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MICROFINANCE AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN RURAL KARNATAKA: A STUDY OF SKDRDP'S SHG MODEL AND ITS ECONOMIC OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

Microfinance has emerged as an important tool to reduce poverty and empower women in rural India, particularly through projects like the Sri Kshetra Dharmasthala Rural Development Project (SKDRDP). Basically, SKDRDP is a combination of microcredit and Self-Help Group (SHG), where women should get a confidence boost to actively participate in their communities. This study focused on examining the growth of SKDRDP's SHGs, the characteristics of the members who joined, the distribution of the loans by sector and the evolution of the total amount of credit. The study has taken a quantitative approach and extracted secondary data from the annual reports published by SKDRDP and analysed the data using descriptive statistics, growth-rate calculation, and trend analysis using Excel and SPSS. The results were rather surprising: the growth of SHGs was 45-fold, and the number of members increased by 40-fold; more than 70% of loans are spent on small-scale industry and business. Loan amounts increased almost two-fold between the years 2017 and 2023, while savings in this period increased by 175%. All of this points to the fact that SKDRDP provides not just money but empowers women to make their own choices, become more self-sufficient, and actively participate in their community.

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INTRODUCTION

Microfinance has for a long time been heralded as a game-changer in poverty alleviation and women's empowerment in developing countries. One of the best examples of such a project is the Sri Kshetra Dharmasthala Rural Development Project (SKDRDP) in Karnataka, which has been improving the economic status of rural women. By providing microcredit and building community-based support structures, SKDRDP empowers women to become economically independent, start income-generating enterprises, and make a difference in their families and communities. Its empowerment agenda is not solely about money but also addresses more social, economic, and psychological concerns (Morduch, 1999; Hossain, 2013). Microfinance and, in particular, programmes administered by SKDRDP, allow women to escape financial exclusion and become active participants in local economic development. Rural women are weak in many ways: they have limited access to conventional banks, they often do not have a good education, and gender attitudes disempower them from progressing economically (Rahman, 1999). The small loans of SKDRDP help women to get access to agriculture, small businesses and handicrafts, thus improving their overall socioeconomic status (Pitt & Khandker, 1998). Besides, the microfinance projects provide women with

increased decision-making power both in the home and in the community, which results in increased autonomy and confidence (Kabeer, 2001). Self-Help Groups (SHGs) play a significant role in the functioning of SKDRDP and go beyond this by furthering women's empowerment through solidarity, decision-making and peer support. SHGs are not only a source of loans; they are also a platform where women come together to share stories, exchange knowledge and build social capital (Vittal, 2009). The ability of SHGs to bring women into the economy and into community projects is well documented; research has shown that active participation in SHGs leads to an enhancement in social cohesion and an increase in self-confidence (Basu, 2006; Chowdhury, 2009). Microcredit lending practices and group expansion are important indicators of the success of microfinance programmes. And the menacing part is that empowering females in the form of education, health care, and income-generating activities helps the girl to gain confidence and enhances her social status (Hossain, 2013). Overall, the growth of credit disbursed by institutions like SKDRDP demonstrates the magnitude and reach of such programmes. Microfinance tends to increase the financial autonomy of women, giving them a long run towards empowerment and social change (Karlan & Zinman, 2010). Even though there are many studies on microfinance and women's empowerment, there are not that many studies focused on

SKDRDP. This paper aims to address that gap by examining the impact of SKDRDP's microfinance system on women's confidence by studying the diffusion of loans, the number of SHG formations and the tendency to credit disbursement. By examining these angles, I hope this study will reveal valuable information about the role of microfinancing in empowering women and contributing to wider development objectives.

Through a detailed analysis of SKDRDP's interventions, this study will contribute to an expanding body of literature on the intersection of microfinance and women's empowerment and socioeconomic development, offering practical insights into the transformative potential of financial inclusion. It will also support our better understanding of how microfinance can be used to improve women's agency, autonomy and overall wellbeing and to drive positive social change in rural communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature has for a long-time discussed microfinance as an engine for women's economic and social empowerment. Empirical research like Addai (2017) and Mengstie & Singh (2020) shows that microcredit and savings programmes are significant in empowering women financially, increasing income and ownership of assets. Yet, high interest rates and limited access remain a barrier to progress, especially for women living in rural areas. For example, Addai (2017) cites marital status and education level as key determinants of empowerment, while Mengstie and Singh (2020) note that education and age have relatively little impact on the outcome of microfinance initiatives.

