Women’s Empowerment through Microfinance Self-Help Groups: A Systematic Literature Review

Bachelor Thesis

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Executive Summary

The concept of microfinance entails provision of financial services to the poor, and is commonly used as a rural development initiative. Microfinance includes financial services such as microcredit, microsavings, and micro-insurance, and since the early 1990s, microfinance institutions (MFIs) also provide nonfinancial services such as literacy education, business training, and skills development. In an attempt to reach the poorest and most remote women, MFIs introduced the microfinance delivery method *self-help groups* (SHGs). SHGs are small groups of poor people who, based on the concepts of joint liability and shared information, gain access to financial and nonfinancial services. MFIs, through SHGs, target primarily women, as women use loans more productively, and growing research shows that women’s access to financial and nonfinancial services can have an empowering effect (Khandker, 1998; Amin et al., 1998). Women’s empowerment is essential in achieving gender equality.

The *purpose of this study* was to provide a literature review of the evidence on the effects of microfinance self-help groups on women’s empowerment. Moreover, we set out to explore how empowerment is defined and measured. This review contributes to the existing literature on effects of microfinance together with the literature reviews by Stewart et al. (2010), Duvendack et al. (2011), Stewart et al. (2012) and Vaessen et al. (2014). This review differs from the previous in that it explores the microfinance field from the perspective of the microfinance delivery method SHG, while previous reviews evaluated the impact of different financial services.

To fulfill the purpose of this study, we used the *method of* systematic literature review (SLR). In following the main steps of SLRs, we (i) searched through databases and websites using predefined keywords, (ii) screened the literature in two stages (title and abstract, and full text), (iii) applied inclusion criteria to identify relevant studies, (iv) assessed the quality of studies, (v) extracted and collected data of included studies, and lastly, (vi) analysed the studies through a thematic synthesis.

After analysis, our *results* showed that an overwhelming majority of the studies reported that participation in SHGs lead to increases in the different dimensions of empowerment. Furthermore, we also found that (i) SHG’s contribution of resources and members’ increased agency enables women to make effective choices, (ii) the multi-functionality of SHGs prevent disempowering processes for women, (iii) activities that are resisting gender norms are empowering for women, and lastly, (iv) providing a combination of financial and nonfinancial services is more effective than only providing financial services in empowering women.
Through analysis and discussion, we have come up with several suggestions for future research. We suggest conducting qualitative research with a longitudinal study design to deepen the understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship of women’s empowerment, and to investigate the long-term effects of SHGs. Furthermore, we suggest that future research explores the possible disempowering effect of SHGs, such as repayment stress and peer pressure.

The limitation of our findings is that due to the context-specificity of empowerment and the fact that most studies were conducted in India, there may be implications on the generalizability of our results. Furthermore, due to incomplete information on which financial and nonfinancial services are offered to which SHG, we were unable to investigate which combinations of services had the greatest impact on women’s empowerment.

In conclusion, we have found that self-help groups have a positive impact on women’s empowerment. This, in combination with SHGs contribution to poverty alleviation and extensive outreach to the poorest and most remote people, is why self-help groups is a suitable initiative for rural development.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents ................................................................................................................... 4

1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1
   1.1 Aim of Study .................................................................................................................. 4
   1.2 The rationale for a new systematic review ................................................................. 4

2. Background .......................................................................................................................... 7
   2.1 Microfinance ................................................................................................................. 7
      2.1.1 Development of microfinance ............................................................................. 7
      2.1.2 Financial services ................................................................................................. 8
      2.1.4 Self-Help Groups ................................................................................................. 14
   2.2 Women’s Empowerment ............................................................................................. 17
      2.2.1 Defining empowerment ....................................................................................... 18
      2.2.2 Measurements of empowerment .......................................................................... 20

3. Methodology ....................................................................................................................... 23
   3.1 Criteria for Inclusion .................................................................................................... 23
   3.2 Search Strategy ............................................................................................................. 25
      3.2.1 Keywords ............................................................................................................. 25
   3.3 Literature Screening Process ....................................................................................... 26
   3.4 Quality Assessment ..................................................................................................... 28
   3.5 Data Extraction ............................................................................................................. 29
   3.6 Synthesis ...................................................................................................................... 29

4. Results .................................................................................................................................. 31
   4.1 Search Results ............................................................................................................. 31
   4.2 Descriptive analysis ..................................................................................................... 32
      4.2.1 Dimensions of women’s empowerment ............................................................... 32
      4.2.2 Country of data ..................................................................................................... 34
      4.2.3 Study Design ........................................................................................................ 35
   4.3 Main findings ............................................................................................................... 37
   4.4 Thematic framework .................................................................................................... 39
   4.5 Thematic synthesis ....................................................................................................... 39
      4.5.1 Financial services ................................................................................................. 39
      4.5.2 Nonfinancial services ......................................................................................... 44
      4.5.3 Group participation .............................................................................................. 46
      4.5.4 Group actions ....................................................................................................... 48
4.5.5 Summary of findings ................................................................. 50

5. Discussion .................................................................................. 51
  5.1 Resource - Agency - Outcome ................................................ 51
  5.2 Outcome vs. Processes .............................................................. 54
  5.3 Resisting gender norms ............................................................ 54
  5.4 Integrative vs. minimalist approach .......................................... 55
  5.5 What’s not mentioned.............................................................. 57

6. Conclusion .................................................................................. 60

7. List of References ....................................................................... 63

8. Appendices .................................................................................. 72
List of Tables

Table 1: Positive and negative empowerment outcomes as a result of microfinance interventions 3
Table 2: This review compared to other SLRs within the microfinance field 6
Table 3: Dimensions of women’s empowerment 33
Table 4: Study designs of included studies 36
Table 5: Main findings of included studies 37

List of Figures

Figure 1: Simple causal chain from microfinance to poverty alleviation 8
Figure 2: Financial services that poor people need access to 9
Figure 3: How savings can improve the lives of the poor 10
Figure 4: The spectrum of financial service providers 12
Figure 5: Interrelated dimensions of empowerment 19
Figure 6: Literature screening process 27
Figure 7: Search results 31
Figure 8: Location of conducted studies in India 35
Figure 9: Simple causal chain from SHG to women’s empowerment 39
Figure 10: SHGs affecting women’s empowerment through resource, agency, and outcome 53

List of Appendices

Appendix A: Coding framework for inclusion and exclusion criteria 72
Appendix B: Quality assessment 74
  Appendix B.1: Coding framework for quality assessment 74
  Appendix B.2: Reasons for exclusion 75
Appendix C: Data collection 77
  Appendix C.1: Coding framework for data collection 77
  Appendix C.2: Spreadsheet of data collection 79
Appendix D: List of women empowering activities derived from Swain and Wallentin’s (2009) focus groups 82
1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of microfinance developed from the failures of the formal financial systems. Poor people have continuously been denied access to financial services, and in an attempt to reach these people, microfinance emerged as a possible solution (Brau & Woller, 2004). Microfinance is best described as formal and informal arrangements offering financial services to the poor. Initially, these services comprised mainly of microcredit, but the field has grown to include other interventions such as (i) microsavings, (ii) micro-insurance, (iii) money transfers, and (iv) micro-leasing (Stewart et al., 2010). It is estimated that there are between 133 and 190 million clients taking part in microfinance worldwide (Vaessen et al., 2014).

Microfinance is not only used for investments in economic activity, but also to finance health controls, education, household consumption, as well as reducing vulnerability to crises. Having access to financial services has the potential to enable poor people to improve health and nutrition, increase assets and household income, and plan for their future (Armendáriz & Morduch, 2010). Furthermore, microfinance programs aim to increase the decision-making power of the clients, as an increase strengthens the clients control over resources and assets, and enhances their ability to manage and prioritize spendings (Littlefield et al., 2003).

A majority of microfinance clients are women, as most microfinance institutions (MFIs) practice gender targeting; that is, they consciously target women exclusively, or tend to have a majority of female clients. The MFIs do this because women use the services better than men; where men tend to consume loans, women invest in productive activities (Brau & Woller, 2004). Studying this phenomenon, Khandker (1998) concluded that when women versus men borrowed, it had a greater positive impact on the entire family, ensuring health control, education, and investments. Furthermore, research shows that microfinance targeted at women has the potential to empower women (e.g. Amin et al., 1998; Goetz & Gupta, 1996; Schuler & Hashemi, 1994). Women’s empowerment, both financial and social, is important in promoting women, and decreasing the existing gender inequalities and discriminations (Swain & Wallentin, 2009).

The studied effects of microfinance, such as poverty alleviation, women’s empowerment, increased education, and decreased starvation (e.g. Amin et al., 1998; Bolnick & Nelson, 1990; Goetz & Gupta, 1996; McKernan, 1996; Pitt & Khandker, 1998; Schuler & Hashemi, 1994; Wydick, 2002), are all related to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), set up by the United Nations, and adopted by all member states. There are eight goals: (i) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, (ii) achieve universal primary education, (iii) promote
gender equality and empower women, (iv) reduce child mortality, (v) improve maternal health, (vi) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, (vii) ensure environmental sustainability, and (viii) develop a global partnership for development (UN DESA, 2014). The aim of the eight MDGs is to, “uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity, and free the world from extreme poverty” (UN DESA, 2014: 3). Growing evidence shows that microfinance “is a critical factor with strong impact on the achievement of the MDGs” (Littlefield et al. 2003: 1). Why microfinance plays a critical role is due to the focus on financial services to the poor, and gender equality; by investing in women and thereby promoting the female population, MFI s challenge the existing norms (Littlefield et al. 2003).

The UK Department for International Development (DFID), working to support the MDGs, state that, “progress on gender equality is a critical factor in achieving all the Goals” (DFID, 2007:1). Furthermore, they explain the importance of microfinance in relation to gender equality:

“Tackling gender inequality in access to services and resources is proven to increase women’s productivity, and reduce poverty and hunger. Economically empowered women play a more active role in household decision-making, with greater bargaining power to increase spending on education and health. Educated girls and women have better opportunities for entrepreneurship and to earn higher wages, lifting themselves and their families, out of poverty. They also tend to be better informed about the risk of HIV, meaning they are more likely – and better able – to negotiate safer sex. The ability of women to make free and informed choices regarding their sexual and reproductive lives underpins their ability to control all other areas of their lives” (DFID, 2007:2).

In light of the potential power that microfinance has, there has been a growing enthusiasm for promoting microfinance as a rural development initiative (Murria & Verma, 2013). However, if microfinance is to been seen as a development initiative, it must be able to reach all members of the rural community, including the poorest and most remote people (Reddy & Manak, 2005). As a solution to this issue, a new delivery mechanism of microfinance was designed: self-help groups (SHG). Murria and Verma (2013) define self-help groups as “a small informal association of poor having similar socio-economic background, who come together to realize group goals on the principles of collective liability and peer pressure” (p.305). The main function of a SHG is members collectively lending to other members. Poor people, however, do not have sufficient funds to lend to others, which is why microfinance is incorporated.
Since its formation in the early 1990s, the microfinance SHGs have received much attention (Murria & Verma, 2013). There is an increasing amount of studies that examine the impact of microfinance SHGs on women’s empowerment. However, the effects concluded in these studies vary, showing both positive and negative effects (see table 1). The variations in effects cause implications in understanding the relationship between SHGs and women’s empowerment. Without full understanding of its effects, SHGs should not be promoted as a rural development initiative. In light of this issue, this study will investigate the relationship between microfinance SHGs and women’s empowerment.

Table 1: Positive and negative empowerment outcomes as a result of microfinance interventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• ↑ access to financial resources</td>
<td>• women do not control the financial resources (access ≠ control) but the repayment obligation remains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ↑ control over financial resources</td>
<td>• ↓ consumption women and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ↑ control over other resources</td>
<td>• no increased access and control over other resources (tangible and intangible)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• changes in the household allocation of resources</td>
<td>• increase of double/ triple working day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ↑ access/ control to savings’ opportunities</td>
<td>• increase of domestic violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ↑ access to emergency fund</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ↑ participation in household decisions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ↑ female (self)-employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ↑ job mobility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• changes in local gender relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E.g. Amin et al. (1998); Hashemi & Schuler (1994); Kabeer (2001); Kaboshi & Townsend (2005); Zaman (2000); Holvoet (2006) E.g. Brett (2006); Goetz & Gupta (1996); Mayoux (1999); Lessinger (1990); Rahman (1998); Yaqub (1995);

Source: Vaessen et al. (2014:18), ed. by authors
1.1 AIM OF STUDY
The aim of this study is to provide a systematic literature review of the evidence on the effects of microfinance self-help groups on women’s empowerment. The objective is to identify common themes within the literature, as well as possible shortcomings. Through qualitative synthesis, this study will explore the mechanisms that influence the process of empowerment. This review aims to answer the following research questions:

- What is the impact of microfinance through self-help groups on women’s empowerment?
- How does the provision of microfinance through self-help groups lead to women’s empowerment?
- How is women’s empowerment defined and measured in the microfinance literature?

Layout of study
To complete this section, the rationale for a new systematic review will be discussed below. Beyond this, the layout of this study will be as followed. Firstly, section 2 will explain the background and characteristics of microfinance and self-help groups, as well as present the leading theories and definitions of women’s empowerment. Secondly, section 3 will outline the research methodology of this systematic literature review, describing the search process, inclusion/ exclusion criteria, quality criteria, and method of synthesis. The results in section 4 will present a description of the included studies and identified themes, followed by a thematic synthesis. Lastly, section 5 will provide a discussion of results and section 6 a conclusion.

1.2 THE RATIONALE FOR A NEW SYSTEMATIC REVIEW
There have been four previous systematic literature reviews (SLR) that explore the impact of microfinance. The first review investigates the impact of microcredit and microsavings on poor people in sub-Saharan Africa (Stewart et al., 2010), while the second review discusses the impact of microcredit worldwide (Duvendack et al., 2011). In 2012, a third review was completed, describing the impact of microcredit, microsavings, and micro-leasing worldwide (Stewart et al., 2012), and the most recently, Vaessen et al. (2014), discusses the impact of microcredit on a specific dimension of female empowerment: women’s control over household spending.
Stewart et al. (2010) conclude that microcredit can both have positive and negative effects; some people are made poorer, while others are made richer—mainly depending on if the microcredit client invests or spends its money. Furthermore, the study shows that microfinance can help the poor in dealing with shocks, such as natural disaster or death. Stewart et al. (2010) suggests that using the model of microsavings instead of microcredit may be more efficient in poverty alleviation. In regards to women’s empowerment, Stewart et al. (2010) explains that there is some evidence (although the evidence is inconsistent across studies) that microcredit is empowering women, while none of the studies discuss the effect of microsavings on empowerment.

The systematic review by Duvendack et al. (2011) examines the impact of microcredit on the well-being of poor people worldwide, and focuses on the methodology of microfinance impact evaluations, assessing its validity. The review classifies and scores the research designs and method of analysis used in the impact studies based on the methods’ internal validity, cross-classifying them to create a single value. The given value then explains if the combination of research design and analysis method used is of low, middle, or high internal validity. The studies with high internal validity did not address the issue of women’s empowerment, and therefore they concluded that there is no evidence of microcredit raising women’s status.

