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Women's Empowerment Activities in Rural Areas of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment of women in rural areas is a pressing issue in the context of Bangladesh. In this regard, the Department of Social Services (DSS) has initiated the Rural Mother Center (RMC) program. The main goal of this program is the development and empowerment of women who reside in rural areas. It organizes disadvantaged, poor and troubled women to alleviate family-based poverty. Through its activities, women's skills are enhanced, opportunities for self-employment are created, and their participation in economic activities and family decision-making is ensured. They are enabled to make small and large purchases, and they are made aware of education, health and nutrition. Their ability to resist domestic violence has increased. Women's freedom of movement is ensured. Considering human resources, the RMC program is included in the revenue budget as a regular government program. The RMC Program contributes significantly to the development of women in achieving the UN-declared Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the National Women's Development Policy-2011, the National Social Security Strategy Paper (NSSS) and the 8th Five Year Plan of the Government. The basic objective of the study is to analyze the role of the RMC in empowering women and to make recommendations on how to make this program more effective. Mixed methods are used in this study; both quantitative and qualitative methods have been applied. As Bangladesh is a poor country, the study selects four of the most poverty-stricken upazilas and four of the least poverty-stricken upazilas. A survey method is conducted for quantitative data collection. On the other hand, for qualitative data collection, focus group discussions (FGDs), case studies, and key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted to explore the depth of the problems. Through the survey, the socio-economic development of women over the past two years is examined. Trade-based training should be arranged for them. Trade-based training should be arranged for them. Data were collected regarding the challenges in empowering rural women and the respondents' recommendations to overcome these challenges. Quantitative data were collected from a total of 160 women selected from eight upazilas. In this case, divorcees, widows, victims of abuse and torture, and the destitute are included. Qualitative data were collected using the objective guidelines of the research. To empower the working group members, the loan amount should be increased from BDT 50,000 to BDT 100,000. The loan repayment period should be changed from one year to two years.

INTRODUCTION

In terms of population, Bangladesh is the eighth-largest country. Women make up half of the country's total population; most live in rural areas and are largely deprived of modern facilities. Desired development is not possible if this large population is left behind. Therefore, empowering women in rural areas is essential for economic liberation and socio-economic development. Especially at the individual level, it helps to lay the foundations for social change. In the first five-year plan of Bangladesh, initiated in 1975, a development project called the Rural Mothers Center (RMC) was included as a women's development program under the Department of Social Services. The activities of this project were implemented in six phases over different periods. The second phase (1980-1985), third phase (1985-1991), fourth phase (1991-1996), fifth phase (1996-December 2000), and sixth phase (January 2001-June 2004) were expanded to include a total of 200 Upazilas. The first four phases of this program (1975 to 1996) were implemented with financial assistance from the World Bank, while the fifth and sixth phases were funded

by the Government of Bangladesh (GOB). Currently, this program is ongoing in all Upazilas of Bangladesh.

As time progresses, the economic empowerment of rural women positively impacts social norms. Economic emancipation establishes social equality. Economic empowerment of women helps eradicate poverty. Eradicating poverty increases food security and promotes gender equality. This study examines the role of the ongoing project in empowering women.

Statement of the Problem

To alleviate poverty in war-affected Bangladesh after independence, the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh introduced the Rural Mothers Center (RMC) development project as a women's development program in 1975. This program was adopted for the empowerment, economic liberation, and socio-economic development of women in rural areas. This program is currently being implemented in all upazilas to make underprivileged poor women living in rural areas self-reliant and self-confident. Through this program, they

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change their socio-economic conditions and statuses. Raising awareness is a key component of the RMC program. As members of a Rural Mothers Center, women are becoming more aware. They are provided counseling and motivation by professional counselors so that they can be motivated by their abilities and become empowered. Now, they are aware of the importance of education and health. They play a role in family decision-making. They can prevent domestic violence, child marriage, and dowry to ensure their protection. They have freedom of movement and purchasing power because of their economic empowerment. The overall empowerment of women is an essential condition for sustainable development. Therefore, it is necessary to include rural poor women in the mainstream of national development. To achieve this, the program is gradually being expanded to all the upazilas of the country to increase the skills of rural poor women, creating opportunities for self-employment, ensuring their participation in economic activities, and developing them as skilled human resources. This program is being implemented to alleviate poverty in the country. The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has taken various steps for the development of rural mother centers for the empowerment of women. Specific implementation guidelines and policies have been formulated for the implementation of the 'Rural Mother Center' program. This program makes a remarkable contribution to achieving the desired goal of women's empowerment in rural areas.