Several papers focus on the broader implications of microfinance for social relations and household resiliency. Adhariani (2022) shows that the combination of basic accounting education and microfinance activities helps improve financial literacy and treat women as a group with their families to create lasting empowerment. In addition, Pokharel (2022) and Jamaluddeen & Alam (2022) highlight microfinance's ability to increase women's mobility, political empowerment, and financial decision-making authority, thereby boosting their social status. Self-help groups have been widely described as a major vehicle for the advancement of women's economic empowerment, particularly in rural areas. Similarly, studies by Rathod & Devi (2018) and Mittal (2024) have shown that SHGs help in raising the household income, raising the savings and further enhancing the employment opportunities. Membership of SHGs is correlated with increased agency in decision-making and increased self-confidence; that is, it is enabling increased social participation. Nonetheless, other issues like lack of business acumen and restricted access to the market remain unsolved, as can be noted by Hossain et al. (2022).

Notwithstanding these apparent benefits, some scholars (Banerjee & Jackson, 2017) have critiqued the limitations of microfinance. They argue that the model can exacerbate indebtedness, and it does not always produce the social capital that it promises. These findings raise reasonable questions about the sustainability of empowerment with microfinance. Second, other research studies like Khurshed et al. (2021) have been advocating the concept that patriarchal influences within the household can hinder the empowerment of women, especially considering how the control of financial resources is mostly in the hands of the male members.

Objectives of the study

- To analyse the growth and trends in the number of SHGs of the SKDRDP and the memberships of the SHGs.
- To evaluate the loan portfolio of SKDRDP by sector and unit purpose, especially women's empowerment, income generation, and social development.
- To examine the overall rate of growth of credit disbursed by SKDRDP.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study takes a quantitative research approach to assess the success of SKDRDP's microfinance interventions in women's empowerment. The data were obtained from SKDRDP Annual Reports. Descriptive statistics, growth rate calculations, and trend analysis were used to determine the growth of SHGs, membership behaviour, loan portfolio behaviour, and loan disbursement trends. Microsoft Excel was used to organise and compute data, while statistical testing was done with SPSS software. This systematic approach ensured objectivity, accuracy and reliability and, as a result, provided meaningful insights on the role of microfinance in boosting the confidence and socio-economic empowerment levels of women.

Meaning of Microfinance: Microfinance refers to the delivery of small-scale financial services, such as microloans, savings, and insurance, to individuals or microenterprises, especially in underserved or low-income settings. The main goal is to empower underprivileged populations by providing them with access to capital that they would not be able to access otherwise. These services allow participants to improve livelihoods, start or expand small businesses and be financially independent.

Objectives of Microfinance

- **Poverty Alleviation:** Microfinance aims to reduce poverty by providing capital to low-income households, allowing them to invest in small businesses and improve their economic situation.
- **Microwave Empowerment:** MFIs tend to focus on women, granting them financial autonomy and a greater say in household decision-making, which ultimately equates to greater social empowerment.
- **Economic Growth:** Microfinance helps to boost local economic growth and job creation by providing microcredit for entrepreneurial activity and business development in underserved communities.
- **Financial Inclusion:** Microfinance aims to include individuals and groups who are excluded from the formal banking sector, enabling them to save, borrow, and invest.
- **Social Development:** Microfinance aims to go beyond financial metrics and strive to improve social welfare by fostering education, healthcare, and housing through financial empowerment.
- **Sustainability:** The focus of the sector is on sustainable, affordable and available financial products that will deliver long-term benefits for individuals and communities.
- By contributing to these goals, microfinance has a critical role to play in enhancing financial stability, building entrepreneurship, and driving economic development in low-income communities around the world.