The third SLR, by Stewart et al. (2012), expands the field by looking at the impact of not only microcredit, but also microsavings and micro-leasing on poor people worldwide. The review included studies that were judged ‘good enough’ through a quality assessment, and it focuses on “engagement in economic opportunities and the outcomes of this engagement for clients” (p.1). They conclude that there is no evidence on the impact of micro-leasing due to the lacking research in this area, and the impacts of microcredit and microsavings were mixed. There was some evidence that microcredit affects the engagement in economic opportunities, while microsavings have no such effect. Furthermore, the review states that there is limited high quality evidence on women’s empowerment, and therefore no conclusions on this topic could be made.

The most recent SLR by Vaessen et al. (2014) focuses on microcredit and its impact on women’s empowerment, entailing a narrower scope than previous SLR. Vaessen et al. (2014) chose to use women’s control over household spending as a measure of empowerment, as this control can influence changes in “the social status of the woman within the household and the community and ultimately gender relations” (p. 15). Additionally, they found that this aspect of female empowerment frequently recurs in microfinance impact evaluations. Vaessen et al.’s (2014) conclusions are in line with the previous systematic reviews in that although there is much evidence of microcredit impact on empowerment, many studies lack sound methodologies. The high-quality studies
that were included showed little or no evidence on the effect of microcredit on female empowerment.

The four systematic reviews are similar in that they all look at impacts of different microfinance interventions: microcredit, microsavings, and micro-leasing. The reviews do not, however, study the impact of delivery mechanisms. This review will differ from the previous reviews in that it is looking at microfinance, not from the perspective of different interventions, but from the perspective of microfinance delivery through self-help groups. Furthermore, this review will study the impacts on women’s empowerment, and not poor people in general, which differs it from Stewart et al. (2010), Duvendack et al. (2011), and Stewart et al. (2012). This is depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: This review compared to other SLRs within the microfinance field

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective: intervention type</th>
<th>Impact on poor people</th>
<th>Impact on women’s empowerment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stewart et al. (2012)</td>
<td></td>
<td>THIS REVIEW</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own
2. BACKGROUND

This section will provide a description of the development and characteristics of microfinance and self-help groups. Following, it will present the theories, definitions, and measurements of women’s empowerment present in the microfinance research field.

2.1 MICROFINANCE

2.1.1 DEVELOPMENT OF MICROFINANCE

The field of microfinance that we know of today stem from the economic experiments conducted by Muhammad Yunus in 1970’s Bangladesh. Yunus, an economics professor at the Chittagong University, hypothesized that lending small amounts of money to poor people, despite their lack of collateral, would enable them to run small-scale income generating activities, repay loans, and pull themselves out of poverty (Armendáriz & Morduch, 2010). His hypothesis was correct, and after proving that poor people can be trusted to repay loans, and that it is possible to provide financial services to them, Yunus started the Grameen Bank in 1983; a bank for the poor (grameen-info.org, 2015). The concept was successful, and together with the Grameen Bank, Yunus received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 “for their efforts through microcredit to create economic and social development from below” (nobelpeaceprize.org, 2015).

The ideas behind banking for the poor are not new. For several centuries, there have existed different formations of groups and individuals providing and collecting loans: pawn shops that spread through urban Europe in the 15th century, the Irish Loan Fund System in the 1700s, and financial cooperatives in Germany in the 1800s. It wasn’t until the 1970s however that the microcredit phenomenon really took off; initially by Yunus in Bangladesh, and then by ACCION International in Latin America and Self-Employed Women’s Association Bank in India. Microcredit expanded greatly during the 1980s and 1990s due to improvements of methods and increasing research; it was found that microcredit clients repaid loans more reliably than clients of commercial banks, and they were willing to pay large interest rates for small loans. Microcredit was adopted as a strategy to fight poverty, and the practice grew exponentially in third world countries. Figure 1 shows a simple causal chain from microfinance to poverty alleviation. As the financial services offered to poor people developed from only credit to also include savings, insurance, and money transfers during the early 1990s, the term ‘microfinance’ became more common to use to include all these provisions, instead of using the term ‘microcredit’ (Helms, 2006).
Brau and Woller (2004) explain the development of microfinance: “what began as a grass-roots ‘movement’ motivated largely by a development paradigm is evolving into a global industry informed increasingly by a commercial/finance paradigm” (p.2). They go on to explain that the development of microfinance into a global industry is fueled by the possibility of “doing well by doing good” (Ibid., p.2); that is, microfinance can decrease poverty while remaining economically sustainable.

2.1.2 Financial services
The financial services provided within the microfinance field have developed from only microcredit to include savings, insurance, transactions, and pension plans; products and services similar to that of the formal financial sector (Brau & Woller, 2004). This development came from the realization that poor people need access to services other than just credit (see figure 2); providing a full range of financial services has shown greater benefit for the poor (Amendàriz & Morduch, 2010). This section will present the four main functions of microfinance: microcredit, microsavings, micro-insurance, and money transfers.
Microcredit

Microcredit is the extension of small loans to individuals, groups, or enterprises. Initially, microcredit was only given to be used as investments in economic activity, such as setting up small shops or purchasing inventory; also known as microenterprise loans. Today, microcredit is extended to aid in a number of situations: for consumption needs, for emergencies, and for investments (Nourse, 2001). While the amount offered differs, it is commonly accepted that the loan size be small and repayments start soon after receiving loan (Brau & Woller, 2004). Helms (2006) explains that the success of microcredit lies within the promise of continued loans encouraging high repayment rates, substitutes to physical collateral, and loan repayment in small and frequent installments.

Microsaving

Microsavings offers the poor a safe place to keep savings. Keeping savings as cash at home, with relatives or neighbors, or as investments in physical assets can be risky, and microfinance institutions can offer a reliable alternative to this (Christen & Mas 2009). Grosh and Somolekue (1996) summarize the need for microsavings:
“Savings are integral to poor households’ risk management strategies; they constitute the first line of defense to help poor households cope with the external shocks, emergencies, and life-cycle events to which they are so vulnerable; and they play a crucial role in allowing the poor to take advantage of productive investment opportunities” (Grosh & Somolekae, 1996; in Brau & Woller 2004:7)

In line with this quote, Christen and Mas (2009) illustrate three ways in which savings can be used to improve the well-being of the poor. Figure 3 shows income over time for people with savings (broken line) and without savings (unbroken line) in three situations. Firstly, saved money can be used to make investments in economic activities, such as purchasing inventory, and thereby increasing productivity (a). Secondly, the income earned by poor people is rarely stable due to insecure employment. This means that their spending on for example food, education, and health varies over time. With saved money, they could smooth over the unstable income ensuring continuous investments in health and education (b). Lastly, if a shock were to occur, such as death in the family, natural disaster, or crop failure, poor people with savings are less vulnerable as they have money to handle the situation (c).

Figure 3: How savings can improve the lives of the poor

Within microfinance, there are typically two types of savings: forced and voluntary. It is common that microfinance clients must make saving deposits in order to receive loans or be a member of lending groups – this is what is known as forced savings. The clients must make small deposits at a required minimum amount to their savings account at short time intervals, monitored by the lenders. Additionally, the lenders set restrictions on the withdrawal and use of saved money. The main reasons for enforcing savings on clients is to guarantee
some sort of financial collateral while at the same time teaching the clients how
to control loans, savings, and repayments. The second method of savings,
voluntary, enables the client to make deposits to a savings account at their own
will, at a self-chosen amount, and in their own time (Brau & Woller, 2004).

Micro-insurance

Micro-insurance complements microsavings in decreasing the poor’s
vulnerability by adding another option for handling crises (Brau & Woller, 2004).
The term ‘micro-insurance’ was first used by Dror and Jacquier in 1999 who
explain it as: “‘micro’ refers to the level of society...and ‘insurance’ refers to the
economic instrument” (Dror & Jacquier 1999:77; ed. by author). A more
commonly used definition is: “micro-insurance is the protection of low-income
people against specific perils in exchange for regular premium payments
proportionate to the likelihood and cost of the risk involved” (Churchill & Matul,
2006:12). In this statement the definition is similar to that of general insurance,
but there are a few distinct differences in that micro-insurance offers: low
premiums, directed at low-income clients, simple products and processes, and
flexible arrangements in terms of payments (Churchill & Matul, 2006).

Researchers argue that the need for insurance is just as large as the need for
access to loans and savings (Churchill, 2002). However, micro-insurance is facing
two main issues at the moment. Firstly, micro-insurance is a relatively new
phenomenon and therefore in its early stages of development. Secondly, the
institutions that offer loan and saving services may not have the competence to
implement and run an insurance program, further crippling the progress (Brau &
Woller, 2004).

Money transfer

Money transfer is another financial service that is increasingly being offered by
the same institutions offering loan and savings services. Adding this service to
their current portfolio, the institutions can attract more clients while meeting the
social objective of offering multiple financial services to the poor (Isern et al.,
2005). The demand for low-cost money transfers is high among poor people,
especially with the increasing amount of remittances being sent from abroad
(CGAP, 2008). In 2013, it was estimated that migrants sent over US$450 billion
to developing countries in the form of remittance to their families, as savings,
and as investments. Comparing to the official development assistance that was
distributed in developing countries 2013, the remittance amount was nearly
three times larger (IFAD, 2013).
2.1.3 Financial Service Providers

A microfinance institution (MFI) is any organization or bank that provides financial services to the poor. The financial service providers that are grouped under the term MFI are considered formal or semi-formal (Brau & Woller, 2004). The most common way, however, for poor people to gain access to loans is through informal channels. This section will describe the different types of financial service providers that exist for poor people (see figure 4), starting with the informal.

*Figure 4: The spectrum of financial service providers*

![Diagram showing the spectrum of financial service providers]

*Note: ROSCAs = rotating savings and credit associations; ASCAs = accumulating savings and credit associations; SHGs = self-help groups; NGOs = nongovernmental organizations; NBFIs = nonbank financial institution.*

*Source: Helms (2006:36); ed. by authors*

**Informal financial service providers**

The informal financial service providers are the main source of credit and other financial services. Most commonly, poor people borrow money from friends, family, and neighbors. This is an easy alternative as there is a personal connection between the lender and the borrower which can increase the trust and assurance of repayment, and there is often no interest charge (Armendáriz & Morduch, 2010). Where borrowing from friends and family is not possible, poor people sometimes turn to moneylenders and pawnbrokers. These alternatives, however, have their disadvantages; moneylenders charge high interest rates and pawnbrokers require physical collateral in exchange for loans. Pawnbrokers are in some countries considered a formal and regulated financial provider (Helms, 2006).
A more structured, but yet informal, method of gaining access to loans and savings is through clubs or associations such as Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) and Accumulating Savings and Credit Associations (ASCAs). In ROSCAs, the members make small periodic contributions to the group which is then distributed to one of the members each time, most often in a rotating fashion. ASCAs, on the other hand, do not necessarily distribute the collected contributions each time. The savings within the ASCAs grow, and are only liquidated when a member is in need of a loan. The construction of ROSCAs and ASCAs are easy to understand, and are very efficient. Additionally, in contrast to ASCAs, ROSCAs never store any savings, which decreases the risk of theft. The disadvantage of informal financial providers is the risk of losing all money due to fraud, corruption, external shocks, or a member defaulting on their loans (Helms, 2006).

**Member-based Organizations**

Member-based organizations range from informal to formal. The informal, such as SHGs, most commonly receive financing from NGOs and banks, while the formal, including financial cooperatives such as credit unions, have in many countries grown to become large financial institutions themselves. Common for both the formal and informal member-based organizations is that their main resources come from the members own savings, and they have the ability to reach the remote communities (Helms 2006).

The financial cooperatives are owned and controlled by the members themselves. They are non-profit organizations, and all surpluses goes back to the members in the form of dividends, increased savings interest, decreased loan rates, or improved services. The informal organizations, on the other hand, only practice control to some extent. While it is their own responsibility to monitor each other, it is a MFI that controls the loans and services provided (Helms, 2006). The characteristics of SHGs and the group lending method is described in Section 2.1.4.

**Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)**

In the wide spectrum of financial service providers, non-governmental organizations have had the biggest influence on the development of microfinance. Since the mid-1980s, NGOs have increasingly worked to fill the gap between informal and formal financial providers. The most recognized NGOs that work within the microfinance field include BRAC, Association for Social
Advancement (ASA), and PROSHIKA in Bangladesh. The main tasks of these NGOs are to increase the outreach of microfinance, start up and support member-based financial providers, and connect the poor and vulnerable with financial services (Helms, 2006).

There are two dominant trends for NGOs: commercialization and outreach. Many NGOs aim to be free of donors and aid; trying to make their programs sustainable. In this, some NGOs have had to provide microfinance to clients that are not so poor and easily reached in order to get bigger returns (Helms, 2006). This is referred to as mission drift. Mission drift within microfinance entails moving away from the organizations’ original aim of serving the poorest, and instead focusing on those clients who generate bigger income for the organization (Barnett, 2011). The other trend, outreach, contrasts to the missions drift; NGOs are pushing to reach the poorest of the poor, to reach clients in remote areas. This is often done through collaboration with other MFIs and member-based organizations such as SHGs (Helms, 2006).

**Formal Financial Providers**

After seeing the Grameen Bank succeed in the 80s and 90s, there has been increasing amount of formal providers entering the field (Brau & Woller, 2004). The potential for these providers is enormous, as they have the capital and connections necessary for making finance more inclusive. While they can offer a wide range of services, they can also use their technology and partnerships with NGOs and member-based organizations to further increase their outreach (Helms, 2006).

The formal financial providers are divided into two main groups: the government-owned banks, and the private commercial banks which include rural banks, nonbank financial institutions (NBFIs), specialized microfinance banks, and full-service banks. Government-owned banks entered the field of microfinance before the private commercial banks, as it lies in their nature to be inclusive in providing financial services. Following, private commercial banks have started targeting the poor as they see the potential in the untapped market (Helms, 2006).

### 2.1.4 Self-Help Groups

Self-help groups are defined as “voluntary formation of small, homogeneous affinity group of people, formed with the objective of attaining certain collective goals, both social and economic in order to address some common need or respond to some common problem” (Murria & Verma, 2013:304). They belong to
the member-based organizations that use group lending as method of gaining access to loans (Helms, 2006). Armendáriz and Morduch (2010) define group lending as “arrangements by individuals without collateral who get together and form groups with the aim of obtaining loans from a lender” (pp.85-86). In SHGs, the ‘lenders’ refer to MFIs such as NGOs and banks, that have been linked to the group; the method that SHGs gain access to loans is therefore often referred to as the ‘SHG-bank linkage program’ (Bansal, 2003).

SHGs emerged in India in the early 1990s, initiated by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) (Helms, 2006). NARBARD’s mission is to “promote sustainable and equitable agriculture and rural prosperity through effective credit support, related services, institution development and other innovative initiatives” (Nabard.org, 2015). Its success in reaching the poorest and most remote people with microfinance services has led to a spread of the linkage program throughout developing countries worldwide, but it is still most prominent in India (Murria & Verma, 2013).

SHGs and other microfinance schemes target primarily poor women. Not only do women use the microfinance loans more productively than men (Khandker, 1998), but women controlling loans and engaging in groups can be a tool used to empower women (Amin, 1998; Malhotra et al., 2002; Pitt et al., 2003; Kabeer, 2001; Goetz & Gupta, 1996; Hashemi et al., 1996). Section 2.2 describes what empowerment is, how it is measured, and the presence of it in microfinance literature.