Significance

Firstly, ensuring the integrated and equal development of rural women is a pressing demand of our time. At present, the economic empowerment of rural women is positively impacting social norms. The female population of Bangladesh increased from 32.2 million in 1972 to 82.3 million in 2021. The annual female population growth rate is 1.93%, as reported by BBS's Sample Vital Registration System (SVRS). Hence, the study explores how rural mother centers empower women by ensuring their access to various social and economic activities and helping them achieve freedom of movement.

Secondly, the economic empowerment of this vast population is essential. Economic emancipation establishes social equality. The study shows how rural mother centers facilitate economic emancipation and how rural women are participating in economic activities through making both small and large purchases.

Thirdly, rural women suffer from various forms of domestic violence. This program directs awareness activities toward education, health and nutrition, domestic violence, and social reforms. The study illustrates how RMC plays a role in making these communities self-reliant by creating opportunities for them to lead normal lives and prevent domestic violence.

Fourthly, the study highlights the role of rural mother centers in empowering rural women to voice their opinions and act as decision-makers, thereby demonstrating their

power and status within their families and society.

Fifthly, there are very few studies on the emancipation of rural women. Therefore, this study initiates a new era for rural women who have potential and can contribute to economic development in society.

Objectives

The fundamental objective of this study is to assess the role of Rural Mother Centers in empowering rural women. More particularly, the specific objectives are-

- To know the economic, social and demographic status of the members of rural mother centers;
- To know the role of rural women in decision making in the family;
- To know the level of economic empowerment of rural women;
- To know whether rural women are able to protect themselves from domestic violence; And
- Bringing up the recommendations of the members for the development of the RMC program.

Limitations

This study is conducted by following all the specified philosophy and principles. It has not been possible to fulfill the predetermined objectives. However, there is no study without limitations. Our study also has some limitations. They are highlighted below:

- (a) Due to time and budget constraints, it was not possible to conduct this study across the country.
- (b) only 20 members were included from each Upazila.
- (c) Due to the shortness of time, it seems respondents were reluctant to give feedback;
- (d) The respondents had work engagements. So, it was difficult to collect information from them;
- (e) Those who did not get loans for a long time expected instant loans; And
- (f) There is no available work found on rural women empowerment. So, we have to depend mostly on field work and different government official websites.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Mixed method (Quantitative and Qualitative Methods) is applied in the study. The basic rationale for using mixed methods is that qualitative data provides richness, precision, and a fuller understanding of the findings. The social survey method, as a quantitative approach, is used to determine the demographic and socio-economic status of the members. Considering the poverty rate of Bangladesh, the study areas were selected. Four of the most poverty-stricken upazilas and four of the less poverty-stricken upazilas were selected. Quantitative data were collected from a total of 160 women by randomly selecting 20 women from each upazila. In this case, divorcees, widows, victims of abuse and torture, and the destitute have been included. On the other hand, focus group discussions (FGDs) and case studies were used for an in-depth investigation of the problems. Moreover, key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted by service providers

directly involved with the program. The purpose of using both methods is to gain an integrated understanding of the problems and to uncover complex issues. For quantitative data, 160 women were randomly selected for interviews. In the questionnaire, the questions are designed to elicit their livelihood patterns. For qualitative data, FGDs, case studies, and KIIs were conducted. Each focus group consists of ten participants. The participants included five members of the rural mother center, the Upazila Social Services Officer (USSO), the Union Social Worker (USW), one member of the Union Parishad, a representative of an NGO, and one media representative. KIIs were conducted with the Upazila Social Services Officer (USSO) and the Union Social Worker (USW). Eight case studies were conducted with eight successful members of rural mother centers who received loans, and their statuses were updated. After conducting FGDs, case studies, and KIIs, the information was transcribed, and themes provided qualitative (text) data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Information was gathered on the education, health, housing, and family decision-making of rural women, both before and after taking a loan. Data were gathered on how rural mother centers empower rural women, as well as their views on the challenges they face and potential solutions to these problems. Data were also collected on their awareness of social evils, such as the prevention of domestic violence, child marriage, and dowry. Below are the surveyed results:

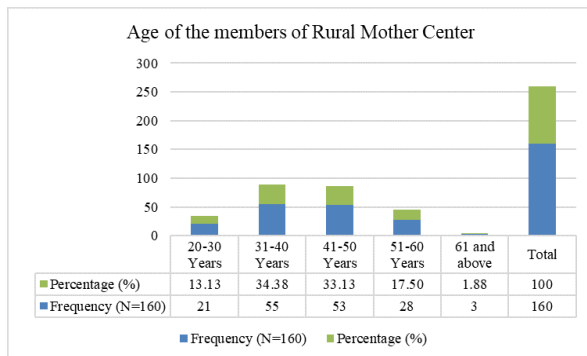


Figure 1: Age of the members of Rural Mother Center
Source: Field work

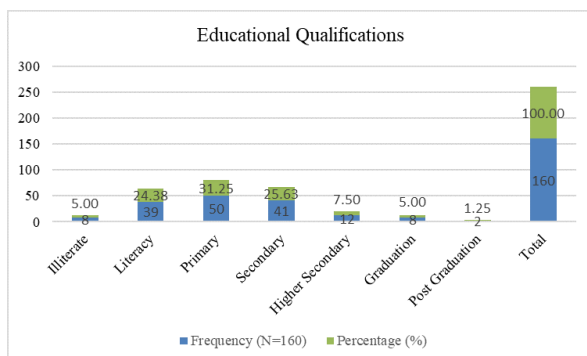


Figure 2: Educational Qualifications of the Members
Source: Field work

Figure 1 shows, 55 women are between 31-40 years, 53 women are between 41-50 years, 28 members are between 51-60 years, 21 women are between 20-30 years and 3 members are aged 60 or above.

Figure 2, shows 50 women have received primary education. 41 members have received secondary education. 12 women have higher secondary education. 8 persons have a graduation degree, 8 women are illiterate, 39 members have only literacy and only 2 members have postgraduate degrees.

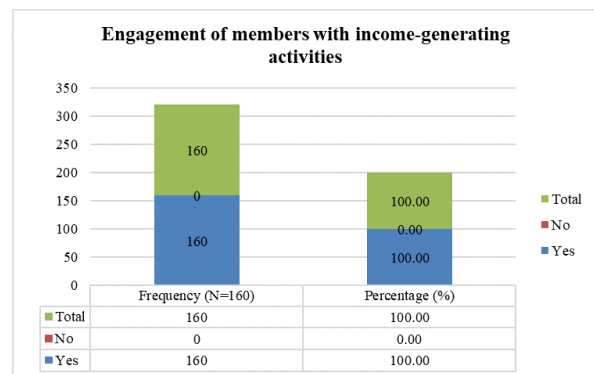


Figure 3: Engagement of members with income-generating activities or occupations
Source: Field work

Figure 3, presents that Every member of RMC is associated with some profession.

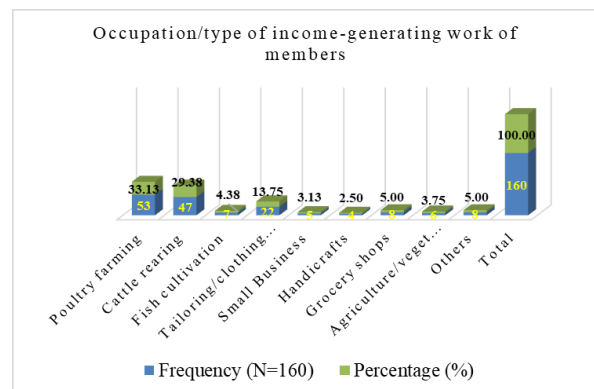


Figure 4: Occupation/type of income-generating work of members
Source: Field work