Profile of the SKDRDP: The Shri Kshetra Dharmasthala Rural Development Project (SKDRDP) is a noted non-profit organisation that is based at Dharmasthala in Karnataka, India. Founded in 1982 by D. Veerendra Heggade, the Dharmadhikari of Dharmasthala, SKDRDP aims to enhance the quality of life of rural people, especially in the backward areas of Karnataka and adjoining states (SKDRDP, n.d.). SKDRDP's central mission is rural development, and it emphasises strongly social and economic empowerment, particularly for women. The organisation is known for its Self-Help Group (SHG) initiative, which provides microfinance to rural women, who have taken it up to obtain small loans from the organisation to start businesses and generate income. This initiative has been highly influential to the financial independence and social status of women (Dharma, 2019). In addition, SKDRDP works on different social welfare programmes such as health, education, skill development and agriculture. It encourages sustainable farming methods and has started programmes in organic farming, thereby enhancing local economies and livelihoods (SKDRDP, 2021). The organisation is also involved in the promotion of rural infrastructure, environmental conservation and social awareness. With its enormous network, SKDRDP has

Table 1. SKDRDP's Active SHGs and Members (2004-2024)

Years	Active SHGs (in millions)	Annual Growth Rate (In Percentage)	Active members (in millions)	Annual Growth Rate (In Percentage)
2004-05	0.014542	-	0.135964	-
2005-06	0.034505	137.28%	0.338413	148.90%
2006-07	0.047656	38.11%	0.463765	37.04%
2007-08	0.07586	59.18%	0.681773	47.01%
2008-09	0.089162	17.53%	0.904538	32.67%
2009-10	0.115172	29.17%	1.23242	36.25%
2010-11	0.123586	7.31%	1.35975	10.33%
2011-12	0.168217	36.11%	1.84422	35.63%
2012-13	0.23535	39.91%	2.483	34.64%
2013-14	0.27604	17.29%	2.931	18.04%
2014-15	0.306942	11.19%	3.18584	8.69%
2015-16	0.337009	9.80%	3.42216	7.42%
2016-17	0.370506	9.94%	3.719	8.67%
2017-18	0.424158	14.48%	3.86841	4.02%
2018-19	0.462753	9.10%	4.02215	3.97%
2019-20	0.505791	9.30%	4.22079	4.94%
2020-21	0.549856	8.71%	4.50432	6.72%
2021-22	0.603801	9.81%	4.91202	9.05%
2022-23	0.625317	3.56%	5.04004	2.61%
2023-24	0.661447	5.78%	5.38581	6.86%
Mean	0.301384		2.732769	

Source: SKDRDP Annual Report-2023-2024

Table 2: Allocation of Loan amount by Purpose

Loan Purpose	No of Loans	Percentage of No of Loans	Loan amount (Rs lakh)	Percentage of loan amount
Auto Rickshaw	31	0.0073%	72.93	0.0173%
Auto Rickshaw Repair	14875	3.5065%	12172.4	2.8934%
Barber Shop Investment \ Development	1651	0.3892%	1805.4	0.4292%
Beauty Parlous	1849	0.4359%	1723.96	0.4098%
Bee Keeping	485	0.1143%	258.25	0.0614%
Boat Purchase	742	0.1749%	614.4	0.1460%
Business and Small-scale industry	191404	45.1203%	200061	47.5553%
Cane Juice Shop	367	0.0865%	338.1	0.0804%
Carpenter Work	5088	1.1994%	5501.72	1.3078%
Cycle Rickshaw Business	132	0.0311%	137.4	0.0327%
Decoration	131	0.0309%	111.35	0.0265%
Decoration Material Sale	83	0.0196%	90.7	0.0216%
Electrical Shop Investment Development	1883	0.4439%	1948.69	0.4632%
Fancy Shop Business	993	0.2341%	933.3	0.2218%
Fishing Boat	155	0.0365%	191.8	0.0456%
Fishing Boat Repair	51	0.0120%	74.92	0.0178%
Fishing Net Purchase	1066	0.2513%	1124.19	0.2672%
Foot Ware Shop	519	0.1223%	542.35	0.1289%
Foreign Visit for Job Purpose	22	0.0052%	31.6	0.0075%
Fruit Stall	2923	0.6890%	2751.84	0.6541%
Furniture Shop Business	1238	0.2918%	1330.07	0.3162%
Garment Shop Investment/Development	2743	0.6466%	2552.13	0.6067%
Hard Ware Shop	718	0.1693%	790.9	0.1880%
Head Carry Business (Peddler)	124	0.0292%	105.05	0.0250%
Hotel Business	14352	3.3832%	15248.1	3.6245%
juice Shop	150	0.0354%	152.7	0.0363%
Mini Mobile Shop Investment \ Development	543	0.1280%	563.25	0.1339%
Moving Cart Business	14	0.0033%	14.9	0.0035%
Mud Block Business	58	0.0137%	74.25	0.0176%
Old Vehicle Repair	3348	0.7892%	2999.68	0.7130%
Other income generation activity	18065	4.2585%	17452.8	4.1486%
Petty Shop Working Capital	910	0.2145%	851.05	0.2023%
Plumbing Works	398	0.0938%	382.24	0.0909%
Poultry farming	1122	0.2645%	1343.41	0.3193%
Provision Store Investment/Development	4933	1.1629%	4459.51	1.0600%
Provision Store Items Purchase	4116	0.9703%	3339.14	0.7937%
Sari Sales	2033	0.4792%	1819.66	0.4325%
Small & Home Industry	3754	0.8849%	3565.92	0.8476%
Small Hotel Business	4	0.0009%	4.2	0.0010%
Small Scale Business	109690	25.8576%	112960	26.8511%
Sweet Stall Shop	232	0.0547%	210.2	0.0500%
Tailoring Machine Purchase	19704	4.6449%	8417.01	2.0008%
Taxi Purchase	1	0.0002%	1	0.0002%
Tractor or Tempo Repair	5660	1.3343%	6307.79	1.4994%
Siri sales outlet	158	0.0372%	131.8	0.0313%
Bakery products	921	0.2171%	1020.4	0.2426%
Agriculture marketing	4415	1.0408%	3741.97	0.8895%
Business and Mini industry	121	0.0285%	181.9	0.0432%
Vehicle purchase and renting	2	0.0005%	1.89	0.0004%
Readymade garments	214	0.0504%	163.45	0.0389%
Wholesale condiments	17	0.0040%	18.55	0.0044%
Total	424208	100.00%	420692	100.00%