**SHG characteristics**

Poor people have no or very little collateral, which is why they have been excluded from the formal financial sector historically; the risks of lending to the poor are too high. But instead of using financial or materialistic collateral, SHGs takes advantage of the social collateral in the form of joint liability. Joint liability entails that each individual within the group, usually made up of 5 to 20 members, is responsible for the other members’ loans. That is, if one member is unsuccessful in the repayment of his or her individual loan, the other members must use own funds to cover that payment. Furthermore, if the group as a whole is unable to repay a loan, no future loans will be given to that group (Helms, 2006). Using social collateral puts peer pressure on the members to repay loans, as they believe that their reputation within the community would be affected if they were to default on a loan (Woolcock, 2001).

Further reason for using the SHG method is the reduced administrative costs. When the group members are jointly liable for the loans, it encourages detailed monitoring of loan use and implementation of loan contracts by the members
themselves, and thereby reducing the lender’s cost of doing this (Wenner, 1995). Armendáriz and Morduch (2010) explain that “the group responsibility clause of contracts can mitigate the moral hazard, adverse selection, and enforcement problems that cripples previous attempts at lending to the poor by outside financial institutions” (p.86). The lenders are also able reduce transaction costs as it is common practice for a loan officer to meet with many groups simultaneously to handle the transactions of lending money and collecting repayments. Any problems will also be handled by the loan officer directly on spot, furthering the peer pressure of repayments (Armendáriz & Morduch, 2010).

Repayments in small and frequent installments ensure that the microcredit clients are able to meet the demand for repayments. The idea is that the amount to repay should be low enough that the borrowers can easily make the payment with her income. A stable income to guarantee repayments is, however, uncommon among poor people. Additionally, frequent repayments mean frequent meetings with the group and loan officer, taking up time that could be used more productively (Helms, 2006).

Group Selection

A unique characteristic of the SHG method is group selection; it is made by the members themselves. A group of people who want to receive loans form a group first, and then apply together for loans. The reason for this method is because of the lenders’ need for information. A lender needs to know if its clients are risky or safe to lend to, especially since there is no physical collateral available. The lender also needs to monitor the members to ensure repayment. By letting the clients create their own groups, the lender can take advantage of the knowledge that each individual within the group has. A person will only form a group with other people that are trustworthy and responsible; people that she knows will repay loans. In this way, the lender does not actually need any information on the clients as the lender can assume that all members of a group are safe borrowers. Furthermore, the lender will no longer need to monitor the group, as the members themselves will monitor each other. The method is proven to work; but issues could arise if the group lives in populated urban areas where members have limited information on each other, and where it is more difficult to track one another (Armendáriz & Morduch, 2010).

Nonfinancial services

SHGs often combine financial and nonfinancial services in order to reach their common goals. The nonfinancial services are provided for by either the same
MFIs that provide the financial services, or are taken over by governments and NGOs (Morduch & Rutherford, 2003). The nonfinancial services include both household related matters, such as health education and family planning, and business related matters such as literacy training, skills development, and basic business and economic education including marketing and savings. Providing these services is both in the best interest of the clients and the lender, as the better off the clients are, the higher repayment rates the lender will see (Swain & Wallentin, 2012). Researchers have found that when the MFIs choose the integrative approach, that is, financial services integrated with nonfinancial services, the members experience improvements in many areas, for example, microfinance in combination with health education leads to improved family health (Smith, 2002), and business training improves microenterprise performance (Edgcomb, 2002; Cook et al., 2001; Dumas, 2001).

The delivery method of these nonfinancial services vary, some MFIs choose to arrange workshops while others simply use the group meetings to provide advice on health, education, and family planning (Armendáriz & Murdoch, 2010). Morduch and Rutherford (2003) report on different methods used by BRAC, ASA, and the Grameen Bank. BRAC set up BRAC schools and BRAC clinics for its members, as well as BRAC retail outlet where members can sell their products. Grameen Bank is also involved in schools, while ASA uses the group meeting to give a half hour lessons or have discussions on social and business matters. Many of these activities have, however, been taken over by governments and NGOs, so that the MFIs can remain focused on the provision of financial services (Morduch & Rutherford, 2003).

2.2 Women’s Empowerment

Women’s empowerment is acknowledged as a key variable of development in less developed countries. Increasing women’s empowerment does not only benefit the women themselves, but it is also believed to improve the overall life standard for their families, and strengthen their communities (Malhotra et al., 2002).

In addition, female empowerment is important in order to make use of humankind’s full potential; 70 percent of the world’s poor are women (Khan & Noreen, 2012). As Kofi Annan, former UN secretary-general explains: “It is impossible to realize our goals while discriminating against half the human race. There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women” (Kofi Annan, 2006). This declaration is in line with DFID (2007), stating that UN’s Millennium Development Goal three, to promote gender equality and empower women, is not only a development goal in itself, but also a key in succeeding the other goals (DFID, 2007).
Although it is widely agreed that women’s empowerment is important for alleviating poverty and increasing economic growth, it does not have any clear definition. Furthermore, there are many dimensions of women’s empowerment and many ways of measuring it (Malhotra & Mather, 1997). In order to identify empowerment within the microfinance context, the remainder of this section will first discuss empowerment definitions and conceptual issues, secondly, explore different dimensions used in previous studies, and lastly, discuss different measurements and their challenges.

2.2.1. Defining Empowerment

There are a few overlapping concepts that are most often included in defining empowerment: options, choice, control and power. These concepts refer to women’s decision-making abilities, and the ability to affect desired outcomes for themselves and their families (Malhotra et al., 2002). Empowerment has also been related to terms like autonomy, self-determination, agency, control over own life and resources, and mobilization (Narayan, 2005). In line with these concepts, empowerment is frequently referred to as the ability to affect one’s own well-being, and to make strategic life choices (Malhotra et al., 2002). This can be seen in Petesch et al. (2005), who defines empowerment as “increasing both the capacity of individuals or groups to make purposeful choices and their capacity to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes” (p.40).

Batliwala (1994) defines empowerment as the process of how the powerless gain control over the circumstances of their lives, by challenging the ideologies, and getting access to and having control over resources. The definition by G. Sen (1993) states empowerment as “altering relations of power, which constrain women’s options and autonomy and adversely affect health and well-being”. Narayan (2002) describes it as “the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives” (p.5). Essentially, the different definitions of empowerment can be summarized as women having the ability to control their own life and make own decision.

Kabeer (1999) describes empowerment as “the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (p.437). In saying this, Kabeer (1999) suggests that empowerment involves a process of change where the people who have been denied the ability to make choices, acquire the ability to do so. In that sense, a person must first experience disempowerment (inability to make choice) in order to experience empowerment (ability to make choice). This further entails that a woman who exercises the ability of choice may be powerful, but she may not necessarily be
empowered. Kabeer’s (1999) definition is useful as it can be applied to different contexts and dimensions of empowerment.

The empowerment definition by Kabeer (1999) is widely adopted in microfinance studies, as it contains elements which differentiate empowerment from the general concepts of power. She further explains that the ability to exercise choice features three interrelated dimensions of empowerment: resources, agency and achievements (illustrated in figure 5).

![Diagram of interrelated dimensions of empowerment](source: Vaessen et al. (2014); ed. by authors)

The first dimension, resources, are the pre-conditions that enable choices to be made. Kabeer (1999) identifies, for example, microfinance as an external factor; a resource that has been made available to women that can influence her decision-making power within the household, her mobility, and her autonomy among other things. The second dimension, agency, is defined as “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them” (Kabeer, 1999:438) and it entails finding the meaning, motivation and purpose to make choices. In the microfinance literature, agency is commonly depicted as women’s decision-making power, but it can also take other forms such as bargaining, negotiation, deception and manipulation. Examples of agency can be if women take control over household spending, have bargaining power within households, or are able to use and control resources in a way that allows her to make strategic life choices.

The third and last dimension, outcomes (or achievements), can be classified into two categories; positive changes in the socio-cultural context of gender relations, and positive economic outcomes. Gender is a socio-cultural construct according to Vaessen et al. (2014), and it differs across countries and regions. Gender relations are shaped by religion, culture, and socio-economic factors, and this means that empowerment is also context specific. For example, existing gender norms for female mobility have an impact on women’s activities beyond households. Are women able to participate in activities, or interact with others outside household? In societies where women have little mobility, increased
female mobility will be an empowering activity (Vaessen et al., 2014). Economic outcomes can be referred to as increased spending on education for children, health, and nutrition, alongside improved household well-being.

Malhotra et al. (2002) argue that increasing agency is the essence of women’s empowerment. For example, there are many cases where women were given access to resources, but did not experience empowerment, as they had no decision-making power or control over resources; they had no agency. Malhotra et al. (2002) further argues that resources are critical for ensuring empowerment, but not sufficient enough: “without women’s individual or collective ability to recognize and utilize resources in their own interests, resources cannot bring about empowerment” (p.10). This clearly identifies agency as the necessary ability needed to bring about empowerment, enabled by the pre-conditions of resources, and fulfilled through achievement of choice.

2.2.2 Measurements of Empowerment
In developing measurements of women’s empowerment, researchers are using different theories and concepts of empowerment. Many studies have looked at the impact of microfinance interventions on women’s empowerment; however, these studies conclude different findings. Hashemi et al. (1996) find that microfinance has a positive impact on women’s mobility, economic contribution to household, political and legal awareness, and participation in public protests and political campaigns. In addition to these findings, Pitt et al. (2006) report women having greater social networks, and higher bargaining power within households. Kabeer (2001) finds in her study that microfinance programs lead to increased participation in household decision-making, and similarly, Pitt and Khandker (1998) find that microcredit influences women’s decisions-making power on household expenditure, non-land assets, and children’s education. Furthermore, Schuler et al. (1996) suggests that microfinance programs can decrease women’s vulnerability to domestic violence.

Goetz & Gupta (1996), Rahman (1999) and Leach and Sitaram (2002) did not, however, find empowering outcomes of microfinance. They find that loans that were given to women are controlled by their husbands, resulting in more dependence on husbands for repaying loans, and this in turn possibly leading to domestic violence (Rahman, 1999; Leach & Sitaram, 2002). Goetz and Gupta (1996) further report that husbands controlling loans could postpone the positive social outcomes expected from increasing women’s bargaining power within the household.
The differences in findings are most likely due to three different factors: (i) different settings where the study has been conducted (different regions, countries, rural settings), (ii) different method of measuring empowerment, and (iii) having different lengths of study (Kabeer, 2001). Firstly, since empowerment is context-specific, meaning that gender relations, norms and beliefs differ across countries and cultures, what would be called empowering in one context might not be empowering in another. The context specificity of empowerment affects the generalizability of findings; being able to go to the local market without consent from husband might be seen as a sign of empowerment in rural Bangladesh, but not necessary in, e.g. urban China. Local norms of gender inequality can even be experienced as being natural in some cultures and traditions, where women automatically view themselves as the lesser worth, and the choices they make highlight their lesser status (Malhotra et al., 2002; Kabeer, 2001).

Secondly, there are many ways of measuring women’s empowerment. These can be related to the dimensions of empowerment, ranging from decision-making power within households to political participation in villages and economic activity. This is connected to the concept that empowerment is context specific, and the dimensions used to measure women’s empowerment might vary from study to study.

Lastly, another factor that can lead to differences in findings is that studies cover different time frames and lengths of follow-up. Some studies may collect data at one point in time (cross-sectional study) while other studies may include multiple data collection points (longitudinal study), and these points can vary between months or years. The benefit of a cross-sectional study design is that it allows researchers to compare many different variables at the same time, but it will not provide information about the cause-and-effect relationship. In other words, a cross-sectional study design only provides a snapshot of a single moment in time, and do not consider what happens before or after the snapshot. A longitudinal study is beneficial as researchers are able to observe the developments or changes that occurs through time. This is a strong design, but time-consuming (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). When researching about empowerment, longer time periods are necessary for changes to be observed (Vaessen et al., 2014). Some changes might not be observed until years later; for example, increasing mobility might be achieved relatively fast, while changing gender norms and values take long time (Amin et al., 1998).
Kabeer (2001) argues that studies that explore the impact of microfinance on women’s empowerment will view empowerment either as an outcome for women or as a process. Studying the processes of empowerment often yields negative findings, while studies focused on empowerment outcomes yield positive findings. In this context, outcomes are measurable factors that reflect the choices made by the women, such as their contribution to household economy, their decision-making power in household matters, mobility, and etc. The processes on the other hand, is about how the women use their loans and how they manage their businesses and loan repayments. If women have a significant impact on these processes, then it is likely that it will result in their empowerment (Kabeer, 2001).

Garikipati (2013) argues in her findings that viewing empowerment as outcomes alone is insufficient and can be misleading, as empowerment is context specific and depends on existing gender relations. She suggests that by studying the processes surrounding the use of loans and their repayments, it can provide an understanding of the actual impact of microfinance on women’s empowerment as these are the processes that lead to an actual increase or decrease in women’s agency. Garikipati (2013) further argues that studying the processes can lead to the understanding of the reasons underlying the observed empowerment outcomes. For example, if a woman has experienced an increase in her income, studying the processes of loan use leading to this outcome, instead of studying only the outcome, can show whether or not this was an empowering experience for her.

To collect data on empowerment outcomes is a relative simple procedure, as it is sufficient for the researchers to use data-collection techniques such as questionnaires and surveys. It is however hard to measure the processes, as they cannot be measured with only statistical analysis. The study of processes require a more time-consuming approach where ethnographic fieldwork and participatory methods are necessary to obtain data. Additionally, a pre-understanding of the specific processes is needed so that the full extent of their impact on women’s empowerment is appreciated and this has to be done before starting to measure the processes. Furthermore, analysis and interpretation of results is time-consuming and can contain interpretational bias. Consequently, studying processes are difficult, while studying outcomes for women is relative simple (Garikipati, 2013).
3. METHODOLOGY

The method of this study is based on the systematic literature review (SLR) methods of the Campbell Collaboration. The Campbell Collaboration is an international research network focused on producing systematic reviews of the effect of social interventions within the fields of crime & justice, education, international development, and social welfare (Campbellcollaboration.org, 2015).

A systematic literature review is defined as “a review of research literature using systematic and explicit, accountable methods” (Gough et al., 2012:2) and goes on to describe three main activities: identification, critical appraisal, and synthesizing of relevant research. SLRs were initially mainly used in health and medicine research, spearheaded by the Cochrane Collaboration, but with the insurance of high quality in methods and results, the methodology spread to other areas of research; one of them being international development (Stewart et al., 2012).

This section will present the methodology used in conducting this systematic literature review. Firstly, the criteria for including studies will be described, followed by the search strategy that was deployed. Next, it will report the literature screening process, the quality assessment criteria used, and the data extraction method. Lastly, the method of synthesis will be discussed.