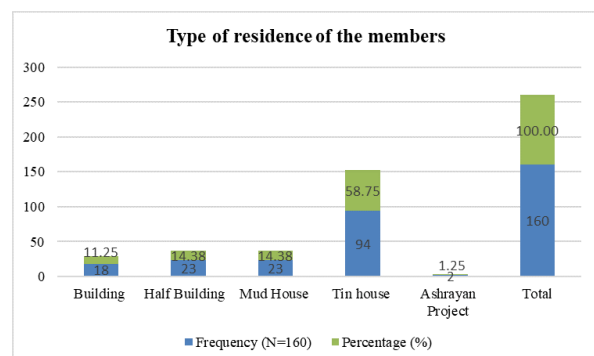


Figure 5: Type of residence of the members
Source: Field work

Figure 4 presents 53 women involved in poultry farming. 47 women are associated with cattle rearing. 22 women are involved in tailoring/clothing business. 8 members are associated with the shoe business. 7 women are associated with fish cultivation, 5 members do small business, 4 members are involved with handicrafts, 8 women are involved with grocery shops and 6 members are associated with agricultural cultivation. It is clear that the maximum number of women are associated with poultry farming.

Figure 5, shows 94 women and their families live in tin houses. 23 members respectively live in a half building and mud house. There are 17 members and their families living in the building. 3 members and their families live in the government Ashrayan project.

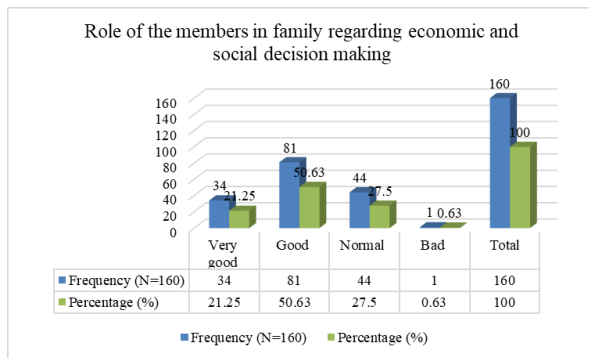


Figure 6: Role of the members in family regarding economic and social decision making
Source: Field work

Figure 6 presents, regarding economic and social decision-making 81 women have good positions. 44 members are in normal positions and 34 women are in very good positions. Only 1 woman has a bad position and no one is in a very bad position regarding decision making.

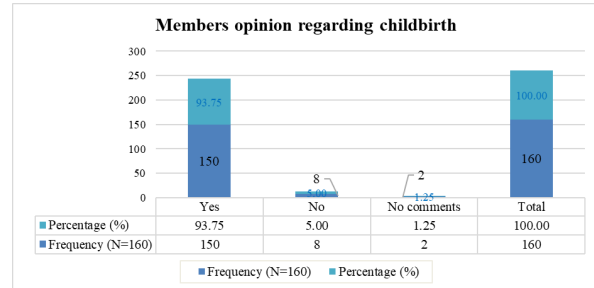


Figure 7: Members opinion regarding giving childbirth
Source: Field work

Figure 7 shows that 150 women have emphasized the importance of childbirth. Only 8 members had no opinion, and 2 members were reluctant to express their views.

Figure 8 shows 38 members investing in the cattle rearing sector, and 35 members are in cattle purchasing. 28 women used it for tailoring, and 5 members bought poultry farming-related materials. 12 women invested in shop preparation, and 9 women invested in agricultural cultivation. 7 women invested in fish farming, and 5 women invested in small businesses. In other sectors, 10 women spent the money. Unfortunately, no members spent money on income-generating training.

