Kitchen gardening and waste management	30	8.82
Floriculture	55	16.18
Driving	30	8.82
Anchoring	25	7.35
Social mobilization	35	10.29
Pickle-making	25	7.35
Leadership	21	6.18
Relationship management	37	10.88

Source: Field study, 2019

According to the treasurer, the loans provided by the cooperative and training activities have helped in empowerment of its members through independence from husbands in economic aspect, inclusion of women in decision making process, respect from husbands and children, and providing them new opportunities for employment.

Interview was conducted with 8 general members regarding how their life has changed after joining the cooperative. The respondents had an unequivocal response: the trainings and economic support provided by the cooperative has helped to become independent, increased their participation in the decision-making process, helped them to share and solve their problems and troubles, has provided them constructive supports, and has also provided them opportunities for recreational activities (like outings). Before joining the cooperative, the women were only housewives who were economically dependent on their husbands. After joining the cooperative and receiving different trainings and economical support, the women were able to break the shackles of being 'just a housewife' and be economically and socially independent. The respondents described the cooperative as a 'platform' for their overall empowerment.

Although the cooperative has provided support (economical and vocational), there are limitations in how many members it can serve at once. In terms of providing loans, it provides loans not to all but on the basis of urgency of needs and if such is not the case then on the basis of rotation among its members. Similarly, the cooperative is not able to include all its members in a particular training due to financial and technical difficulties. As such, only few members receive a particular training. This issue was voiced by 10 members who were on the waiting list for loan allocation. They also questioned the loan

allocation process and even raised worry about the possibility of biasness in the process. Concerns similar to these members were also raised by the chairperson. This shows that the cooperative still has potential and also need for growth so that it can empower more women in the future.

Discussion

The study of Ichangu Women Jagriti Cooperative showed that the cooperative plays an important role in empowerment of its members. As indicated by paired sample t-test, there was significant difference between level of empowerment before and after joining cooperative across economic, political, sociocultural and total empowerment domain. It was also evident through data provided by the cooperative and the interviews conducted with the board members and general members. This finding is similar to findings from researches on other parts of the world regarding the role of cooperatives in women empowerment, like the study by Ghebremichael (2013) among the women beneficiaries of cooperative sector in Mekelle city, Ethiopia, study by Lecoutere (2017) on the impact of agricultural co-operative in women empowerment using the P'KWI Farmer to Farmer Co-operative Society in north-eastern Uganda, study by Niketha et al. (2017) on empowerment of women through dairy cooperatives in Karnataka, India, and study by Gebremichael (2014) on the role of agricultural cooperatives in promoting food security and rural women's empowerment in Eastern Tigray region of Ethiopia. All of these studies have similar findings on how the cooperatives helped in empowerment of women: through financial aid at times of need, through trainings and vocational activities, which increased the independence of the women and increased their presence in the decision making process in their household and community. From the findings of interview conducted with the board members and general members, the current study also found that the cooperative has not been able to reach its full potential due to many constraints, the primary being lack of feasibility to increase the monthly mandatory saving for its members. Another area of improvement for the cooperative that has been indicated by both the general members and the chairperson has been the difficulty in timely heeding to needs of all of its members, for example, only few of its members are selected as eligible for loan at a time. This sort of constraints of the cooperatives was also noted by Gebremichael (2014), who cited poor implementation capacity and low managerial, financial and operational competence as the reasons for the multipurpose cooperatives in Ethiopia not being able to strengthen and expand their business operations as per the expectations. The similar reasons might have been prevalent in the cooperative of the current study.

Conclusion

The study of Ichangu Women Jagriti Cooperative has revealed the significant role that the cooperative plays in the empowerment of its members. The findings, supported by paired sample t-tests and data from the cooperative, indicate a notable difference in the level of empowerment across various domains

before and after joining the cooperative. This aligns with similar research conducted in other parts of the world, which also emphasize the positive impact of cooperatives on women's empowerment. However, despite its positive impact, the cooperative has faced several challenges that hinder its full potential. The primary constraint identified is the lack of feasibility to increase the mandatory monthly savings for members and lack of timely responding to loan needs of the members.

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