3.1 CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION

The three first criteria are language, publication year, and peer-reviewed articles. Firstly, this review only includes studies that are in English, as this is the researchers’ study language, and also because the given timeframe for the research does not allow for time to translate studies. Secondly, the publication date of the study must be at the earliest 1995, as it was not until this time that peer-reviewed articles on microfinance started to appear (Brau & Woller, 2004). Finally, the criteria of peer-reviewed studies are to ensure a high level of quality. Furthermore, the included studies must have the following characteristics:

Type of study: This review includes studies that are both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative studies are included to find statistically proven effects of microfinance on female empowerment. The quantitative studies must include a treatment and comparison group to control for external factors. The qualitative studies are included to further understand the underlying factors that cause the changes in empowerment. Example of a quantitative study is surveys, while
qualitative studies include interviews and observations. All studies must contain the researchers’ original empirical analysis.

*Population:* The studied population must consist of women who are poor. Hagenaars and Vos (1988) explain that poverty can be defined as (i) having less than an objectively defined, absolute minimum, (ii) having less than others in society, or (iii) feeling you do not have enough to get along. In this sense, the definition can be in both absolute and/or relative terms. As some studies do not clarify the extent of poverty that the women are living in, this review will include studies that refer to its studied population as poor; that is, the studies do not have to explain the level of poverty in absolute form. Furthermore, there will be no geographical restrictions on the studies, however, it is assumed that a majority of the studies have been made in developing countries.

*Type of microfinance intervention:* There are no limitations on what type of intervention is used, but it is necessary that the included studies describe the type of microfinance intervention. The type of intervention could be for example: microcredit, microsavings, micro-insurance, money transfer, training, and/or workshops. The description of the intervention is necessary in order to understand if there are different outcomes of interventions within the group program model.

*Program model:* This review studies the impact of the microfinance group program model, therefore, the included studies must study a population that are taking part in a group program. The focus lies on the participation in SHGs, but other group lending programs are also included if they show similar characteristic to SHGs.

*Outcome measures:* We are looking at studies that measure the impact of microfinance SHGs on women’s empowerment. As discussed in Section 2.2, empowerment is difficult to measure. However, there are some dimensions of women’s empowerment that are reoccurring in microfinance research. These include: control over household spending, decision-making power, bargaining power, income, consumption, and mobility (Vaessen et al., 2014). The included studies can examine any dimension of empowerment, however, the chosen dimension must be argued for.
3.2 **Search Strategy**

Searches for relevant studies were conducted in online databases, microfinance web-portals, and in previous microfinance literature reviews. The search was concluded on 28th February 2015.

The following databases were searched:

- IBSS (ProQuest)
- EconLit (ProQuest)
- Web of Science
- ABI/INFORM (ProQuest)
- Business Source Complete (EBSCO)

The following web-portals were searched:

- CGAP: www.cgap.org
- Microfinance Gateway: www.microfinancegateway.org
- Microfinance Bulletin: www.themix.org

The following systematic literature reviews were searched:

- Stewart et al. (2010)
- Duvendack et al. (2011)
- Stewart et al. (2012)
- Vaessen et al. (2014)

This review is not as extensive in its search strategy as previous SLR within microfinance, and it is also less extensive than what is recommended by The Campbell Collaboration. This is due to the limited timeframe and resources. However, since the search strategy included searching previous SLR, we are confident that this review did not miss the most relevant and important studies conducted and reported within this field.

3.2.1 **Keywords**

Certain keywords, in combination with the language, peer-reviewed, and publication date limitations, were used to search through databases. The Boolean logic was used, which combines keywords using operators such as **AND** and **OR** to define and limit the search ([http://handbook.cochrane.org](http://handbook.cochrane.org), 2011). Where there are multiple spellings of endings to a word, an asterisk wildcard operator (*) was used.
The following keywords were used:

- Women*
- Female
- Empower*
- Microfinanc*
- “Group lending”
- “Rural credit”
- “Access to credit”
- Microcredit
- Microsaving*
- Microinsurance
- “Self help group” OR “self-help group” OR SHG
- Credit-plus
- Evidence
- Impact*
- Effect*
- Result*

The web-portals were searched using more simplistic keyword combinations, such as “women’s empowerment” and “microfinance impact”.

3.3 LITERATURE SCREENING PROCESS

All studies that were found were exported to RefWorks; a reference management software. In order to extract articles from RefWorks to be used in this review, three article elimination stages were used (depicted in Figure 6):

**First stage:** Entailed a title and abstract screening of all collected articles. At a minimum, the title and/or abstract had to include some aspect of microfinance (credit, savings, group lending, insurance, etc.), as well as mention ‘women’ or ‘female’. It was important to be over inclusive in this initial screening so that no potentially influential studies were eliminated. The first 100 articles were screened by the two researchers together to ensure identical inclusion/exclusion decisions, and the remaining articles were split between the two.

**Second stage:** Similar to the first stage, the second stage involved ensuring the relevance of included studies. This was done through a systematic screening of the full texts of articles and applying the selection criteria for inclusion and exclusion (see Section 3.1). Data based on the selection criteria was collected from each study (see coding framework in Appendix A). Again, to ensure identical inclusion/exclusion decisions, the first 10 articles were screened by the two researchers together, and the remaining were split between the two.
**Third stage:** The articles were screened once again to make a quality assessment (see Section 3.4).

**Fourth stage:** for those studies that were assessed relevant in the second stage and showed medium or high quality in the third stage, data was collected from each study using a coding framework (see section 3.5).

*Figure 6: Literature screening process*

1. Title & abstract screening
2. Full text screening & application of selection criteria
3. Quality assessment
4. Data collection using coding framework

*Source: own*
3.4 Quality Assessment

This review has adopted the quality assessment criteria used in the systematic review by Stewart et al. (2010). Stewart et al. (2010) base their assessment on the recommendations of Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre), a research unit committed to, among other things, developing methods for systematic reviews and research syntheses. The EPPI-Centre method involves evaluating three aspects of studies (EPPI-Centre, 2010):

- Methodological quality: trustworthiness of the results judged by the quality of the study
- Methodological relevance: appropriateness of the use of study design to address the review question
- Topic relevance: appropriateness of focus for answering the review question

Based on these three aspects, Stewart et al. (2010) formed six quality assessment criteria, all of which are adopted into this review:

**Completeness of Reporting:** The study must describe the microfinance intervention, study participants, data collection, analysis, and possible confounding factors.

**Flawed assumptions within the study design:** Assumptions within the study design must not be flawed; that is, the study must convince that it is really the impact of microfinance that is being measured, not any other external factors.

**Concerns about the intervention:** In order to account for acceptability and integrity of the intervention, three issues should be considered in the study:

- Is the same intervention provided to the participants consistently over time?
- Are any additional interventions introduced during the study period that may influence outcomes?
- Have there been drop-outs from treatment or comparison group, and have these drop-outs been explained?

**Appropriateness of analysis:** The study must use an analysis method that is appropriate to the data collected. Furthermore, the study must ensure that the analysis is trustworthy, reliable, and valid.

**Consideration of confounding factors:** The study must consider potential confounding factors during participant/control group selection and during analysis of collected data.
Reporting of findings: The study must clearly report findings from the data collected.

Every study was assessed and judged poor, medium, or high quality on each criteria. Combining these judgments, each study was given an overall assessment. Following Stewart et al. (2010), the studies rated high or medium were kept, while those rated poor were excluded from the review, as these are could potentially “unduly bias research syntheses” (p.20). The two researchers evaluated the first five studies together to ensure identical assessments, and the remaining were assessed by one researcher (R.L). Appendix B.1 shows the coding framework for quality assessment, while Appendix B.2 describes the reasons for exclusion of studies.

3.5 Data Extraction
Data was extracted from the studies that had been rated good or medium quality. The following information was recorded:

- Descriptive information:
  - Publication information: author, year, journal
  - Geographic information: country, region
  - Microfinance program information: MFI, program model

- Research information:
  - Description of study participants and control group: number of participants/ control group, selection method
  - Data: collection method, collection time, type of data, data analysis method
  - Results: main findings, dimensions of empowerment

The two researchers extracted the data from the studies separately into a spreadsheet. Appendix C.1 shows the coding framework, and Appendix C.2 presents the spreadsheet with extracted data.

3.6 Synthesis
In choosing synthesis method, the type of question that is being answered plays a role. There are three types of questions, which can be defined by its aim: (i) to test a theory or hypothesis, (ii) to explore a range of possible answers and approaches within a given theoretical framework, or (iii) to generate new theories, concepts, and understandings (Gough et al., 2012). The aim of this review is to analyse and understand the impact of microfinance group programs.
on women's empowerment; therefore, the aim is both to explore existing frameworks and potentially develop new understandings.

Gough et al. (2012) further explain that the type of synthesis that is associated with these types of questions, exploratory and generating, is configuring syntheses. Configuring synthesis arrange the findings of the studies to answer the review question. The other type of synthesis, aggregate synthesis, adds up the findings of the studies and is associated with the testing-theories-questions. Configuring syntheses, in contrast to aggregate, tend to include studies that are heterogeneous in both study design and execution, and for this reason, configuring studies are rarely statistical. It is, however, common that there are aspects of both configuration and aggregation in most syntheses (Sandelowski et al., 2011). This review will use the configuring approach to synthesizing the findings, as it aims to answer questions that explore an existing theory from a particular point of view, and aims to generate new understandings. Furthermore, it is expected that the included studies will be heterogeneous, making the configuration approach more suitable.

In this approach, the concepts or themes by which the studies will be configured can either be determined before the synthesis, or during the synthesis; that is, using a deductive or inductive method, or both. Deductive approaches include analysis methods such as thematic summaries and framework synthesis, and inductive approaches include thematic synthesis and meta-ethnography, while the mixed methods synthesis uses both deductive and inductive approaches (Gough et al., 2012). This review adopts an inductive approach in finding concepts and themes, and will therefore use the method of thematic synthesis.

Thematic synthesis is commonly used in bringing together findings from different types of research methods and analyses (Thomas & Harden, 2008). One of the most important activities, due to the differences, is translating the findings into one common 'language'. More specifically, the review must identify, despite being expressed differently, common themes in the individual studies (Gough et al., 2012). The themes will be extracted from the included studies' findings, which in this review is considered both the studies' results and the researchers' conclusions. From the collected themes, a framework will be developed, depicting the relationship between the themes, and connecting those themes that are related to each other. The next stage entails linking the findings in the studies to the themes, to further build on the framework. The themes and framework will be reported qualitatively. Furthermore, the synthesis will also include a descriptive analysis of the included studies.
4. RESULTS

4.1 SEARCH RESULTS

Figure 7 shows the process of inclusion and exclusion of studies. Employing the search strategy (section 3.2), 6400+ studies were collected and extracted to RefWorks. Through title and abstract screening, 6100+ of these studies were eliminated, reducing the number of included studies to 229. Next, applying the inclusion criteria, 198 studies were further excluded. 31 were assessed relevant, and were next judged by certain quality criteria. 19 studies were judged poor quality and excluded. Appendix B.2 reports the reasons for excluding the 19 studies. 12 studies were judged medium or high quality, and included for analysis.

Figure 7: Search results
Similar studies

Two of the included studies, Mukherjee and Kundu (2012) and Mukherjee (2015) are similar in that they are sharing the same data sets. The first investigates the effect of participation in SHG on four areas of women’s decision-making power, while the latter examines if SHG participation have an impact on socio-cultural, physical, economic and political components of empowerment. They share same the data collection method, however, since they are reporting on different dimensions of empowerment, with different end results, they are included in this literature review as two independent studies.

Swain and Wallentin (2009) and Swain and Wallentin (2012) examine if SHGs have an impact on women’s empowerment, and if the economic or non-economic aspects of SHGs affect women’s empowerment more, respectively. They are sharing the same data sets, but since they are using different study designs, longitudinal (Swain & Wallentin, 2009) and cross-sectional (Swain & Wallentin, 2012), as well as using the data in different ways to evaluate SHGs impact on women’s empowerment, these two studies will be considered as two independent studies.

4.2 Descriptive analysis

As a sample for the SHG - empowerment research field, certain characteristics of the included studies are described in this section, hinting towards the characteristics of the entire field. This section will explore the different dimensions of women’s empowerment measured, which countries / regions are commonly picked for research, and what study designs are employed.

4.2.1 Dimensions of women’s empowerment

Women’s empowerment is context specific; it is highly influenced by local culture, religion, tradition, and norm (Kabeer, 2001). Moreover, there is no one definition of empowerment due to its complex multi-dimensional nature (Malhotra et al., 2002). Table 3 shows the different dimensions of women’s empowerment that are measured in the included studies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household decision-making power</td>
<td>Al-Mamun et al. (2014); Amin et al. (1998); Garikipati (2008); Haile et al. (2012); Holvoet (2005); Lyngdoh &amp; Pati (2013); Mukherjee (2015); Mukherjee &amp; Kundu (2012); Suja (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic activity</td>
<td>Haile et al. (2012); Holvoet (2005); Lyngdoh &amp; Pati (2013); Mukherjee (2015); Mukherjee &amp; Kundu (2012); Suja (2012); Swain &amp; Wallentin (2009), (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic decision-making power</td>
<td>Al-Mamun et al. (2014); Amin et al. (1998); Haile et al. (2012); Lyngdoh &amp; Pati (2013); Mukherjee &amp; Kundu (2012); Suja (2012); Swain &amp; Wallentin (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education / legal, political &amp; health awareness</td>
<td>Al-Mamun et al. (2014); Amin et al. (1998); Lyngdoh &amp; Pati (2013); Mukherjee (2015); Suja (2012); Swain &amp; Wallentin (2009), (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control over resources</td>
<td>Al-Mamun et al. (2014); Amin et al. (1998); Garikipati (2008); Haile et al. (2012); Mukherjee (2015); Mukherjee &amp; Kundu (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
<td>Al-Mamun et al. (2014); Amin et al. (1998); Haile et al. (2012); Lyngdoh &amp; Pati (2013); Mukherjee (2015); Suja (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in group</td>
<td>Amin et al. (1998); Holvoet (2005); Mukherjee (2015); Suja (2012); Swain &amp; Wallentin (2009), (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in developmental/ political activities</td>
<td>Lyngdoh &amp; Pati (2013); Mukherjee (2015); Suja (2012); Swain &amp; Wallentin (2009), (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership of household assets and income</td>
<td>Garikipati (2008); Haile et al. (2012); Suja (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resisting gender norms</td>
<td>Swain &amp; Wallentin (2009), (2012); Mukherjee (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic security</td>
<td>Al-Mamun et al. (2014); Garikipati (2008); Lyngdoh &amp; Pati (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy /self-reliance</td>
<td>Amin et al. (1998); Suja (2012); Swain &amp; Wallentin (2012)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Dimension | Study
--- | ---
Work time allocation | Garikipati (2008); Holvoet (2005);
Contribution to household | Lyngdoh & Pati (2013); Mukherjee (2015)
Confidence/assertiveness | Amin et al. (1998)
Division of domestic chores | Garikipati (2008)
Equal rights and privileges | Mukherjee (2015)
HIV risk behavior | Rosenberg et al. (2011)
Power in relationship | Rosenberg et al. (2011)

*Source: own*

### 4.2.2 Country of data

All of the studies included in this literature review were carried out in developing or emerging countries. India has by far been the center of attention, with 8 out of 12 studies conducted in this country (depicted in Figure 8). The rest are based in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Ethiopia and Haiti. The high concentration of studies on the impact of microfinance on women’s empowerment in India is due to the fact that the self-help group program was first implemented in India, initiated by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD). Since SHGs have been present in India for a longer time compared to other developing and emerging countries, it makes it suitable for researching long-term effects and observing changes in women’s empowerment. The self-help group program has subsequently spread throughout the world.
4.2.3 STUDY DESIGN

Even though the inclusion criteria allowed for both quantitative and qualitative research methods, all of the included studies employ a quantitative approach, with five of them complementing their studies with qualitative methods. The quantitative method is most prominent, even though the studies measure the impact of microfinance on empowerment indicators that are difficult to quantify. For example, while it may be easy to measure the changes in income, it is more difficult to quantify the amount of decision-making power that a woman has in the household. In these cases, the studies have taken to a survey method where the studied women answer on a scale how much decision-making power they possess. Those studies that have chosen to complement the survey with either focus group discussions or individual interviews, have done so in order to understand both the underlying reasons behind actions and the women’s own definition of empowerment, how empowerment can be increased, and the effect it has on them.
The included studies also differ in that they employ either a cross-sectional or longitudinal study design. There are advantages with both methods, as cross-sectional study designs can measure many indicators at one time to understand how they interplay, while the longitudinal study designs measure fewer indicators, but during a longer period of time, giving better insight to the cause-and-effect relationship (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The data collection methods used in these studies are surveys, focus groups, and interviews. The surveys are either written or conducted through structured interviews, as the literacy rate may be low in certain areas. Summarized data of the study designs of the included studies can be found in Table 4.

