Impact of Self-help Group Membership on the Women Artisans of Shantiniketan: An Empirical Study

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Key Words :
1.Micro-finance
2.Self-help groups
3. Leather cluster
5. Women artisans

Abstract

Micro-finance refers to small savings, credit and insurance services extended to socially and economically disadvantaged segments of society. The women artisans from Shantiniketan leather cluster , which has the long tradition of leather bags and other accessories manufacturing , have changed their lives and their socio-living condition in many aspects by adopting the way of self-help group formation under different coordinating agencies , specially the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) since 1992 . These self-help groups have been extended soft loans of various nature through the respective coordinating agencies and the initiative has added different new positive dimensions in respects to the members of such groups. This structured questionnaire based feedback based empirical study attempts to evaluate the level of positive change occurred in the life of other-wise under-privileged rural women artisans engaged in leather craftsmanship under several self-help groups coordinated by different coordinating NGOs at the grass-root level .

INTRODUCTION

Micro-finance refers to small savings, credit and insurance services extended to socially and economically disadvantaged segments of society. World Bank has comprehensively defined Micro-finance as “small-scale financial services-primarily credit and savings –provided to people who farm or fish or herd : who operate small enterprises or micro-enterprises where goods are produced , recycled , repaired or sold ; who provides services; who work for the wages or commissions ; who gain income from renting out small amounts of the land , vehicles , draft animals, or machinery and tools ; and to other individuals and groups at the local levels of developing countries , both rural and urban” (World development report ,2000). In the Indian context terms like "small and marginal farmers", " rural artisans" and "economically weaker sections" have been used to broadly define micro-finance customers. According to Gert Van Maan, “Micro-credit or micro-finance , is banking the unbankables, bringing credit , savings and other financial services within the reach of millions of people who are too poor to be served by regular banks , in most cases because they are unable to offer sufficient collateral (Oikrocredit).

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At present, a large part of micro finance activity is confined to credit only. Women constitute a vast majority of users of micro-credit and savings services. In the NSS (round 60) , it has been estimated that the large percentage of rural women above the age of 15 are willing to work at household premises (29.3%) , in activities such as dairy farming (9.5%) , poultry farming (3%) , cattle rearing , spinning and weaving (3.45) , tailoring (6.1%) and other manufacturing of other finished products etc. (Srinivasan , Sriram)

Women empowerment and micro-finance initiatives - different paradigm

In India organizations like Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) among others with origins and affiliations in the Indian labour and women's movements identified credit as a major constraint in their work with informal sector women workers. The problem of women's access to credit was given particular emphasis at the first International Women's Conference in Mexico in 1975 as part of the emerging awareness of the importance of women's productive role both for national economies, and for women's rights. This led to the setting up of the Women's World Banking network and production of manuals for women's credit provision. Other women's organizations world wide set up credit and savings components both as a way of increasing women's incomes and bringing women together to address wider gender issues. From the mid-1980s there was a mushrooming of donor, government and NGO sponsored credit programmes in the wake of the 1985 Nairobi women's conference (Mayoux, 1995a).The 1980s and 1990s also saw

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development and rapid expansion of large minimalist poverty targeted micro-finance institutions and networks like Grameen Bank, ACCION and Finca among others. In these organizations and others evidence of significantly higher female repayment rates led to increasing emphasis on targeting women as an efficiency strategy to increase credit recovery. A number of donors also saw female targeted financially sustainable micro-finance as a means of marrying internal demands for increased efficiency because of declining budgets with demands of the increasingly vocal gender lobbies. The trend was further reinforced by the Micro Credit Summit Campaign starting in 1997 which had 'reaching and empowering women' as its second key goal after poverty reduction (RESULTS 1997). Micro-finance for women has recently been seen as a key strategy in meeting not only Millennium Goal 3 on gender equality, but also poverty Reduction, Health, HIV/AIDS and other goals (Nandi).