Source: SKDRDP Annual Report-2023-2024

Table 3. Credit Growth over the Years (2017–2023)

Financial Year	Amount Disbursed (₹ in Lakhs)	Amount Disbursed Growth (₹ in Lakhs)	Savings Amount (₹ in Lakhs)	Savings Amount Growth (₹ in Lakhs)	SHG Members Availing Loans	SHG Members Growth
2017–18	8,17,387	-	1,18,469	-	38,68,412	-
2018–19	9,26,409	1,09,022	1,40,861	22,392	40,25,392	1,56,980
2019–20	10,41,788	1,15,379	1,77,083	36,222	42,21,317	1,95,925
2020–21	11,72,699	1,30,911	2,11,915	34,832	45,15,812	2,94,495
2021–22	13,90,496	2,17,797	2,65,208	53,293	49,07,917	3,92,105
2022–23	16,82,128	2,91,632	3,26,385	61,177	52,74,814	3,66,897

Source: SKDRDP Annual Report-2023-2024

reached millions of beneficiaries, empowering rural communities and building a model for rural development in India. Its holistic approach towards rural development has made it a top-tier organisation in the country in achieving rural development (Hegde, 2020). Table 1 shows the SKDRDP active Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and members during the period 2004 to 2024. The data reveal a consistently upward trend in both the number of active SHGs and their membership in the twenty-year period. In the financial year 2004-05, SKDRDP registered only 0.014 million SHGs and 0.135 million members; this rose quickly to 0.034 million SHGs (an increase of 137.28 per cent) and 0.338 million members (an increase of 148.90 per cent) by 2005-06, which represents an initial phase of expansion. The programme thereafter continued with a strong growth momentum with some remarkable peaks during 2007-08 (59.18 per cent SHG growth; 47.01 per cent member growth) and 2011-12 (36.11 per cent SHG growth; 35.63 per cent member growth). By 2023-24, the totals reached 0.661 million active SHGs and 5.385 million members, or a forty-five-fold increase in the number of SHGs and a forty-fold increase in the number of members from the base year. Nevertheless, the data also shows a slowing down of the growth rate after 2015-16; SHG growth has stabilised at single-digit levels (e.g., 3.56 per cent in 2022-23), while membership growth has fallen to 2.61 per cent in the same period. This pattern indicates that the programme has reached a maturation stage where expansion is reaching saturation. Overall, the analysis highlights a large-scale successful mobilisation of women through SHGs, which was characterised by vigorous growth in the first decade and stabilisation in recent years.