Table 4: Study designs of included studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Quantitative/Qualitative</th>
<th>Study Design</th>
<th>Data collection method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al-Mamun et al. (2014)</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Survey through structured interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amin et al. (1998)</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Survey, focus group discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garikipati (2008)</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
<td>Longitudinal (1 year)</td>
<td>Survey, focus group discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haile et al. (2012)</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Surveys, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holvoet (2005)</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Survey, in-depth interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyngdoh &amp; Pati (2013)</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
<td>Longitudinal (5 years)</td>
<td>Surveys, focus group discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukherjee (2015)</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Longitudinal (4 years)</td>
<td>Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukherjee &amp; Kundu (2012)</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Longitudinal (4 years)</td>
<td>Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosenberg et al. (2011)</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Survey through structured interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suja (2012)</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swain &amp; Wallentin (2009)</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Longitudinal (3 years)</td>
<td>Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swain &amp; Wallentin (2012)</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Survey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own
### 4.3 Main Findings

Table 5 presents a summary of the main findings of the included studies.

**Table 5: Main findings of included studies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Main Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Al-Mamun et al. (2014)        | - Participation in SHG generated positive and significant impact on women's empowerment  
                                - SHG women experienced increased: access to financial services, ownership of assets, household decision-making power (assets, purchases, family planning), control over resources, mobility, children's education, and legal awareness |
| Amin et al. (1998)            | - Participation in SHG generated positive and significant impact on women's empowerment  
                                - Non-members living in SHG areas also experienced increased women's empowerment  
                                - SHG women experienced increased: economic contribution to family, confidence, assertiveness, intelligence, self-reliance, legal awareness, welfare, and autonomy |
| Garikipati (2008)             | - SHG women experience disempowerment when loans are diverted into household assets and income, as they have little or no ownership over these assets.  
                                - Women must challenge the ownership of assets in order to experience empowerment  
                                - Lending to women enables households to better cope with crisis and vulnerability  
                                - SHG programs are more effective than credit-only programs in empowering women, due to its integrative approach |
| Haile et al. (2012)           | - Participation in SHG increased income and improved asset base for women  
                                - SHG women experienced increased expenditure decision-making power and ownership of assets, and decreased domestic conflict  
                                - Independent income improved women's household decision-making power and ability to make strategic choices  
                                - Women experienced an increased workload, for some, this affected their health |
| Holvoet (2005)                | - SHGs are more effective than credit-only programs in increasing women's empowerment, due to its integrative approach  
                                - SHG women experienced increased decision-making power  
                                - Longer participation in SHGs positively affect women's decision-making power |
| Lyngdoh & Pati (2013)         | - Participation in SHG generated positive and significant impact on women's empowerment  
                                - SHG women experienced increased: income, expenditure, savings, education, decision-making power, mobility, communication skills, confidence, political awareness, and promotion of gender equality |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Main Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Mukherjee (2015)**         | - Participation in SHG generated positive and significant impact on women’s empowerment  
- SHG women experienced increased: ability to negotiate gender barriers, control over own life, position in household, level of economic activity, economic contribution to household, self-worth, and decision-making power  
- Women’s socioeconomic background affects the extent to which these increases occurred  |
| **Mukherjee & Kundu (2012)** | - SHG women experienced increased decision-making power within three areas: food items, use of borrowed money, and kinship and family matter  
- Women experienced no increase in decision-making power regarding money management  |
| **Rosenberg et al. (2010)**  | - Women participating in SHGs experienced decreased HIV risk behaviour and increased relationship power and general power  
- Longer participation increases these effects  |
| **Suja (2012)**              | - Participation in SHG generated positive and significant impact on women’s empowerment  
- SHG women experienced increased: income, decision-making power, participation in social activities, confidence, entrepreneurship and management skills, communication skills, economic contribution to household, legal and business awareness, and standard of living  |
| **Swain & Wallentin (2009)** | - Participation in SHG generated positive and significant impact on women’s empowerment  
- SHG women experienced increased: access to loans, household bargaining power, awareness, skills, social and economic support, and network  
- Not all participating women experience same level of empowerment, or same pace of progression  
- SHG women showed greater ability to resist gender norms and culture  |
| **Swain & Wallentin (2012)** | - Participation in SHG generated positive and significant impact on women’s empowerment  
- SHG women experienced increased: economic opportunities, income, bargaining and decision-making power within household and at work, autonomy, confidence, awareness, managerial skills, social support, involvement in village development and politics, and networking  
- ‘Economic factor’ is most effective in empowering women, followed by ‘greater autonomy’ and ‘social attitudes’  |

*Source: own*
4.4 The thematic framework
In thematic synthesis, the findings are to be categorized into common themes (Gough et al., 2012). In this review, the themes were uncovered using an inductive approach. Reading through the included studies, four main themes were identified: financial services, nonfinancial services, group participation, and group actions (Figure 9). These themes derive from microfinance through SHGs, and all have an impact on women’s empowerment. The thematic synthesis (section 4.5) will explore these themes to create an evidence-based understanding of how they each contribute to women’s empowerment.

Figure 9: Simple causal chain from SHG to women’s empowerment

Source: own

4.5 Thematic synthesis
The following section examines the included studies in respect to the four identified themes: financial services, nonfinancial services, group participation and group actions. Each theme will be examined thoroughly and include sub-themes and examples to create a better understanding of how participation in SHGs have an impact on empowering women.

4.5.1 Financial services

Increased Economic activity

Through SHGs the members have access to financial services. These financial services have the possibility to increase the economic activity of the members and their families, create personal and group savings, and enable the women contribute economically to the household.
Swain and Wallentin (2012) argue that the economic aspect of SHGs is the most important in increasing women’s empowerment. They explain that having access to loans creates a possibility to start a process where the loans are used to seize and create economic opportunities, increasing the women’s income, and thereby increasing their bargaining power and decision-making power. In line with this statement, Lyndoh and Pati’s (2013) study shows that microfinance clients engaged in economic activities to a greater extent than non-microfinance clients, which lead to increased income for the clients. Why clients engage in more economic activities could be explained by the increase of available options that are revealed by credit. For example, Lyndoh and Pati (2013) found that microfinance “also increased access to livestock and micro machines thereby highlighting improvement in economic assertiveness and income generating activities” (p.55; italics ed. by authors)

Suja (2012) agrees that access to loans increase economic activity in that members of SHGs are, after receiving credit, able to operate small businesses and generate income. Similarly, Mukherjee (2015) and Haile et al. (2012) report that women who receive loans increase their economic activity and ownership over assets. Garikipati (2008) furthermore found in her research that women who borrow are more economically secure, more economically diversified, and have better coping strategies.

The findings in the studies suggest several factors that influence the success of having access to loans. Firstly, Swain and Wallentin (2012) recommend that income generation should be the main focus of the SHG. They state that: “programs such as SHGs, which focus on the income generation by women in low-income households, have the double advantage of leading to an improved economic situation of the respondents and being the most effective factor in empowering women” (Swain & Wallentin, 2012:440). In making this comment, they argue that the economic factors are more effective than the non-economic factors in empowering women. This does not, however, mean that the non-economic factors such as social attitude and greater autonomy are not effective; on the contrary: they “are also critical in empowering SHG members” (Swain & Wallentin 2012:441). Secondly, Lyngdoh and Pati (2013) recommend larger loan sizes. Their study shows that access to larger loans leads to larger investments and thereby more economic activity. The women can influence the loan size by increasing their initial savings and through longer SHG participation, as the loan sizes grow with time. Lastly, Mukherjee (2015) found in his research that the access to markets is significant in increasing economic activity. Without access to the market, it is more difficult to find opportunities that could enhance the women’s economic activity as well as understanding the market demand. Mukherjee (2015) states that “greater access to market might be the single most important avenue to expand their economic spaces” (p.7). The studies show that the women’s economic activity will be increased if income generation is the focus
of the SHG, if the women receive sizable loans, and if the women have access to the economic market. In addition, Lyngdoh and Pati (2013) concluded that those who gained most from joining a SHG were women at a working age that had a supportive family and some education.

The access to loans not only leads to increased economic activity, it also enhances the women’s personal and group savings, especially in the long-run (Haile et al., 2012). Mukherjee and Kundu (2012) explain that through savings, the women now have access to financial resources in the long run. Holvoet (2005) agrees with this, and argues that this long-term access improves the position the women hold within the household. There are three main uses for the savings: business investments, emergency fund, and helping family members (Haile et al., 2012).

The impact of increased economic activity affects the amount of workload for the women. They participate in income generating activities, such as family businesses or independent ventures, while at the same time they continue to care for the household through domestic work. Their lone responsibility for domestic work combined with the income generating work is an issue for the women (Haile et al., 2012). Haile et al. (2012) describe that women will most often hand over some of the household responsibilities to their daughters if the women themselves cannot complete the tasks. In most cases, the male members of the family do not participate in domestic work, usually due to local customs. Haile et al. (2012) further found that women, whose family was lacking daughters to help with the domestic work, did not expand their businesses, and in some cases they even left the SHGs, as they were unable to cope with the workload. Women that were better off, however, showed that they had a larger probability for sharing their domestic work compared to women who were worse off (Garikipati, 2008).

Another possible issue with the increased economic activity is what Garikipati (2008) refers to as the “impact-paradox” (p.2621). She explains that “woman’s loan may easily get diverted into enhancing household assets and incomes but given her lack of co-ownership of family’s productive assets, access to credit may not result in her empowerment” (Ibid.p.2621). Basically, Garikipati (2008) is saying that it is not the contribution of assets, but the control and ownership of it, that leads to empowerment. Mukherjee (2015) disagrees with this statement, as she found that women’s self-worth was boosted by being able to contribute to the household. Moreover, she found that being able to care for the family with money from the SHGs excluded the need for taking on “menial domestic labor in other people’s home” (Mukherjee, 2015:7), further increasing her self-worth.
Lyngdoh and Pati’s (2013) study shows that through access to credit, the women are able to contribute with not only daily goods, such as food, but also invest in household equipment and durables. These purchases can secure the family in short and long term, bettering the family’s situation (Ibid.). Bringing in money to the family in the form of goods can also improve the woman’s role in the household and in her relationships. Halie et al. (2012) found, for example, that marital conflicts decreased as women’s contributions increased, and Al-Mamun et al. (2014) found that this increase could also lead to greater decision-making power within the household.

**Decision-making power**

This section will present the ways in which access to loans and an increase in economic activity leads to women’s bargaining power, decision-making power, autonomy, and control; factors influencing women’s empowerment.

Swain and Wallentin (2009) reported in their study that: “by providing the members with better access to loans, the SHGs enable them to generate income thereby, increasing their bargaining power within the household” (pp.551-552). Similarly, Suja (2012) also stated that women’s partaking in decision-making was increased by joining a SHG. According to the study by Al-Mamun et al. (2014), around 50% of the women in a SHG reported a significant change in decision-making power within the household after participation, and around 25% women stated that household decisions are now taken on their own. Part of household decisions is food purchases, which was investigated in Mukherjee and Kundu’s (2012) study. They found that, although food purchase already usually lies within the women’s domain of decision making in South Asia, participation in SHGs further increased their decision-making power and the women could take decisions by themselves. Holvoet (2005) also found that in her study in South India, women were usually already in charge of household expenditures such as food and clothing before participation in SHGs; however, unlike Mukherjee and Kundu (2012), she found no increase regarding decision making within this area. Holvoet (2005) did, nevertheless, find improvements in the women’s control over family and kinship matters, which was further confirmed in the study by Mukherjee and Kundu (2012). Age of the woman has an influence on her decision making power. If the woman is young, or if there is a large age gap between the husband and wife, it was found that the woman’s decision making power did not increase through SHG participation (Mukherjee & Kundu, 2012)
Decision-making power within the domain of money management is an important aspect of women’s empowerment, as these decisions are traditionally taken by men (Holvoet, 2005). If women are able to take decisions within this area after SHG participation, they would be resisting the traditional gender norms. Holvoet (2005) found positive shifts in the decision-making power within the areas of money management and loan use. The shifts were from male-only decisions to joint and female-only decisions. The shift of decision-making power within money management and loan use was also examined in the study by Mukherjee and Kundu (2012), where they reported no shifts in power regarding money management; this remained a male dominated area of decision-making. They did, however, find that women were taking decisions alone or together with husband in regards to loan use. Mukherjee and Kundu (2012) further explains that this is most likely due to the fact that decisions regarding loan use is seen as women’s effort in transforming loans into actions benefitting the household.

Another area of interest connected to women’s empowerment is women’s ability to make decisions regarding work and work related matters, such as time and task allocation and major sales and purchases for business. Al-Mamun et al. (2014) reported that after participation in SHGs, the women were making more joint decisions with husbands related to work, such as purchase of inventory and livestock. Women were also taking a more active role in leading agricultural businesses and cottage industries, taking decisions about time and task allocation (Holvoet, 2005), and controlling the income generated from their businesses (Haile et al., 2012).

Previous research has shown that women need to practice control over their loans and work in order to achieve empowerment (Anderson & Eswaran, 2009; Goetz & Gupta, 1996; Malhotra & Mather, 1997). In line with this, Swain and Wallentin (2012) found that “greater autonomy in terms of independent planning, management and decision-making at work and greater propensity for intolerance of negativity at home also significantly contribute to empowering women” (p.438). With control over loans, the women are relieved from asking their husband for money and are more independent in their spending decisions (Haile et al., 2012). Control over loans is also reflected in the women’s participation in resource allocation. As an example, Al-Mamun et al. (2012) reported that women who received and controlled loans showed increased participation in house repair and construction decisions, compared to women who did not partake in SHG loan programs. This increased participation depicts their increased knowledge of economics and control. It was further found that this economic control spilled over in other areas of decision making, such as family planning and children’s education (Al-Mamun et al., 2014).
Garikipati (2008) found that although the women were able to control the allocation of loans, they still had very little ownership. This is an issue as once the loans had been allocated to the household as investment in family business or the purchase of land, the women were no longer in control of the income generated by these investments, causing difficulties in loan repayment. This was especially true if the woman was young, but less so if the woman’s economic situation was better. As a result, the women who controlled their loan distribution and spending tended to invest in self-managed enterprises rather than family-run enterprises (Garikipati, 2008). Although this solution does not solve the household assets ownership issue, the women are able to stay in control of their loan, income, and repayment. Garikipati (2008) concluded on this issue that “if loans given to women are continued to be diverted into household needs without any change in their asset positions, then this can over time widen the existing resource divide between men as owners and women as laborers and prove to be a disempowering experience for the women concerned” (p.2637).