Leather industry in India – A brief introduction

The leather industry in India is one of the top 10 export earners for the country and plays an important role in the Indian economy though in the last few years, India's contribution to the global market has increased marginally. In 2002, India's leather production accounted for 2.25 per cent of the global trade and in 2006, it increased by meager 0.37 per cent to 2.62 per cent. India being the largest livestock holding country of the world it has the potential to contribute up to 10 per cent to the global market. During 2007-08 India's exports of leather and leather products touched US$ 3.47 billion, a growth of 13.67 per cent over the corresponding period of last year. This establishes the inherent potential of the Indian leather industry. The major production centres of leather processing and leather products manufacturing in India are located at Kolkata in West Bengal , Chennai, Ambur, Ranipet, Vaniyambadi, Trichy and Dindigul in Tamil Nadu, Kanpur and Agra in Uttar Pradesh, Jalandhar in Punjab, Delhi, Bangalore in Karnataka, Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh and Mumbai in Maharashtra.

Table 1 : Export and domestic market trend(Rs .in lakhs)

Year	Export market	Domestic market
1985-86	327.34	551.43
1989-90	339.45	553.30
1992-94	341.10	553.34
1996-98	341.76	554.14
2000-01	340.98	554.56
2003-05	340.76	555.02
2007-09	338.32	555.17

Source: India leather sector network report 2009

Leather industry in West Bengal : A brief review

West Bengal is one of the largest producer and exporter of leather and leather goods and accounts for almost 25 per cent of the country's leather exports. In 2007-08 West Bengal exported leather and leather products worth US$ 517 million. The State has around 224 tanneries and a large number of leather goods manufacturing units, most of them being small enterprises. Cheap raw materials, abundant water supply, economical labour and low cost of operations are some important factors that have made West Bengal an attractive destination for the leather industry.

Shantiniketan leather cluster : An overview

Traditionally Shantiniketan leather cluster is known for fancy leather products like bags, ladies and gents money purse etc. However , for more than last one decade the cluster has shifted its product composition from pure leather products to artificial or semi-leather accessories . Export market for such products continued to increase till 1990s and since 2000 the trend certainly started falling down. However, its domestic market keeps on increasing steadily during the same period. Following table shows the trend in these regards:

Employment scenario in Shantiniketan leather cluster

Shantiniketan leather cluster is traditionally dominated by house-hold women artisans , who are basically housewives , young women studying at schools and colleges etc. Majority of them are skilled under the artisanship training schemes jointly run by Vishwabharati & Government of India rural employment Bureau Training initiatives. Though both the state and the central governments traditionally supported the cluster by arranging soft loans under different schemes and by purchasing in bulk the finished products for government emporiums and showrooms across India , yet all the working population has not been equally benefited by such efforts. It has been found that due to selective involvement by the respective governments for extending the active support and the growing government policy of extending passive support have created the new sensation among the women workers engaged in the sector. A joint study conducted by Society for Economic development (SED) , Kolkata and Bandhab Sanghatan (BS) , Bolpur during 2004 has shown that more and more women are interested to enter the business and want to set up their own ventures as entrepreneurs targeting both domestic and international markets (SED

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report , 2010) . Currently, about 23000 women are directly or indirectly engaged in the cluster in four major locations like Bolpur , Labpur, Sriniketan , Saroi and Dohila (Majumder). As on December 2008 , about 134 registered self-help groups (SHGs) have been formed across the Birbhum district of West Bengal and 112 of these groups are very much active in this business. The largest coordinating group or NGO called "Sabala" has about 94 members located at Bolpur .This group has even been awarded by different government agencies for their commendable performance as best employment generating group for rural women, for best business performance , for best export quality product manufacturer etc. (Nandi)

Micro-finance and growth of SHG based business venture

The first Self-help group of women leather artisans was formed under the NGO called "Shilpi Goshhti" in the year 1992 at Bolpur, Birbhum with the involvement of only five women skilled artisans under the active initiative of some of the progressive local political visionaries. Gradually this group became larger and 2 other SHGs were formed exclusively devoted to leather and semi-leather bag manufacturing from two other different locations called Paliputi and Nirmapur. Some other prominent coordinating groups or NGOs are there with good membership record and significant contribution to the sector. A survey (2007) on the women members of the largest SHG coordination group of the cluster , i.e., " Sabala" has revealed that life of about 90% members have become better in many senses (IMSER , Kolkata) .