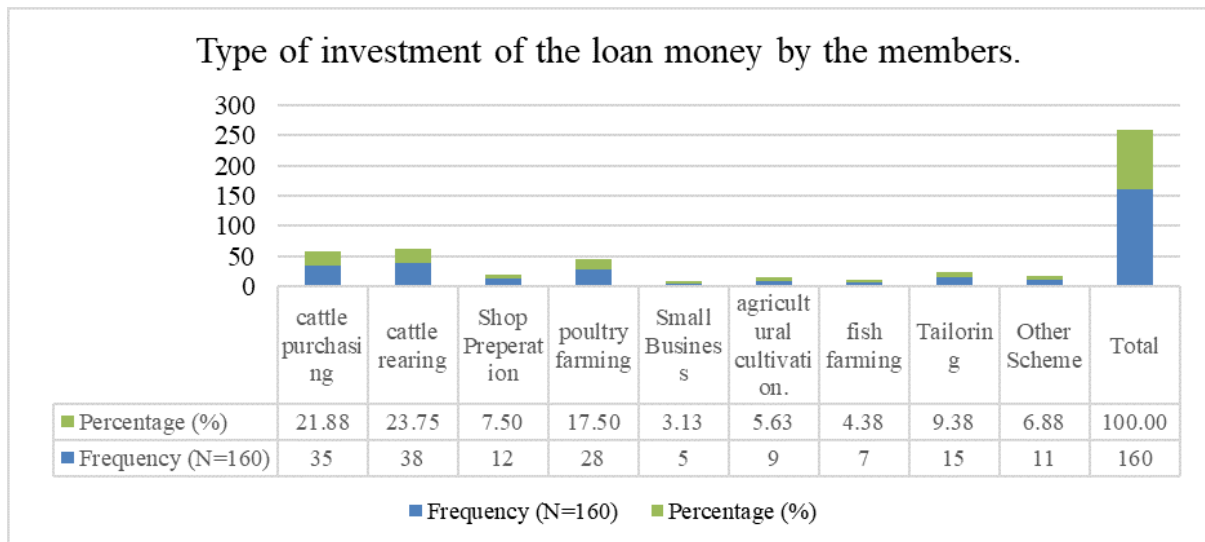


Figure 8: Type of investment of the loan money
Source: Field work

Figure 9 shows that 146 members were insolvent before taking the loan. Only 12 members were affluent. Two

members had no comments.

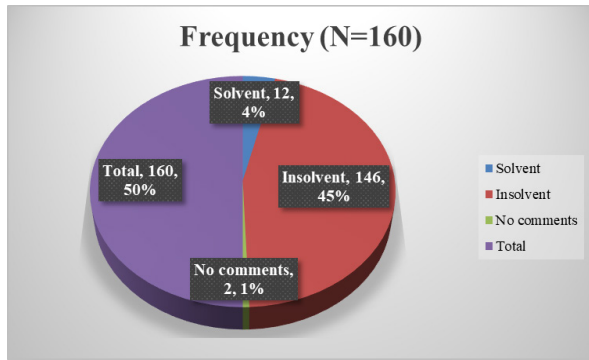


Figure 9: Financial status before receiving the loan
Source: Field work

Figure 10 shows 120 members (multiple answers) and their families lacked treatment. 114 members suffered from malnutrition; 64 members had clothing problems; 20 members had no recreational facilities; 14 members were unable to maintain kinship; 8 members had problems with education; 5 members were deprived of familial support; 3 members had security problems; and 1 member had the inability to pay house rent.

Figure 11 presents 117 members who reported that they had the opportunity to become self-reliant. 127 members said that their status has increased in society. 30 members reported that their children had access to education. Job opportunities were created for 2 members. One member did not provide a comment.

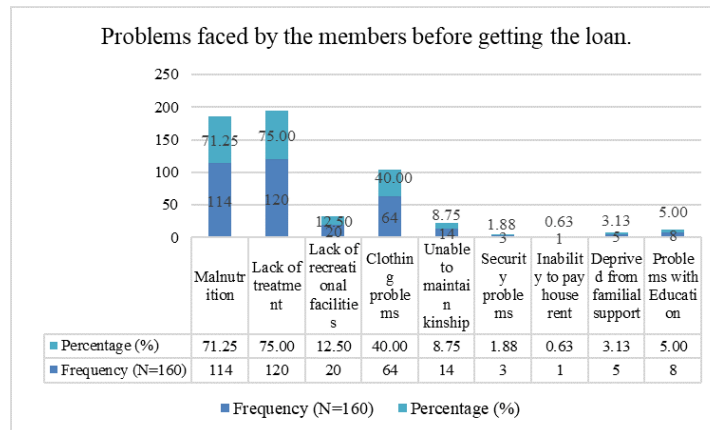


Figure 10: Problems faced by the members before getting the loan.
Source: Field work