4.5.2 Nonfinancial Services

Awareness and discussions

Al-Mamun et al. (2014) found that more than 52% of the respondents to his study reported that, “their level of awareness about legal right regarding family abuse and violence increased after participation in AIM’s microcredit program” (p.14). Studies by Garikipati (2008), Mukherjee (2015) and Swain and Wallentin (2012) have also found increased awareness about women’s rights and legal rights. Swain and Wallentin (2012) further explain that resistance to verbal abuse and domestic violence is a sign of increased awareness of women’s rights. By providing training and awareness creation activities, it can lead to changes in social attitudes of the respondent, her spouse and family members, which is crucial toward contributing to women’s empowerment (Swain and Wallentin, 2012).

Some studies reported business and management training as a part of the SHGs (Holvoet, 2005; Suja, 2012; Swain & Wallentin, 2012), while other focused on communication skills, income-generating activities, and improving and learning new skills (Garikipati, 2008; Lyngdoh & Pati, 2013; Swain & Wallentin, 2009). Suja (2012) argue that in order for business training and workshops to be beneficial for poor female entrepreneurs, it has to match with their existing skills and help them tackle their needs. During these trainings and workshops, women would also develop greater communication skills while interacting with other women, creating a platform for discussion. Here, members can share their thoughts and become braver in expressing their concerns to the other members.
(Swain & Wallentin, 2012). Swain and Wallentin (2012) made the point that through workshops women would learn about topics such as gender subordination, reproductive health, and domestic violence, and subsequently discuss and communicate with others. Although Swain and Wallentin (2012) argue that communication is not statistically significant in empowering women, they stand by that it may have a significant and positive impact in the long run.

Based on data from Holvoet (2005), it was reported that getting credit through SHGs combined with technical and social awareness training had a significant impact on one dimension of women empowerment, the decision-making power. Holvoet (2005) found that the longer a women would be member, combined with intensive training and group meetings, the more it would strengthen a shift in decision-making power; from norm-guided behavior and male decision-making, to more female decision-making.

These training activities together with literacy training allow women to partake in a wider range of opportunities. Literacy and numeracy trainings are provided in some programs, and according to Lyngdoh and Pati (2013), basic writing and reading is crucial since SHG activities involve a certain degree of paperwork; if women have some educational background, they would perform better. Similarly, Suja (2012) stated, “women’s education and literacy rate are important if they are to reach their full potential and become empowered” (p.11). However, according to Swain and Wallentin (2012), education is statistically non-significant in empowering women, but they do mention that it may be in the long run.

Women not only learn about business, rights, and literacy, but a great part of the credit-programs are about educating the women in health, nutrition, sanitary and family planning. Amin et al. (1998) reported NGO staff teaching women in credit groups about nutrition, family planning and child immunization. Suja (2012) and Swain and Wallentin (2012) found increased use of contraceptives due to awareness programs, while Lyngdoh and Pati (2013) observed that increased awareness of health and sanitary issues led to better access to health centers and health care. In addition, Rosenberg et al. (2010) reported that sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and AIDS were reduced due to health education. It can also be seen from Rosenberg et al. (2010) that participation in SHG increases relationship power and reduces HIV risk behavior. Microfinances’ provision of health education and business and social awareness training has made an impact on social attitudes. Furthermore, increased awareness has influenced the women’s attitudes towards the importance of children’s education; women now have a much greater say on the education of their children, and even daughters get sent to school (Swain and Wallentin, 2010).
Joining a group

Empowering process

The process of joining a group can be empowering in itself (Swain & Wallentin, 2012). Joining, combined with group meetings, engagement, and support, has the possibility to change the social attitudes of the SHG members and those connected to the members. Swain and Wallentin (2012) explain that these changes in social attitudes, and the confidence created by SHG activities, lead to women’s empowerment. Joining a SHG is also found to increase the women’s self-esteem, and build solidarity between the women in the group (Ibid.).

Resisting gender norms

Swain and Wallentin (2009) argue that “women’s empowerment takes place when women challenge the existing social norms and culture, to effectively improve their well-being” (p.541). In agreement to this statement, Swain and Wallentin (2012) found for example that while access to loans could help better the children’s nutrition, cooking lies predominantly within the women’s responsibility and therefore this activity is not empowering for the women. Similarly, Mukherjee (2015) concluded that when women invest in conventionally female activities, it does not lead to empowerment. The women that Mukherjee (2015) studied continued to work with norm-abiding activities throughout their SHG participation; activities that did not challenge the gender roles. Furthermore, she found that these conventional activities had limited possibility of expansion and therefore a limited possibility of bettering the women’s situation.

Although the women’s economic activities may not be resisting the gender norms, there are activities related to SHGs that are. Swain and Wallentin (2009) compiled a list of these activities, which the SHG participants themselves saw as resisting the gender norms, and therefore empowering. These activities include overcoming husband’s opposition to join a SHG, increased household decision-making powers, mobility, literacy, and political awareness and engagement (full list available in Appendix D). Some of these activities lie deep rooted in the culture and tradition, making it difficult for women to overcome them. Domestic work, for example, lies traditionally within the women’s duties, and has been found to continue doing so even though the women’s economic activity has increased (Haile et al., 2012). Since empowerment is context specific, women who join the same SHG programs might not be empowered at the same pace or
to the same extent (Swain & Wallentin, 2009). Factors, such as, household and village characteristics, cultural and religious norms within the society, behavioral differences between the respondents and their family members, and the kind of training and awareness programs that the women have been exposed to, will determine how women have become empowered by the program (Ibid.). Participating in gender-challenging activities could lead to marital conflicts; 15% of the households have witnessed conflicts as the women have begun to question their insignificant decision-making power and labour division (Haile et al., 2012). Mukherjee (2015) explains that the issue lies in the unyielding characteristics of the “socio-cultural space” (p.9); changing the social and cultural characteristics and challenging the gender norms takes a long time (Mukherjee & Kundu, 2012).

### Being part of a group

#### Mobility

Microfinance programs help women get out of their homes and participate in meetings where they can interact with others, and by doing so reduce women isolation (Swain & Wallentin, 2009). Several studies (Al-Mamun et al., 2014; Amin et al., 1998; Haile et al., 2012; Lyngdoh & Pati, 2013; Mukherjee, 2015) argue that women’s ability to go outside increases after joining a SHG program. Al-Mamum et al. (2015) found that women’s ability to go outside without husband’s permission had increased along with the ability to work outside. This is further observed by Amin et al. (1998), that reported increased participation in jobs outside their homes, while Haile et al. (2012) added that women spent more time in markets, and had market-oriented activities outside their homes. Lyngdoh and Pati (2013) found that group activities had enhanced women’s need of traveling near and far to associate with many others. This is also supported by data from Mukherjee (2015) which shows that access to credit and being in a SHG increased the opportunity of going together with other women.

#### Forum for communication

The self-help group’s meetings and activities create a forum for communication where they can share ideas, experiences and knowledge. Suja (2012) found that women became more confident in discussions, and this would suggest an improvement in psychological empowerment. Swain and Wallentin (2012) reported the same, that women became confident in communicating and raising their concerns within the group meetings. Suja (2012) further reported that discussions about women’s rights, community problems, political, and similar
family problems would make the women express solidarity towards each other, and empower women both as individuals and as a group to address their problems. Being part of a group gives the members social and economic support, which can lead to empowerment (Amin et al., 1998).

4.5.4 GROUP ACTIONS

Village development

Being in a group enhances women’s awareness of important issues within the villages. Women participating in SHGs can contribute to the village using their newly learned knowledge about rights and politics, and use their networks to get things done (Holvoet, 2005). Holvoet (2005) reported that the SHG activities had made women more active in public decision-making bodies, such as village health committee, teacher-parent associations, forest and watershed committees, and dairy cooperatives. The activities had transformed the women into actors of local institutional change, and this benefitting themselves, the community and also their families. Before joining credit-group programs, neither women nor men went to the community decision-making bodies, because of their low socioeconomic status. After joining a SHGs, women were increasingly more active within the community, and their individual position in the household had strengthened. Mukherjee and Kundu (2012) also report that women got involved in public decision-making bodies, and this in return increased their individual leverage in decision-making within their households.

A few other studies found there was an increased involvement in community and village development activities, where e.g. women had the possibility to vote and participate in the political space. Lyngdoh and Pati (2013) found that women were more aware of the community development programs, and subsequently participated in them. They took part in political decision-making through voting, and shared information about gender-sensitive issues to promote gender equality at the community level. The women also participated in political campaigns during elections, to bring forward the cause of women. Lyngdoh and Pati (2013) furthermore showed that the political variables were all statistically significant for women empowerment, except political campaigning. Mukherjee (2015) observed that the women in self-help groups were in position to bargain with the local moneylenders, participate in village council meetings, and vote at their own will. Swain and Wallentin (2009, 2012) suggested that participating in village development activities created confidence, and that women participating in the political space would be an indicator for empowerment (2009).
Networks and contacts

While being in a group can have substantial benefits for the communities, where women participates in village development programs and enhances their political status, it can also lead to great networking and contacts. Amin et al. (1998), Haile et al. (2012), and Swain and Wallentin (2009, 2012) all reported increased social and political networks and contacts through SHG programs. By participating in meetings, Swain and Wallentin (2009) found that members were brought close to government officials, bank officials, and NGO workers. This was confirmed by Swain and Wallentin (2012), where each member would meet at least one official. Amin et al. (1998) reported similar increased contact between members and officials, and NGO-staff would offer help to the group members if they were having personal and household problems. Networking, communication and political participation are non-significant according to Swain and Wallentin (2012), but may be critical in the long run for achieving women empowerment. In contrast to Swain and Wallentin (2012), Lyngdoh and Pati (2013) found significant evidence that being politically active would enhance empowerment.

It is further reported by Amin et al. (1998) that non-members living within the SHG program areas would show a higher level of empowerment than non-members living in non-SHG program areas. This is however not observed in Swain and Wallentin (2009) nor in Garikipati (2008), and not mentioned in the other remaining studies.

Whereas most studies reported positive findings from participating in Microfinance activities, Haile et al. (2012) found something quite the opposite. Here it was seen that women were increasingly aware about the importance of education for their children, and they were able to support them because of participation in SHGs. However, it would sometimes work the reverse way. It was reported that some girls never joined a school, because they needed to help their mother with household chores or at work. Others went, but missed a lot of classes or had little time to study. This suggests that women who get credit and join SHG programs would have less and less time for household chores and childcare responsibilities, leaving their children for these duties. Furthermore, it was found that being part of SHGs and receiving credit also increased women’s workloads; leisure and sleep time were cut down on, and some even suffered from fatigue and got health problems. Pressure from SHG members did not make it easier for women to handle her workloads.
4.5.5 Summary of Findings

In summarizing the synthesis, there are four main themes that have been focused on: (i) financial services, (ii) nonfinancial services, (iii) group participation and (iv) group actions. Firstly, in analyzing financial services, it was found that several of the included studies reported increased economic activity (Lyngdoh & Pati, 2013; Swain & Wallentin, 2012), and increased savings through access to loans (Haile et al., 2012; Holvoet, 2005). Swain and Wallentin (2012) argue that the economic aspects of SHGs are more effective than the non-economic aspects in empowering women; however, these non-economic factors are also crucial in the long run. It was further found that access to loans and an increase in economic activity would lead to an increase of women's bargaining power and decision-making power within the household and in work related situations (Al-Mamun et al., 2014; Suja, 2012; Swain & Wallentin, 2009).

Secondly, analyzing the nonfinancial services, it was found in most of the included studies that through training and workshops, the women increased their legal, political, and health awareness as well as knowledge of women's rights. Furthermore, women were also educated in basic business and management training, literacy, and developed practical skills. The researchers argue that increased knowledge and awareness lead to empowerment as it enables women to make effective life choices (Al-Mamun, 2014; Garikipati, 2008; Holvoet, 2005; Mukherjee, 2015).

Thirdly, group participation was divided into two sub themes: joining a group and being part of a group. Here it was found that by joining a SHG, the women are doing an activity that resist traditional gender norms (Mukherjee, 2015; Swain & Wallentin, 2012). Through being part of the group, the studies found increased female mobility and improved communication skills; the women also experienced greater social support. The researcher argue that participating in gender resisting activities positively impact the empowerment of women (Al-Mamun et al., 2015; Amin et al., 1998; Suja, 2012; Swain & Wallentin, 2012).

Lastly, through analyzing the group actions, it was found that the main results were increased village development activities and improved networks and contacts (Holvoet, 2005; Lyngdoh & Pati, 2013; Mukherjee & Kundu, 2012). Lyngdoh and Pati (2013), and Swain and Wallentin (2009) suggested that participating in political activities is an indicator for empowerment, however Swain and Wallentin (2012) argued that political participation and networking are non-significant, but may be enhancing women's empowerment in the long run.
5. Discussion

This section will address the main findings of the research, and discuss how they fit into the theories commonly accepted within the microfinance field. Firstly, the results are examined from the point of view of Kabeer’s (1999) model of empowerment (as described in Section 2.2.1; Figure 5). Secondly, the results will be discussed according to the notion of studying outcomes versus processes and the implication of this. Thirdly, two main findings will be discussed: participation in activities that resist gender norms lead to empowerment, and, the integrative approach is more effective than the minimalistic approach in empowering women. Lastly, this review puts forward several issues that are not discussed in the included studies, along with recommendations for future research.

5.1 Resource - Agency - Outcome

Kabeer (1999) explained that empowerment entails having the ability to make choices. Furthermore, she outlines the dimensions of empowerment that are necessary to make choices: resources, agency, and outcomes (further explained in Section 2.2.2). An increase in a woman’s resources, agency and outcomes therefore leads to the increase of ability to make choices, which in turn leads to increased empowerment. This section will describe how these three dimensions can be used in combination with the findings of this review to create an understanding of how SHGs have the ability to increase women’s empowerment.

Resources are the inputs that enable choices. In this review, the resources are the provisions of microfinance through SHGs. Microfinance through SHGs opens a door of opportunities for women; opportunities that were limited or nonexistent before SHG participation. The four themes identified in thematic analysis are direct provisions of microfinance, and are therefore considered the resources (see Section 4.4; Figure 9). The four themes are: financial services, nonfinancial services, group participation, and group action. These themes are resources as they are necessary to initiate the processes of empowerment, they enable choices. In other words, women who take part in these resources also have the possibility to take part in the opportunities that are created by them. For example, women who receive the resource financial service through SHGs, have the opportunity to increase their economic activity, and contribute economically to the household (Amin et al., 1998; Lyngdoh & Pati, 2013; Mukherjee, 2015; Suja, 2012; Swain & Wallentin, 2012). The resource group participation entails among other things group meetings, which creates an opportunity for increased mobility (Al-Mamun et al., 2014; Amin et al., 1998; Haile et al., 2012; Lyngdoh & Pati, 2013; Mukherjee, 2015). Furthermore, the resource nonfinancial services,
such as training and workshops, presents an opportunity for learning and skill-training (Garikipati, 2008; Holvoet, 2005; Lyngdoh & Pati, 2013; Suja, 2012; Swain & Wallentin, 2012), and the resource group action presents an opportunity for networking and being politically active (Amin et al., 1998; Haile et al., 2012; Swain & Wallentin, 2009; 2012).