Table 2 shows the comprehensive picture of some of the major SHGs in the cluster .

From this tabular statement , it can be easily understood that most of the self-help groups (SHGs) in the sector have come into existence under the very popular SHG-Bank linkage initiatives under the micro-finance based development model. Most of the SHGs active in this sector started with very small capital of 5-8 lakhs at the initial period and gradually expanded their business by adoption of new marketing strategies leading to greater profits . Since 2003 , many of the self help groups , mainly from Labpur and Bolpur blocks have adopted the new practice of out sourcing many of their non-core but important functions like accounting and book keeping , training to the members on new technology adoption and product quality

Table 2 : Major SHGs and their comprehensive details in Shantiniketan Leather cluster :

Name of the SHG coordinating NGO	Total membership and number of SHGs coordinated	Target market	Total annual turnover (Rs. in lakhs)	Supported by
Sabala	94 (07 SHGs) 64 (04 SHGs in leather occupation)	Domestic and export	87	SBI micro-finance support initiative and state government schemes
Balaka	86 (11 SHGs) 56 (07 SHGs in leather occupation)	Domestic and Export	76	IDBI and Bolpur grameen cooperative bank
Charmo-shilpi	80 (06 SHGs) 59 (04 SHGs in leather occupation)	Domestic and export	74	ICICI bank and state government schemes .
Shilpi-Goshhti	77 (05 SHGs) 40 (03 SHGs in leather occupation)	Domestic and Export	77	Different funding agencies
Chetana	62 (05 SHGs) 43 (03 SHGs in leather occupation)	Domestic and export	70	Punjab National Bank , IDBI bank.

Source : Primary data

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development etc. . On the issues of training reputed organizations in the field like Indian Leather Producers' Association (ILPA) , Kolkata chapter , Small and medium scale enterprise institute (SMSEI) have come into front (ILPA report , 2007). To avoid the distribution of cost of training 16 major SHGs have formed a common platform called “Samannay” in the year 2007 and gradually other joint initiatives have also been planned for the benefit of the whole sector.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The paper attempts to evaluate the impact of micro-finance support on the self-help group members , who are exclusively female artisans engaged in leather craft-work in Shantiniketan leather cluster in terms of scope of regularity of income , adequacy of income to support the family , regular savings , members importance in family decision making , change in status of independence on personal matters , perception towards getting soft loans etc.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Cluster sampling method has been adopted across coordinating NGOs. and the Sample size was comprised of 30% of members fro each coordinating NGOs . The survey was conducted during January –March 2011.From each coordinating NGOs respective numbers of members were selected on random basis. Structured questionnaire (close ended) were used to collect feedback from the members on respective issues .Though the total number of 79 questionnaires were distributed and all the questionnaires were returned , out of which only two questionnaires were not excluded from further process of statistical analysis , due to incomplete feedbacks . Finally total number of 77 responses were considered. To test the validity of the hypothesis tools like chi-square analaysis has been used on the basis of comparison between chi-square tabulated value and the tabular value of the chi-square analysis.

Accordingly , following Hypothesis have been formed for being tested :

H1 : Self- help group membership has improved the scope of regular income .

H2 : Self-help group membership has made the earning enough to support the family.