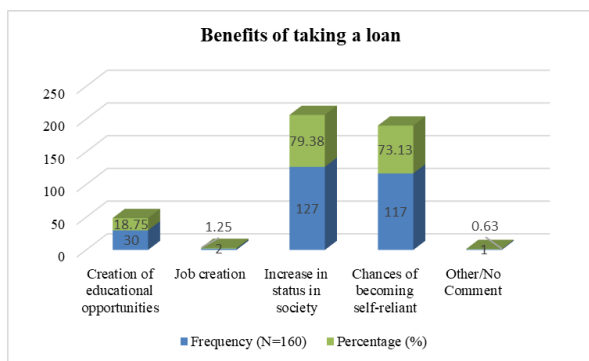


Figure 11: Benefits of taking a loan.
Source: Field work

Figure 12 presents one hundred ten members who believe that economic emancipation of women has been achieved. One hundred twenty-seven women believe that employment opportunities have been created for women through this loan. Ninety-seven members believe that the importance of women's opinions has increased in family decision-making. One hundred twenty-seven women believe that women's dignity has increased, and twenty-seven members believe that awareness of women's health and nutrition has increased.

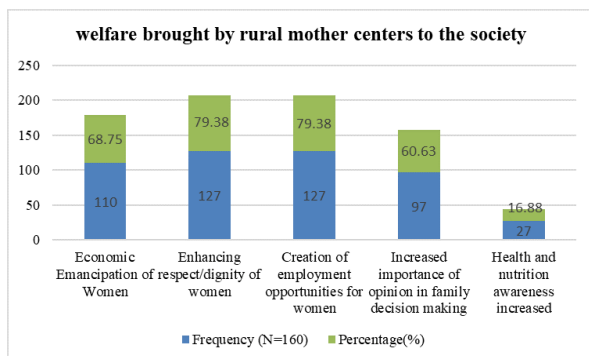


Figure 12: Welfare brought by rural mother centers to the society
Source: Field work

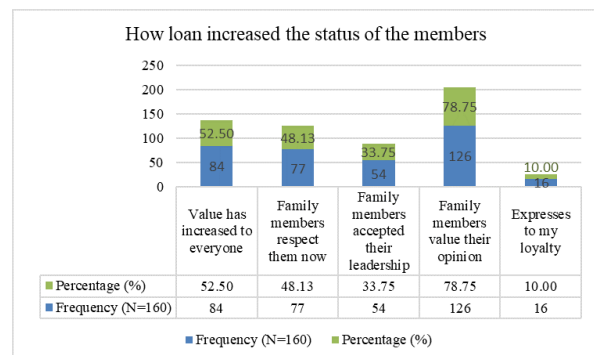


Figure 13: How loan increased the status of the members
Source: Field work

Figure 13 presents data from 84 members who reported that their status has increased in the eyes of others. 77 members reported that their family members now respect them. 54 members reported that their family members

accepted their leadership. 125 members reported that their family members value their opinions. One member did not comment.

Qualitative study

For qualitative data, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), case studies, and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) are conducted. Each focus group consists of five members of the rural mother center, the Upazila Social Services Officer (USSO), the Union Social Worker (USW), one member of the Union Parishad, a representative of an NGO, and one media representative participated in the focus group discussion. KIIs are conducted with the Upazila Social Services Officer (USSO) and the Union Social Worker (USW). Eight case studies were conducted with eight successful members of rural mother centers who received loans from these centers, resulting in their status changing to epitomes of women's empowerment. After completing the interviews, the interviews were transcribed, and themes were identified to provide qualitative (text) information.