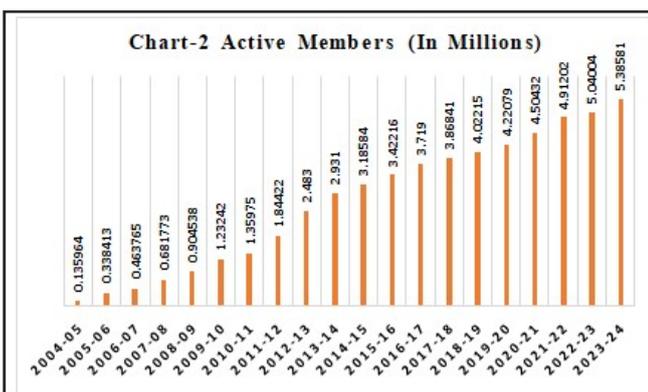
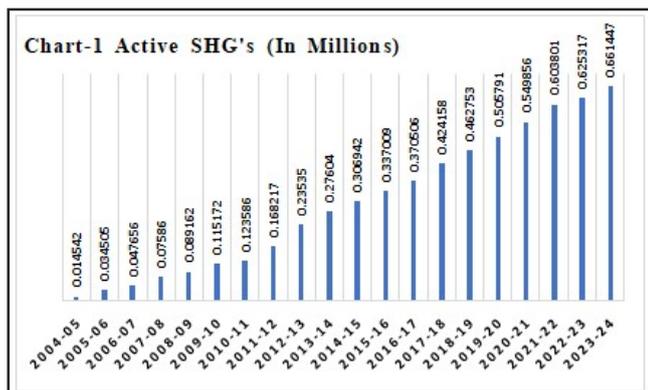


Table 2 provides details on the allocation of loans on the basis of purpose and amount in the SKDRDP Annual Report (2023 - 2024), a majority of the loans is directed towards business and small-scale industry, with 191,404 disbursements accounting for 45.12 per cent of the total amount, followed by a sanctioned amount of ₹200,061 thousand crore (47.55 per cent). This was followed by small-scale businesses comprising 109,690 loans (25.86%) and an allocation of ₹112,960 lakh (26.85%). Together these two categories represent more than 70 per cent of the total distribution of loans, thus reflecting a strong focus on the support of entrepreneurial and industrial activities. Other important amounts allocated are Hotel Business (14,352 loans; 3.38 per cent) amounting to ₹15,248.10 (3.62 per cent) and Other Income Generation Activities (18,065 loans; 4.25 per cent) amounting to ₹17,45,280 (4.15 per cent). Smaller but socially significant sectors such as Tailoring Machine Purchase (19,704 loans; 4.64 per cent) and Auto Rickshaw Repair (14,875 loans; 3.51 per cent) are examples of focused support for self-employment and micro-enterprises. In contrast, agricultural-related purposes were given comparatively less weight, and beekeeping (485 loans; 0.11%) and agriculture marketing (4415 loans; 1.04%) recorded small shares. The analysis, therefore, shows that SKDRDP's loan strategy is prevalent in the small-scale industries and businesses to promote sustainable livelihood generation and widens the diversification into various micro sectors for economic empowerment at the community level.

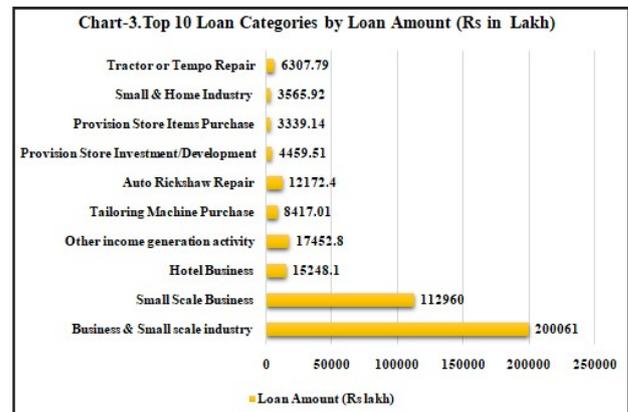


Table 3 illustrates the growth of credit in the period 2017-23, the data shows a consistent growth of loans, savings and SHG member credit. The amount of loans disbursed has increased from ₹8,17,387 in 2017-18 to ₹16,82,128 in 2022-23, practically doubling in 6 years. Savings, similarly, increased from ₹1,18,469 to ₹3,26,385 in comparable time, which points towards increased saving behaviour. The number of the SHG members accessing loans has gone up from 38,68,412 in 2017-18 to 52,74,814 in 2022-23, which is a rise of around 1.4 crore members in five years. Year-on-year growth is obvious; for example, in 2018-19 loans grew by ₹1,09,022 lakhs, savings by ₹22,392 and SHG members by 1,56,980. The highest loan growth was recorded in 2022-23, ₹2,91,632 lakhs; similarly, the highest savings growth was also recorded in 2022-23, ₹61,177 lakhs. The greatest increase in members occurred during 2021-22 with 3,92,105 new loan-takers. Overall, the table shows that the programmes of SKDRDP are growing strongly, with growing loan volumes, savings levels and, of course, a growing membership each year.