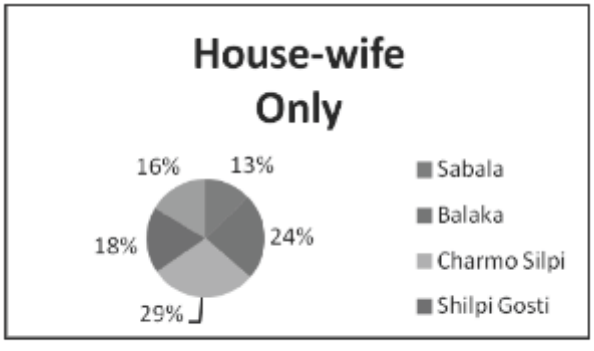
H3: Self-help group membership has made the regular savings possible .

H4 : Self-help group membership has improved importance in family decision making.

H5 : Self-help group membership has made more independent on personal matters.

H6 : Self-help group membership has made more confident in getting soft-loans in need .

Analysis Can be done As Follows



Finding 1: Chormo-Shilpi has the highest number of house-wife artisan members (29%) followed by Balaka (24%) .

SURVEY FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

Following table (Table- 3) shows the demographic break-up of the respondents :

Coordinating NGO	House-wife only	Student only	Others/Hose-wife cum student	10+2	Matric	School Drop-out	Age 30+	Age 20-29	Age Below 20
Sabala	7	11	1	17	2	0	5	8	6
Balaka	13	1	2	9	2	5	8	2	3
Charmo Silpi	16	1	0	6	8	3	6	7	3
Silpi Gosti	10	2	0	3	6	3	5	6	1
Chetana	09	04	0	4	4	5	3	7	3

From the above table, demographic analysis as well as individual coordinating NGO based analysis can be done as follows:

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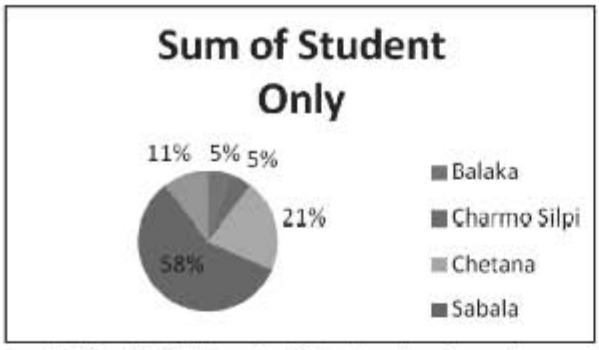
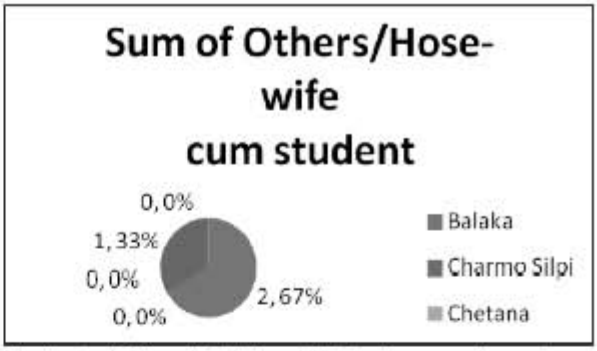
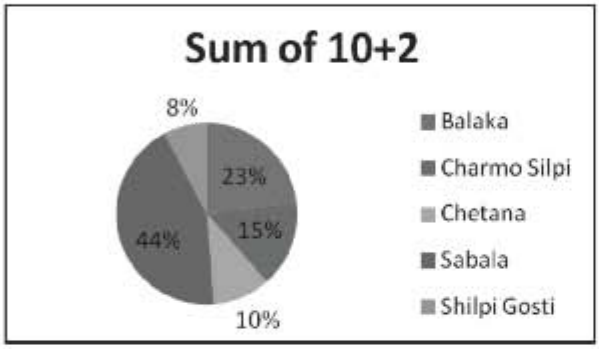