Case Study-1

Rahima Khatun, aged approximately 50 years, is currently living in Kachari Para village of Char Rajibpur upazila of Kurigram district. She is a housewife and rears cattle and poultry. Due to river erosion, her father became homeless and married her off to Abdul Alim (30), a shopkeeper who sold bay leaves. At that time, she was studying in class 5 at the age of 14. Currently, she is living in a tin shade house with her husband, sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. She has a good relationship with her husband.

Rahima's opinions are valued in the family. They make decisions together. They struggled significantly to support their family due to financial difficulties. She said, 'It was very difficult to survive on my husband's low income. I first got a loan of BDT 10,000 in 1999 from the Upazila Social Services office, which I used to buy a calf and some poultry.' Thus, a personal source of income was established for her. She said, 'There has been no loan provided for twenty years. As a result, our development has been hampered. We would have improved a lot if we had received loans regularly.' Before receiving the loan, her basic needs were unmet. Her children were never provided with nutritious food. She mentioned, 'This loan has provided me with financial stability. I have become self-reliant. I don't have to depend on my husband for everything.'

The economic crisis has been resolved. Her opinions are now valued. She added, 'When I could not do anything due to a lack of capital, this loan created a source of income for me and lifted my family out of poverty.' She stated that this loan has improved her status and created income opportunities. Her success has inspired many unemployed rural women to take loans and achieve their own success. Her success is attributed to her determination and the support of Rural Mother Centers. To enhance the effectiveness of the Rural Mother Centre,

she suggests increasing the loan amount. The RMC should provide training aligned with the established program and continue offering regular loans.

Case study-2

Piara Begum, aged 55, currently resides in Dasmina village of Dashmina Upazila, Patuakhali District. She is a housewife and cultivates fish. In addition, she keeps poultry and pigeons. Before passing the SSC at the age of fifteen, her father married her off to Noor Hussain Howlader in 1984, who worked as a mason.

Her first son was born in 1986, before she passed the SSC. In the year 2000, there was a sudden shock when her husband died unexpectedly, and her elder son appeared for the SSC exam that year. But the self-confident woman, Piara Begum, turned her grief into strength. She didn't give up; instead, she helped her sons obtain higher education at the university level.

She first learned about the Rural Mother Center through a union social worker in 1992 and purchased a cow with a loan of BDT 3,000. By selling the cow's milk, she paid off the debt and saved some money. Additionally, she reared poultry. In 1997, she took another loan of BDT 5,000 and purchased more cows. By selling eggs and milk, she saved some money. She also saved a small amount from her husband's income. With this money, she purchased 11 points of land and created a pond for fish cultivation in 1999. When she was only 38 years old, she lost her husband. She said, 'After the death of my husband, I fell into deep trouble. I couldn't figure out how to move forward in my life. Due to a lack of capital, I could not cultivate fish in the pond left by my husband. Then I took out another loan of BDT 12,000 from the Rural Mother Center. I started to cultivate fish with the loan and also kept poultry.' While she struggled to support her family, the Rural Mother Center provided assistance. Currently, there is a pond adjacent to her house. She also has a poultry farm and a pigeon farm. There are also two cows. She has more than 50 ducks, more than 40 hens, and more than 100 pigeons on her farm. As a result, she has a good source of personal income. She mentioned, 'This loan has increased my status, created a source of income, and helped me become self-sufficient. Now I can save some money even after meeting all my needs. I built a house.' She has made official visits to Nepal, Bhutan, Indonesia, and India. Seeing her progress, many unemployed rural women have been motivated to become successful by taking loans. Her sons graduated and work in good positions.

She believes the RMC program would be more effective if the loan amounts were increased, training were arranged for members, and the loan repayment period were extended from one to two years. The chairperson, along with the secretary, should receive an honorarium.