It is important to note that the availability of resources, both before and after joining a SHG, varies. Before joining, certain women were completely excluded from both formal and informal financial services, while others had access to loans through informal financial providers, such as moneylenders or family members. After joining SHGs, the availability of resources vary as not all MFIs provide the same nonfinancial services to SHGs; while some merely offer advice on household and business matters, others offer a complete range of skills-training, basic economics lessons, and workshops on health (Helms, 2006). The availability and opportunity for women to take part in resources is also affected by the woman's agency and external factors. These external factors influencing women's opportunities are what Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) refer to as a woman's opportunity structure. They explain that a woman’s “opportunity structure is shaped by the presence and operation of formal and informal institutions, or rules of the game. These include the laws, regulatory frameworks, and norms governing people's behavior. The presence and operation of the formal and informal laws, regulations, norms, and customs determine whether individuals and groups have access to assets, and whether these people can use the assets to achieve desired outcomes” (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005:9).

The second dimension of making choices, agency, is defined as “the ability to define one's goals and act upon them” (Kabeer, 1999:438). A common proxy used for this ability within the microfinance literature is a woman's decision-making power; an increase in decision-making power reflects an increased individual agency (Vaessen et al., 2014). The analysis shows that this proxy holds for this review as well, as household decision-making power is found to be the most commonly used measurement for empowerment in the included studies (see Table 3). There are other indicators that are used to measure agency, sometimes referred to as “asset endowments” (Alsop & Heinsohn 2005:8). Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) describe that these assets can be “psychological, informational, organizational, material, social, financial, or human” (2005:8). Simply put, an increase in assets contributes to a woman's increased agency; it contributes to her ability to define and act upon her goal.

Through analysis it was found that there are many assets that stem from SHGs. Financial assets include increased credit and savings, ownership of income and household/ business assets, and control over income. Informational assets include training and workshops, and the knowledge and awareness that it leads to are human assets. Some assets are transboundary, such as group solidarity and
social support which can be seen as both social and human assets. Furthermore, the assets affect each other; social and human assets can affect a woman's confidence and self-esteem, which are psychological assets.

Together, the resources and agency become the boundaries for a woman's opportunity and ability. The last dimension, outcome, is connected to these boundaries, because her choice will only become realized if the choices that are made lie within the boundaries of her opportunity and ability. An outcome is simply defined as if an individual does or does not achieve the choices that she sets out to achieve (Kabeer, 1999). It can be assumed that the main reason for joining a SHG is to improve the overall well-being of oneself and family; this is the choice. The resources and agency then creates a possibility for defining and achieving this choice, and if a desired outcome is reached, the woman has increased her empowerment. The three dimensions are therefore interconnected; agency means little without having the resources and actually executing your choice to reach an outcome, and vice versa. For example, having money to buy agricultural land (resource) has little impact on the outcome if the woman has no farming skills (agency) or confidence in her abilities (agency). Figure 10 shows the findings of this review in relation to Kabeer's (1999) model of empowerment.

Figure 10: SHGs affecting women's empowerment through resource, agency, and outcome

Source: own
5.2 Outcome vs. Processes
Garikipati (2013) argues that researchers conclude negative or positive results depending on if they are measuring the process or outcome of microfinance’s impact on women’s empowerment. She explains that “outcomes are understood to be measurable factors, which reflect the ways in which women live their lives – such as their contribution to the household economy, their access to spending money, their say in household matters, how much freedom and leisure they enjoy, and so on. The processes of loan use, on the other hand, concern how women use their loans, how they manage their business and loan repayments” (Garikipati, 2013:54).

A majority of the included studies in this review have looked at outcomes instead of processes, which has had an effect on the overall result; they are studying the what, instead of how and why. For example, Mukherjee (2015) and Haile et al. (2012) found that women who receive loans through SHGs increase their economic activity and ownership of assets, however, the studies do not describe in how these increases occurred, how the increased economic activity and ownership is managed, and how it may or may not help the women repay her loans. So while Mukherjee (2015) and Haile et al. (2012) describe positive results of women’s empowerment (outcomes), the processes that led to these outcomes and the processes that follow may carry with it negative effects on empowerment (processes); for example: repayment difficulties, incapability to manage assets, and stress due to ownership.

On the other hand, from the results of the analysis, it can be understood that the role of SHGs is to ensure success in all areas. Taking the previous example where SHG participation and loans lead to increased economic activity, SHGs can help the members with repayment difficulties, provide workshops on business management, and through social support relieve the member of stress. In other words, even though the included studies measured outcomes instead of processes, which can explain the overall positive results found in this review, it can be assumed that these results are true due to the multi-functionality of SHGs.

5.3 Resisting Gender Norms
The analysis shows that researchers look at different dimensions when measuring empowerment. Some measure the changes in decision-making power, while others, for example, measure changes in control and ownership (see Section 4.2.1; Table 3). It is found that these dimensions share a common feature: a positive change of the dimension suggests that the women are resisting traditional gender norms.
For example, several of the included studies have found an increase in female mobility after joining a SHG program, resulting in freedom to move and to interact with others (Al-Mamun et al., 2014; Amin et al., 1998; Haile et al., 2012; Lyngdoh & Pati, 2013; Mukherjee, 2015). This suggests that women who had been denied the ability to move around freely due to her gender, challenged this norm, and consequently increased her empowerment. Another example are the positive shifts in decision-making power regarding money management that Holvoet (2005) found. These shifts (from male-only to joint and female-only decisions) show that women overcame the existing norms by increasing her decision-making power in a traditionally male dominated field. Likewise, in contexts where female education is rare, literacy training can be seen as an action that challenges the existing norms, and therefore also empowers the women (Lyngdoh & Pati, 2013; Suja, 2012).

This finding relates with the ideas of Swain and Wallentin (2009) who argue that “women’s empowerment takes place when women challenge the existing social norms and culture, to effectively improve their well-being” (p.541). They further explain that “SHG members are empowered by participating in the microfinance programme in the sense that they have greater propensity to resist existing gender norms and culture that restrict their ability to develop and make choices” (Ibid.p.553).

A common shared feature across all dimensions is an important finding, as empowerment is context-sensitive. In determining if an activity is empowering for a woman in a specific context, one could essentially look to see if the activity is (i) effectively improving the woman’s well-being, and (ii) is resisting gender norms.

5.4 INTEGRATIVE VS. MINIMALIST APPROACH

MFIs use one of two different approaches in delivering microfinance in developing societies (Bhatt & Tang, 2001); the minimalist approach or the integrative approach. In a minimalist approach, MFI services are concentrated to financial services only, including microcredit, microsavings, micro-insurance, and money transfer. Using an integrative approach, however, MFIs offer both financial and nonfinancial services (Ledgerwood, 1999). Results from this review provide evidence that the integrative approach is appropriate when aiming for an increase in women’s empowerment.

SHGs combine financial services with nonfinancial services in order for the women to reach their common goals. Nonfinancial services include health education, family planning, and business related matters such as literacy training, basic business education and skills development, among others. These
services are normally provided through training and workshops, or through informal discussions during group meetings. As found in the analysis, these services have a considerable influence on women participating in SHGs, as women get to interact with other women in the same socioeconomic situations, with whom they can share problems and experiences, as well as ideas and knowledge. Interacting with other women was found to increase the women’s confidence and self-esteem, while the awareness created through training and discussions can enhance the women’s participation in village development and politics; an activity that publicly promotes gender equality. Being an active member of the society, women practice networking and get important contacts that might help in later situations. Furthermore, MFIs practicing the integrative approach through SHGs help women increase their mobility. The women must attend meetings, and it gives them a legitimate reason to go independently outside, and meet others in public spaces.

While the integrative approach show many advantages, the minimalist approach is more advantageous in one aspect: it is more cost effective. By developing and providing only one service to its poor clients, the focus is specific and clear. Additional development and social services are not included in the program because of high costs, and instead, letting other organizations take responsibility of providing it. In contrast with the minimalistic approach, the integrated approach focuses on a wide range of services. One of the advantages of using this approach are the benefits derived from training; providing training and assistance can enhance the opportunity for poor clients to make educated and well thought out choices regarding strategic life decisions. However, the cost of providing these services is high and sometimes not financially sustainable (Ledgerwood, 1999).

Swain and Wallentin (2012) argue that economic factors have the best direct impact on women’s empowerment, implying that the minimalist approach is most effective. Nevertheless, social factors such as networking, communication, political participation and education are also significant for empowering women in the long run (Swain & Wallentin, 2012). Several other researchers have made the point that only providing women with the opportunity to access financial services will not necessarily improve their well-being or increase their empowerment. Women have to take control and make their own decisions related to their credit, resources and work; actions that are made easier by the nonfinancial services provided by SHGs (Batliwala, 1994; Goetz & Gupta, 1996; Malhotra & Mather, 1997).

Another reason for why the integrative approach is favoured, is because SHGs can give the necessary push in initiating the processes of women’s empowerment. Batliwala (1994) explains that “women have been led to participate in their own oppression and therefore external change agents are
necessary for empowerment. Women need access to a new body of ideas and information that not only changes their consciousness and self-image but also encourages action” (Batliwala, 1994 in Mosedale, 2005:248; italics ed. by author). SHGs are the “external change agents” that women need access to, contributing with “a new body of ideas and information” (Ibid.p.248).

To summarize: while the integrative approach is not as cost effective as the minimalist approach, it bears with it advantages for women that may be more important than the cost effectiveness of the program. A Chinese proverb reads: “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime”. This can also be found within the statements of Batliwala (1994), arguing that only giving credit is not enough nor long lasting, while providing training of how to use the loan will give life-long benefits.

5.5 **WHAT’S NOT MENTIONED...**

The included studies are representative of all studies within the field; they define the boundaries and the progress of research. This review has so far investigated what the studies research, their results and their conclusions. This section will present four matters that are not discussed in the studies, which could possibly have an effect on the relationship between SHGs and women’s empowerment, and ends with recommendations for further and future studies.

**Defining empowerment**

The studies show that it is difficult to clearly define the concept of women’s empowerment. There is no commonly agreed upon definition of empowerment or SHG evaluation method, and therefore, the researchers must make own interpretations of existing theories and studies in choosing which dimensions of empowerment to measure. Additionally, the cause-and-effect relationship of women’s empowerment is yet to be determined, causing further issues in evaluation. It is, however, agreed upon that women’s empowerment is context specific- it varies in different groups, countries, cultures, traditions, religions, and even individuals; what is empowering for one woman might not be empowering for her neighbour. In regards to this, it could be argued that it is favourable that there is no ‘one way of measuring empowerment’, and there is no ‘one dimension of empowerment’ that is more true than others.

In spite of the fact of the context-specific notion of empowerment, the included studies conduct surveys using *pre-defined* dimensions of empowerment. Researchers decide beforehand which dimensions of empowerment they will measure based on previous research or theories; conducting deductive research.
It raises the questions of: what determines if the measured dimensions are best suited in that specific context?, and: would the results have been different if other dimensions of empowerment were measured? The possibilities and implications of choosing one or the other dimension of empowerment is not discussed in any of the included studies.

Another issue with using the deductive method of defining empowerment is that it leaves out the women’s own definition of empowerment. The studied women may feel empowered in many areas of their life, but perhaps not in the specific area that is being surveyed about. Furthermore, a majority of the studies research activities that are empowering (e.g. increased mobility), but do not consider the women’s thoughts and emotions about this activity (e.g. how does increased mobility make you feel? Is it empowering for you?).

**Disempowerment**

The included studies examine SHG activities that have an empowering effect on women, and in doing so, they ask questions regarding the changes in the women’s decision-making power, economic contribution to the family, the family's overall health and nutrition, and so on. However, the studies do not investigate if participation in SHGs have any disempowering effects. For example, are the women ever feeling stressed or overwhelmed due to repayment difficulties, increased workload, or peer pressure within the SHG? And if so, is this stress disempowering for the women? Does the disempowerment caused by stress potentially weigh out the empowerment achieved by other activities?

**What effect does the opportunity structure have?**

Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) describe the opportunity structure as the external factors, such as formal (laws, regulatory frameworks) and informal (norms, customs) institutions that affect the women’s access and use of assets. In this review, it was determined that empowering activities are activities that are challenging the existing gender norms. But in order to know if an activity is challenging traditional norms, it is essential to first understand the existing formal and informal institutions, the opportunity structure, in that specific context.

While some studies have mentioned certain village characteristics, like the presence of SHGs (Garikipati, 2008), religion of population (Mukherjee, 2015), or literacy and health status (Lyngdoh & Pati, 2013), none have discussed the informal institutions (culture, traditions, and norms) that affect women. Without understanding which norms are present in a specific context, and how deep
rooted these norms are, there exists difficulties in determining to what extent the women have the possibility to be empowered, and to what extent they actually are empowered. Furthermore, the studies do not describe the formal institutions (laws, bureaucracy, and regulatory framework) that could potentially have an influence on the impact of SHGs on women’s empowerment.

*Society’s reaction*

Microfinance SHGs are being used as rural development programs. Along with the aim to improve the lives of individuals, ultimately, the aim is to improve the society as a whole. The studies do not, however, discuss how the empowerment of women will affect society, or how the society reacts to the norm-challenging activities. Does the society develop along with the women, or does women’s fight actually evoke resistance from society? Does women’s empowerment through SHGs improve the society as a whole in the bigger picture?

*Suggestions*

In light of the issues revealed in this review, the authors make the following suggestions for future research:

- Conduct qualitative studies to further investigate the cause-and-effect relationship of women’s empowerment in the context of microfinance
- Research using inductive methods for defining empowerment; that is, let the studied women define what empowerment is for them
- Explore possible disempowering effects caused by SHGs
- Incorporated in the study the external factors (culture, tradition, norms, laws, regulations) that may affect SHGs impact on women’s empowerment
- Investigate the effect of women’s empowerment through SHGs on society as a whole
- Explore the long-run impact of SHGs on women’s empowerment by employing longitudinal study design
6. Conclusion

Microfinance developed as a tool to reach poor and remote people with financial services, as the formal financial institutions had been unwilling and unable to do so. Microfinance includes financial services such as microcredit, microsavings, and micro-insurance, and since the early 1990s, microfinance institutions (MFIs) also provide nonfinancial services such as literacy education, business training, and skills development. A delivery method of microfinance is through self-help groups (SHGs). SHGs are small groups of poor people who, based on the concepts of joint liability and shared information, gain access to financial and nonfinancial services. MFIs, through SHGs, target primarily women, as women use loans more productively, and growing research shows that women's access to financial and nonfinancial services can have an empowering effect (Khandker, 1998; Amin et al., 1998). Women's empowerment is essential in achieving gender equality.