Major Findings of the Study

- **Expansion of SHGs and Membership:** During the 20-year period (2004-2024), the number of active Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under SKDRDP had increased almost 45 times, and the number of members increased around 40 times. This is a testimony of the massive mobilisation and participation of rural women in community collective structures.
- **Loan Allocation Patterns:** The loans were allocated to small-scale industries and businesses for more than 70 per cent of the total loans allocated to SKDRDP, as entrepreneurship and livelihood generation are focus areas. Sectors like tailoring, auto, rickshaw repair, and petty shops also have substantial support, which also leads to household-level women-led enterprises.
- **Credit and Savings Growth:** The total credit to be paid out during the 2017-2018 and 2022-2023 fiscal years increased almost twice, and the savings that can be attributed to the programme were over 175 per cent. The size of Self-Help Group (SHG) people getting loans grew by 1.4 million people in this duration, which signifies increased confidence in the interventions and more extensive engagement.
- **Women Empowerment Outcomes:** The interventions of the programme empowered women and their confidence, decision-making ability and participation in society, thus making it beyond financial independence. Participation in SHGs enhanced solidarity, common support, and agency among women that strengthened their socio-economic status both in the family and community.
- **Overall Effect:** The microfinance supported by the Sri Kshetra Dharmasthala Rural Development Project (SKDRDP) as an empirical support system is proved to be not only a financial tool but also a multi-dimensional empowerment tool. It helps the livelihoods of people to be sustainable; it promotes a culture of saving as well as rural development through the agency of women.

Policy Recommendations

According to the SKDRDP study, the following policy recommendations are suggested in order to enhance the programmes of microfinance and empower women even more:

- **Specific Loan Distribution:** Extend further lending to women-owned businesses in other sectors like education, health care and social enterprise so as to boost the confidence and socioeconomic position of women.
- **Encouragement of Self-Help Groups (SHGs):** Enhance SHGs through the provision of financial literacy training, leadership, and business skills workshops to enhance the women's decision-making and participation capacity in the society.
- **Gender-Sensitive Microfinance Practices:** Promote gender-sensitive policies by the microfinance institutions and offer

products which meet the special needs of women at reduced interest rates and with liberal terms.

- **Microfinance sustainability:** Support financial literacy and electronic financial services to enhance repayment of loans as well as the sustainability of microcredit programmes in the long term.
- **Digital Financial Inclusion:** support the use of digital platforms to promote easier access to credit, savings, and insurance, especially amongst rural women.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Strengthen its monitoring mechanisms to monitor the social impact of microfinance, not solely in terms of monetary achievements but especially in terms of women's empowerment.
- **Multi-Sectoral Cooperation:** The microfinance institutions, non-governmental organisations, and local governments should be encouraged to collaborate to provide a holistic approach to women's empowerment.

These suggestions will support the purpose of microfinance in enhancing women's confidence and financial inclusion and promoting sustainable development among rural communities.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the effects of interventions of microfinance implemented through the Sri Kshetra Dharmasthala Rural Development Project (SKDRDP) indicates the central role of microcredit and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in improving the socio-economic status of women, especially in terms of confidence and decision-making power. Within 20 years, the efforts of SKDRDP have yielded a tremendous increase in the number of active SHGs and their membership, which has resulted in over three-quarters of the loan distributions being directed to small-scale businesses. The research illustrates that microfinance does not only ensure financial independence but also social empowerment because of the augmented female involvement in family and community decision-making. The results highlight the relevance of gender-specific microfinance service provision, extensive financial literacy interventions, and the introduction of digital solutions to exaggerate the women's empowerment and ensure the sustainability of the programmes. This study helps in enhancing a better understanding of how microfinance can become an agent of long-term positive change in the rural communities that would impact not only female individuals but also the overall socio-economic conditions of these communities.

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