Focus Group Discussion

The focus group discussion was held at the Upazila Social Services Office in Paba, Rajshahi. Upazila social

services officers, union social workers, local government representatives, journalists, and some members of RMC were present in the discussion. All participants were between 32 and 45 years old. The objective of the discussion was to determine the extent to which RMC plays a role in empowering women and to explore how the program can be made more effective in this regard. Focus group discussions revealed that the members live in their own houses. Most of the houses are partially constructed. Although the members live under male domination, they express their opinions on family matters. In the last local government elections, five members of RMC contested for reserved seats. As they are involved in income-generating work, they gain additional status and importance. The Secretary of RMC said, "By getting loans from RMC, some of us buy and rear cows, some use money in grocery shops, and some use it in agricultural work. Due to the loan money, our value and respect in the family have increased." Another member said, "Our financial crisis has been resolved by getting the loan. We are able to meet our daily needs." Another member added, "We became financially sound by using loan money. Our respect in the family has increased. However, if the loan amount were higher, it would have been more beneficial." Another member said, "We need training to improve our skills. The maximum loan ceiling should be BDT 100,000 rather than BDT 50,000." She added, "To make rural mother centers more effective, the loan repayment period should be extended."

Key Informants Interview (KIIs)

Upazila Social Services Officer (USSO) of the Upazila Social Services Office, Mohammadpur, Magura, and the Union Social Worker took part in Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). They expressed their views on the role of Rural Mother Centers in empowering women.

They discussed the family and socio-economic conditions of the members of the Rural Mother Centers (RMC) program. The USSO provided detailed information about the RMC program managed by the Department of Social Services, stating, "The loans are invested in various income-generating schemes such as cattle rearing, small businesses, and agricultural work."

The Union Social Worker stated, "The members use the loan money for their self-employment. They sew, do batik work, and make materials from bamboo. Additionally, their family members are also improving in terms of education."

The USSO stated, "In the Centers, women are made aware of empowerment, women's rights, child marriage, the prevention of violence against women, and child care, among other topics." He recommended that "it is necessary to increase the loan amount to one lakh, provide trade-based training, and offer respectable remuneration for the secretary and president. A woman member from the local government should be included in the RMC committee, as they can help collect the loan installments in a timely manner."

Discussion

This study presents an overall review of the positive impact of rural mother centers on the empowerment of rural women, based on the results of the survey, the case study, focus group discussions (FGDs), and interviews with key service providers.

However, after receiving loans, they engage in income-generating activities, gain respect within their families, and are able to make decisions as they contribute economically. They are conscious about childbirth, become self-reliant, achieve economic liberation, educate their children, and save a portion of their income. They appear to have become financially solvent and can make both small and large necessary purchases.

Through the RMC awareness program, they are becoming educated and health-conscious. They are sensitized to the evils of early marriage, the importance of sending children to school, the need for vaccination, the dangers of dowry, and the prevention of domestic violence. They gain self-confidence, allowing them to visit district and upazila-level offices and participate in various training programs. They are now able to travel beyond the boundaries of their families and society. This clearly shows that rural mother centers are supporting themselves through loans, increasing their income and accessibility, and manifesting their capabilities in various ways.

Recommendations

Some changes and enhancements are needed to make the Rural Mother Center activities more effective. The following recommendations are given on how the Rural Mother Center program can be run to empower rural women:

- There is a huge shortage of manpower at the Upazila level. To run this program more effectively, necessary manpower should be deployed.
- Many members are not interested in repaying the loan installments regularly. Therefore, women members occupying reserved seats in the Union Parishad can serve as guarantors for the loans, facilitating their collection.
- All working women should be brought under the Rural Mother Center program.
- Rural Mother Centers should be restructured to ensure they can provide necessary training, including basic education.
- The Rural Mother Center can provide loans and training based on profit and local demand.
- Loans should be disbursed regularly, as many centers have not been providing them consistently.
- The maximum loan amount should be BDT 100,000 (One Lac Taka).
- The repayment period for the loan should be extended from one year to two years.

CONCLUSION

Empowerment of rural women is an essential prerequisite for eradicating poverty and upholding human rights. For this purpose, the government included the development

project titled 'Rural Mother Center' in 1975, which greatly empowered rural women. The RMC program is a blessing for backward, underprivileged, poor, and troubled women. The program has brought about a radical change in their lives. In the case study conducted in Dashmina Upazila of Patuakhali, we have seen how successful a member of the Rural Mother's Center has been after securing a loan. They are spending what is necessary for themselves and their families while also saving. They have become successful not only in their personal lives but also in exercising their right to vote. Some have also participated in local government elections and have also won their elections.

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