The aim of this study was to provide a systematic literature review (SLR) of the evidence on the effects of microfinance self-help group on women's empowerment. Moreover, we set out to explore how empowerment is defined and measured. This review contributes to the existing literature on effects of microfinance together with the previous SLRs by Stewart et al. (2010), Duvendack et al. (2011), Stewart et al. (2012) and Vaessen et al. (2014). This review differs from the previous SLRs in that it explores the microfinance field from the perspective of the microfinance delivery method SHG.

The method we used to explore this field was through a systematic literature review. This SLR involved several steps: searching through databases and websites using predefined keywords, literature screening in two stages to identify relevant studies, application of inclusion criteria, quality assessment, data extraction, and lastly, analysis of included studies through thematic synthesis.

We identified four themes within the literature: financial services, nonfinancial services, group participation and group actions. Analyzing these themes, we found that the researchers studied different dimensions of empowerment derived from SHGs, such as decision-making power, economic activity, mobility, awareness, and literacy rate. An overwhelming majority of the studies revealed that participation in SHGs lead to increases in the different dimensions of empowerment.
From the results, we were able to draw several conclusions:

**SHGs contribute to women’s ability to make choices:** The ability to make effective choices consist of three interrelated dimensions: resources, agency, and outcome (Kabeer, 1999). We found that SHGs contributes with both financial and nonfinancial resources to enable choices, and the activities derived from SHG participation increases women’s agency. Together, the resources and agency allow for effective choices to be made, and by implementing this choice and reaching an outcome, women increase their empowerment.

**Positive results due to multi-functionality of SHG:** The included studies measured empowerment outcomes and found overall positive results, which is common when measuring outcomes instead of processes (Garikipati, 2013). The processes that led to these outcomes and the processes that follow may carry with it negative effects on empowerment. However, we found that SHGs can intervene and prevent situations and processes that are disempowering. Therefore, even though the included studies measured outcomes instead of processes, which can explain the overall positive results found in this review, it can be assumed that these results are true due to the multi-functionality of SHGs.

**Resisting gender norms is empowering:** We found that all examined empowerment dimensions share a common feature in that they are all resisting gender norms in their own specific context. Women are empowered in that they are able to challenge the existing gender norms that have been limiting their ability to make effective life choices.

**Integrative wins over minimalist approach:** We found that all studies either showed positive and significant impact of nonfinancial services on women’s empowerment, or they defended its importance in the long-run. Therefore, the integrative approach to microfinance, combining financial and nonfinancial services, is more effective in empowering women than the minimalist approach entailing financial services only.
**Limitations of review**

As with any study, we have found certain limitations of this review. The limitations constrained the methodology, available evidence, and findings, and are summarized below:

**Methodology:** We excluded all studies that were not written in English. As most studies are conducted in Asia, where English is not the primary language, this inclusion criteria may have affected the amount of studies included for review. Furthermore, we decided to include studies that were judged both high and medium quality; studies that we judged 'good enough'. Analyzing the studies, we made no difference between the high and medium quality studies.

**Available evidence:** The included studies show some limitations in that they do not discuss: the implications of deductively pre-defining empowerment, the possibly disempowering effects of SHG participation, the contexts in which empowerment did or did not occur, and external factors (culture, norms, tradition, laws, etc.) that may influence results. Additionally, long-term effects have not been studied.

**Findings:** It is repetitively stated that women's empowerment is context specific. This, in combination with the fact that most studies were conducted in India, can have implications on the generalizability of our results. Furthermore, due to incomplete information on which financial and nonfinancial services are offered to which SHG, we were unable to investigate which combinations of services had the greatest impact on women's empowerment.

**Concluding remarks**

We have found that self-help groups have a positive impact on women's empowerment. This, in combination with SHGs contribution to poverty alleviation and extensive outreach to the poorest and most remote people, is why self-help groups is a suitable initiative for rural development. While we found positive results studying the delivery method *self-help groups*, previous systematic literature reviews studying the impact of microfinance interventions found no significant impact on women's empowerment. This suggests that the way women receive financial and nonfinancial services affect the extent women experience empowerment.
7. List of References


## 8. APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Coding framework for inclusion and exclusion criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selection criteria</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Author (year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Does the study include research on a population consisting of poor women?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>YES / NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Does the study describe the type of microfinance intervention present? (i.e. microcredit, micro-savings, micro-insurance, money transfer, training, and/or workshops)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>YES / NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IF YES: which one?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Schemes</td>
<td>Does the study describe the type of microfinance delivery scheme is used? (i.e. SHGs or other group lending program)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>YES / NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IF YES: which one?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Does the study explore the effects of microfinance on women’s empowerment? (Any dimensions of empowerment are accepted as long as they are argued for)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>YES / NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IF YES: Which dimensions of empowerment are discussed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison Group</td>
<td>Do the quantitative studies use a comparison group? (Qualitative studies do not need a comparison group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>YES / NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Empirical Analysis</td>
<td>Does the study involve original empirical analysis?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>YES / NO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Inclusion                   | YES = If all previous answers are YES              |
|                             | NO = If one or more of the previous answers are NO |
### Appendix B: Quality assessment

#### B.1 Coding framework for quality assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Assessment</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Unreported Information**      | Are any of the following not described in the study: Microfinance intervention, Data collection, Description of participants, Data analysis, Confounding factors  
                                 | OR                                                                                                                                          
                                 | All of the above are reported in the study                                                                                                  |
                                 | IF 2 or more of the above is not reported, the study is of poor quality due to the lack of information provided                                |
| **Flawed Assumptions**          | Do the assumptions within the study design appear flawed? Does the study design leave us unconvinced that what was being measured was really the impact of microfinance? | IF YES, the study is of poor quality                                                                                                         |
| **Intervention Concerns**       | - Is the same intervention provided to the participants consistently over time?  
                                 |   - If not: Medium quality  
                                 | - Did the authors consider whether additional unintentional interventions were introduced during the study period which might have influenced the outcomes?  
                                 |   - If not: Medium quality  
                                 | - Did the authors explain drop-outs from the intervention and comparison groups?  
                                 |   - If not: Medium quality                                                                                                                  |
| **Appropriateness of Analysis** | - Is the analysis method appropriate?  
                                 |   - EX: Qualitative study of small sample and then generalizing the results is judged poor quality  
<pre><code>                             | - Did the author take steps to ensure that their analysis was                                                                               |
</code></pre>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>trustworthy, reliable and valid?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- If little assurance: The study is judged to be of medium quality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confounding Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Insufficient consideration of confounding factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Did the author control for confounding factors during the allocation or identifying of participants for the intervention group and comparison group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Did the author control for confounding factors during the analysis of data from the intervention/comparison group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- If no on both - Poor quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- If no on 1, but yes on 1 - Medium quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- If yes on both - High quality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Findings Not Apparent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- If the study’s findings were not apparent in the reported data or analysis, the study is rated poor quality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High / Medium / Poor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**B.2 Reasons for exclusion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Reason for exclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annadural (2013)</td>
<td>Assumptions were flawed; lacking information on analysis method and confounding factors; findings not apparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoop et al. (2014)</td>
<td>Assumptions were flawed; no clear description of intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayarkanni (2013)</td>
<td>Analysis method not appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krenz et al. (2014)</td>
<td>Analysis method not appropriate; finding were not apparent; no control for confounding factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leach &amp; Sitaram (2002)</td>
<td>No information on data sampling, data collection, analysis method; assumptions were flawed; findings not apparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahmood (2011)</td>
<td>No information on confounding factors; findings not apparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manjunatha &amp; Gupta (2014)</td>
<td>No information and control of confounding factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayoux (2001)</td>
<td>No information on data collection and analysis method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milgram (2001)</td>
<td>No information on data collection and analysis method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nader (2008)</td>
<td>No original empirical data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitt et al. (2006)</td>
<td>No original empirical data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sagar &amp; Gaikwad (2012)</td>
<td>No information on data collection and confounding factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanyal (2009)</td>
<td>No information on confounding factors; analysis method did not ensure validity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shetty (2010)</td>
<td>Analysis method not appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siringi (2011)</td>
<td>No original empirical data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srinivasa &amp; Shivanna (2014)</td>
<td>No information on data collection; findings not apparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steele et al. (2001)</td>
<td>No original empirical data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sud (2013)</td>
<td>No information on participants and analysis method; findings not apparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suresh &amp; Saravanan (2013)</td>
<td>No information on analysis method</td>
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## Appendix C Data collection

### C.1 Coding framework for data collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Microfinance Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Author (Year)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFI</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Model</td>
<td>SHG or other group lending programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Description</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># Participants</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Gender</td>
<td>Gender unclear/ unspecified, Men only, Women only, Men and Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IF men only or gender unclear: eliminate study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IF men and women: eliminate if it doesn’t separate the results according to gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Selection</td>
<td>Random, Cluster-random, Unclear, other form of non-random way (if non-random, describe selection method)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># In Comparison Group</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison Group Selection</td>
<td>Random, Cluster-random, Unclear, Other form of non-random way (if non-random, describe selection method)</td>
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### Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Design</th>
<th>Cross-sectional or Longitudinal</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Data</td>
<td>Quantitative and/or Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Method</td>
<td>Surveys, Interviews, Focus Group, or other methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Time</td>
<td>Not clear when the data was collected, Data collected at one point in time only, Data collected before and after the intervention was provided, Data collected on more occasions (specify occasions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis Method</td>
<td>Unclear method, Clear method (specify which one)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Results

| Results | - Description of main findings  
|---------|---------------------------------|
|         | - Dimensions of empowerment  
<p>|         | - Other findings |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>MFI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al-Mamun et al. (2014)</td>
<td>The Journal of Developing Areas</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>Peninsular Malaysia</td>
<td>AIM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amin et al. (1998)</td>
<td>The Journal of Developing Areas</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Whole country</td>
<td>ASA, RDRS, DCI, CDA, VERC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garikipati (2008)</td>
<td>World Development</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>RRB, SGSY, NABARD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hale et al. (2012)</td>
<td>Elsevier/ Women’s Studies International Forum</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>Amhara and Southern region</td>
<td>ACSI, OMFI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holvoet (2005)</td>
<td>Development and Change</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>RDP, TNWDP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukherjee &amp; Kundu (2012)</td>
<td>Gender, Technology and Development</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>SGSY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosenberger et al. (2010)</td>
<td>AIDS Behav</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>Limbe</td>
<td>Fonkoze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suja (2012)</td>
<td>Sona Global Management Review</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>TNWDP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swain &amp; Wallentin (2009)</td>
<td>International Review of Applied Economics</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Orissa, Andra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra</td>
<td>NABARD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swain &amp; Wallentin (2012)</td>
<td>International Review of Applied Economics</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Orissa, Andra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra</td>
<td>NABARD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**
AIM = Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia; ASA = Association for Social Advancement; RDRS = Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service; DCI = Development Center; CDA = Community Development Association; VERC = Village Education Resource Center; RRB = Regional Rural Banks; SGSY = Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana; NABARD = National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development; ACSI = Amhara Credit and Saving Institution; OMFI = Omo Microfinance Institution; IRDP = Integrated Rural Development Programme; TNWDP = Tamil Nadu Women’s Development Programme; IFAD = International Fund for Agricultural Development; MRDS = Meghalaya Rural Development Society; SHG = self-help group;
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Program Model</th>
<th># Participants</th>
<th>Participants Gender</th>
<th>Participant Selection</th>
<th># in comparison group</th>
<th>Comparison group selection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al-Mamun et al. (2014)</td>
<td>Group based Grameen Bank model</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Random sampling</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>Same group as participants; before-after method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amin et al. (1998)</td>
<td>Grameen Bank credit</td>
<td>2364</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Random multistage stratified cluster sampling</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>Random multistage stratified cluster sampling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garikipati (2008)</td>
<td>SHG</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Random stratified sampling</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>Random stratified sampling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haile et al. (2012)</td>
<td>Group lending program</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Random sampling</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Comparing long-term participants to short-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holvoet (2005)</td>
<td>Group lending program</td>
<td>1297</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Random sampling drawn from a membership list</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Random sampling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyngdoh &amp; Pati (2013)</td>
<td>SHG</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Random stratified sampling</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Stratified random sampling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukherjee (2015)</td>
<td>SHG</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Random sampling drawn from a membership list</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>Random sampling of non-participating households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukherjee &amp; Kundu (2012)</td>
<td>SHG</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Random sampling</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Random sampling of non-participating households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosenberg et al. (2010)</td>
<td>Solidarity group</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Passive recruitment approach</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Comparing long-term participants to short-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suja (2012)</td>
<td>SHG</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Random sampling</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>Same group as participants; before-after method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swain &amp; Wallentin (2009)</td>
<td>SHG bank linkage program</td>
<td>805</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Random sampling</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>Random sampling of non-participating households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swain &amp; Wallentin (2012)</td>
<td>SHG bank linkage program</td>
<td>810</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Random sampling</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Comparing long-term participants to short-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Study design</td>
<td>Type of data</td>
<td>Data collection method</td>
<td>Data collection time</td>
<td>Data analysis method</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Mamun et al. (2014)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
<td>Survey through structured interviews</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Average effect of treatment of treated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amin et al. (1998)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
<td>Survey, focus group discussions</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Cronbach’s alpha coefficients, Least-square regression model, Multivariate analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haile et al. (2012)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
<td>Surveys, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Cross-case synthesis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyngdoh &amp; Pati (2013)</td>
<td>Longitudinal (5 years)</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
<td>Surveys, focus group discussions</td>
<td>2004-5 &amp; 2009-10</td>
<td>Propensity Score Matching (PSM), Difference-in-Difference (DinD)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukherjee (2015)</td>
<td>Longitudinal (2 years)</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>2006 &amp; 2008</td>
<td>Chi square, one way ANOVA, Regression analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukherjee &amp; Kundu (2012)</td>
<td>Longitudinal (4 years)</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>2006 &amp; 2008</td>
<td>Regression analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosenberg et al. (2010)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Survey through structured interviews</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Logistic regression analysis, linear regression analysis, adjusted logistic and linear model, Sobel tests</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suja (2012)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>One way ANOVA; F-test; comparison of mean, SD, mean percentage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swain &amp; Wallentin (2009)</td>
<td>Longitudinal (4 years)</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>2000 &amp; 2003</td>
<td>Robust Maximum Likelihood (RML); Maximum Likelihood Estimator (MLE)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: List of women empowering activities derived from Swain and Wallentin’s (2009) focus groups

1. Overcoming the resistance from husband and other members of the family to join the SHG.
2. Increased participation in decision making within the household to issues that were usually considered outside the domain of the woman.
3. Improved status and increase in respect within the household.
4. Feeling fearless, open and confident
5. All group members learn to sign their names and some have joined adult literacy programmes
6. Adopting family planning measures
7. More mobile, can move out of the house and the village more frequently
8. Talking to the male persons in their village, which they were not confident to do before because of cultural reasons
9. They have more information about the government programmes due to their exposure and can apply for them for their own betterment and the benefit of the community
10. Actively participating in the decision to send their children to school
11. Eradication of prostitution
12. Some women can actively engage in the decision of their marriage with the elders in their household
13. Awareness about politics and engaged in political participation (by way of voting) or directly, by standing as a candidate in the local elections

Source: Swain & Wallentin (2009:556)