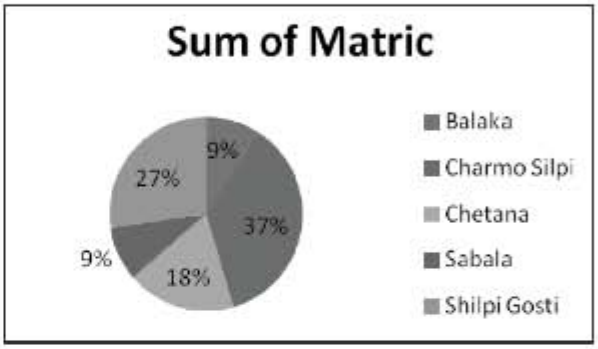
Finding 2: Sabala has the highest number of members , who are students (58%)



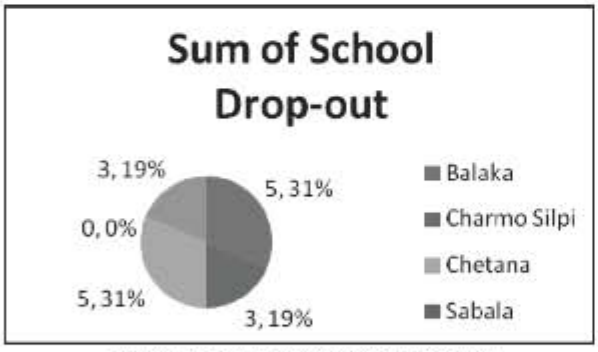
Finding 3 : While only Sabala and Balaka have members who are neither house-wives nor students



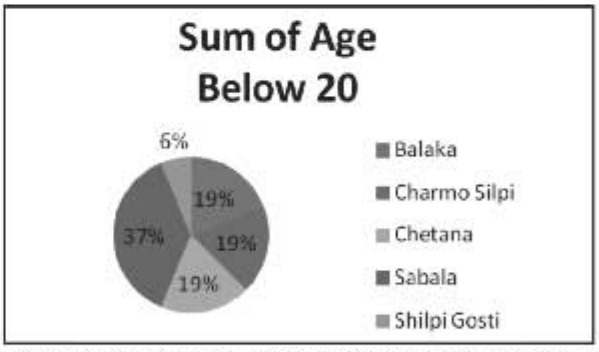
Finding 4 : The Sabala has the highest number of members with 10+2 qualification (44%) , followed by Balaka (23%)



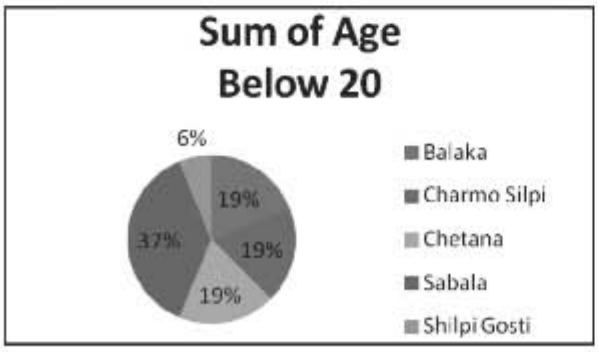
Finding 5 : Charmosi pi members are matric qualified in highest numbers (37%)



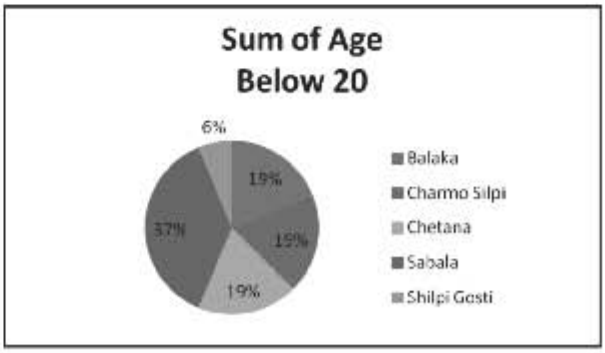
Finding 6 : No school drop-outs at Sabala



Finding 7 : Balaka (30%) and Charmosilpi (22%) have maximum number of members with age below 20



Finding 8 : Members of age group of 20-29 are almost same in number in all Coordinating NGOs



Finding 9 : Sabala has the highest number of members (37%) below aged 20

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Table- 4 :Further shows the feedback pattern received through the structured questionnaire:

Coordinating NGO	Strongly agree	Agree	Not agree
Scope of regular income has been improved ...			
Sabala	18	1	0
Balaka	14	2	0
Charmo Silpi	12	5	0
Silpi Gosti	9	3	0
Chetana	8	5	0
Earning is sufficient to support the family....			
Sabala	9	10	0
Balaka	9	5	1
Charmo Silpi	8	9	0
Silpi Gosti	8	3	1
Chetana	4	9	0
Regular savings is possible.....			
Sabala	7	6	6
Balaka	6	5	4
Charmo Silpi	6	7	4
Silpi Gosti	7	3	2
Chetana	4	6	3
Importance in family decision making has been improved			
Sabala	9	10	0
Balaka	8	6	1
Charmo Silpi	7	10	0
Silpi Gosti	7	4	1
Chetana	5	8	0
Have become more independent on personal patters.....			
Sabala	10	9	0
Balaka	13	2	0
Charmo Silpi	9	8	0
Silpi Gosti	6	6	0
Chetana	7	6	0
Confident of getting soft loan in need			
Sabala	6	7	6
Balaka	9	5	1
Charmo Silpi	6	4	7
Silpi Gosti	6	4	2
Chetana	5	8	0

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The statistical analysis of the response on the specific issues further shows the following , which helps to draw the conclusion regarding accepting or rejecting the stated hypothesis on individual issues :

H1 : Self- help group membership has improved the scope of regular income .

Coordinating NGO	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Agree
Sabala	18	1	0
Balaka	14	2	0
Charmo Silpi	12	5	0
Shilpi Gosti	9	3	0
Chetana	8	5	0

Balaka

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
2	1	9.5	-8.5
14	18	9.5	8.5
Total	19		

Test Statistics

	Balaka
Chi-Square	15.211a
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

Since the chi-square calculated value (15.21) is more than the tabular value of chi-square (df = 1 , α =.05) , the hypothesis is proved. Therefore , it can be said that the membership of self-help groups have improved the scope of regularity of income among the women artisans of the cluster.

H 2: Self-help group membership has made the earning enough to support the family.

Coordinating NGO	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Agree
Sabala	9	10	0
Balaka	9	5	1
Charmo Silpi	9	9	0
Shilpi Gosti	8	3	1
Chetana	4	9	0

Chetana

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
4	9	9.5	-.5
9	10	9.5	.5
Total	19		

Test Statistics

	Chetana
Chi-Square	.053a
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.819

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 9.5.

Since the chi square calculated value (0.53) is less than the tablular value of chi sqare (df=1, α=.05). We cannot accept the hypothesis and it can be observed that membership of self-help groups has not made the earning enough to support the family.

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H 3: Membership to self-help group has made the regular savings possible .

Coordinating NGO	Strongly Agree	Agree
Sabala	7	6
Balaka	6	5
Charmo Silpi	6	7
Shilpi Gosti	7	3
Chetana	4	6

Balaka

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
4	6	6.3	-.3
5	6	6.3	-.3
6	7	6.3	.7
Total	19		

Test Statistics

	Balaka
Chi-Square	.105a
Df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.949

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 6.3.Since the chi square calculated value (0.105) is less than the tablular value of chi sqare (df=1, α=.05) . Therefore , hypothesis is not accepted and it can be observed that membership to self-help groups has not made regular savings possible.

H4: Self-help group membership has improved importance in family decision making.

Coordinating NGO	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Agree
Sabala	9	10	0
Balaka	8	6	1
Charmo Silpi	7	10	0
Shilpi Gosti	7	4	1
Chetana	5	8	0

Chermo Shilp

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
7	9	9.5	-.5
10	10	9.5	.5
Total	19		

Test Statistics

	Chermo Shilp
Chi-Square	.053a
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.819

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 9.5. Since chi-square calculated value (0.053) is less than the tabular value of chi-square (df=1, α=.05) , the hypothesis is rejected .

Therefore , it can be said that due to the membership of self-help group , the importance in decision making in family has not been improved.

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H 5: Self-help group membership has made more independent in decision making on personal matters.

Coordinating NGO	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Agree
Sabala	10	9	0
Balaka	13	2	0
Charmo Silpi	9	8	0
Shilpi Gosti	6	6	0
Chetana	7	6	0

Balaka

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
2	2	7.5	-5.5
13	13	7.5	5.5
Total	15		

Test Statistics

	Balaka
Chi-Square	8.067a
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.005

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 7.5. Since the chi square calculated value (8.067) is more than the tablular value of chi square (df=1, α=.05) , hypothesis is accepted .Therefore , it can be concluded that membership of self-help groups has made these women artisans independent in decision making on personal matters.

H 6 : Self-help membership has made them more confident of getting soft-loans in need .

Coordinating NGO	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Agree
Sabala	6	7	6
Balaka	9	5	1
Charmo Silpi	6	4	7
Shilpi Gosti	6	4	2
Chetana	5	8	0

Chetana

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
5	5	6.5	-1.5
8	8	6.5	1.5
Total	13		

Test Statistics

	Sabala	Balaka	Chermo Shilp	Shilp Gosti	Chetana
Chi-Square	.692a	.692a	.692a	.692a	.692a
Df	1	1	1	1	1
Asymp. Sig.	.405	.405	.405	.405	.405

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 6.5. Since the chi square calculated value (0.692) is less than the tabular value of chi square (df=1, α=.05), the hypothesis can be rejected .

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Therefore , it can be said that the membership has not made these women artisans confident of getting soft-loans in need.

The detailed statistical analysis shows that though the membership of self-help groups has improved the scope of regular earning to a great extent , but on other issues like regular savings possibility , contribution and support to the family , greater importance in family , increased independence in taking personal decisions and even , chances of getting soft-loans in need etc., the impact seems to be not satisfactory. Though the analysis can logically correlate the negative findings like lack of savings possibility , lack of support possibility to the family , lack of enhanced importance in family decision making and lack of independence in personal decision making , yet it fails to identify the reasons of negative perception of the women members to get soft-loans in need even their earning has been regularized as observed by the study.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has exposed both the positive and negative socio-economic impacts on self-help group members . Several other studies on the nature of impact on self-help group members , specially the women members have shown remarkable improvements . But , in this case , the effect is surprisingly limited . The scope of future research is always there to investigate the reasons of this limited benefit caused in Shantiniketan leather cluster , which is known for vibrant inclusive economic initiatives for many years.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

The study has the limitations as all the data have been collected through single source self reported measures. Therefore, common method variance may be a major problem. Responses of individual survey items may not be truly independent as there has been a chance influence of group membership. From this perspective, it can be said that more research is needed to examine the generalization of this study.

CONCLUSION

Though the research findings highlight limited impacts on the issues covered , yet the scope of broader impact can not be ignored. Some other reports published in the different reports have shown that the impact of self-help group membership is already started to touch those aspects of life , which have been unthinkable before. The report published by Institute of Self-employment and research (IMSER) , Calcutta (2011) has divided the impact on women self-help group members into three areas- professional , social and personal accomplishments. The reports have shown that at the professional level average monthly income has increased over 3 times during 2008-2011 period , at the social level school drop out rates after 8th standard has been reduced significantly (about 5%-7.3% lower than other parts of the district), pulse polio immunization rates have been increased , average age of marriage (14 years in the year 2008 to 16 years in 2010) , first pregnancy age among married women have increased (16 years in the year 2008 to 18 years in the year 2010) and average children per couple has dropped from 4 (2007) to 2.6 (2010) . Even the average age of marriage has increased from 14.23 years (2008) to 20 years (2011) in many of these villages dominated by self-help group women members engaged in leather craft . Therefore, it can be said that the financial support in this case has played multifarious roles and transformation has already begun towards a better society , which may not have been reflected in the study .

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