

Is Micro Credit in Urban Poverty Making a Difference? A Review from Bangladesh

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Abstract Bangladesh has gained substantial experience in using micro credit for reducing poverty since 1980s. NGOs first adopted micro credit approach basically to empower the women attempting at generating self employment and self reliance. The government followed the policy to achieve same objectives. NGOs and GOs have launched micro credit based programs to alleviate urban poverty, especially in the slum areas. Most of the NGOs and GOs could bring urban women within the fold of different micro credit based activities. Strong criticisms exist in relation to the economic success of micro credit programs despite the consciousness that has generated. Attributed progress has been seen in many areas such as education, health care, employment, gender equality. The urban poor seem more confident now than ever before and community development approach of NGOs played vital role to elevate their overall situation. The current paper is situated in the debate of micro credit and urban poverty. This paper traces the brief history; describes the strong foundations and faith in micro-credit in Bangladesh and examines the notions of the debate: has micro credit moved the urban poor from survival mode to thrive or remains a placating phenomenon? Central to the paper is the human rights dimensions of social work and its empowerment actions.

Keywords Micro credit, Self-employment, Social work, Urban poverty, Gender-based oppression, Empowerment, Strength perspective, Human rights

Introduction

Micro-credit has been considered most effective instrument in fighting poverty, especially in developing and least developed countries (Sen, 2001; Rahman, 2000; Khandker, 1999; Zaman; 1999; Husain, 1998; Wood and Sharif, 1997; Montgomery et al., 1996). The approach of micro-credit has gained further prominence and recognition across the world after Muhammad Yunus and Grameen Bank of Bangladesh have jointly been awarded Nobel Peace Prize

in 2006. The situation of poverty was always acute in this part of Indian sub-continent which later on emerged as an Independent and sovereign country named Bangladesh in 1971. The poor of this region used to be dependent on traditional money lenders as they had no other way to survive during the time of crisis. The traditional money lenders used to lend money to the poor with high interest and other stringent conditions that never benefitted the poor, rather exploited them causing untold miseries with a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. The public banking sectors could not introduce any mechanism through which the poor had the opportunity to have easily accessible credits. The commercial private banking sectors that only came up in late 90's- afterwards also did not prioritize the poor but had made adequate provisions for the rich and the organized sectors. It was always important to innovate a device that would facilitate the poor to gain easy access to credits without collateral as the poor had no assets. Micro-credit system has been thought out for the poor as the system offers collateral-free loans mostly for the women of low-income families. It was first introduced in Bangladesh by Grameen Bank in mid 1970s, and later on many other non-government organizations came up with micro-credit programs attempting at rural women; and some of the organizations also targeted the urban women living in the slums for their empowerment (Ahmad, 2007; Reza, 2003). In micro-credit programs, mostly the women are provided with group-based small loans under certain rules and regulations, aiming at reducing poverty. The micro-credit borrowers are expected to utilize the credit in such a way so that they can involve themselves in different income generating activities that will create self-employment and self reliance without being exploited and discriminated. Micro-credit programs of NGOs have become well-known throughout the country since 1980s (Das, 2008). Now, thousands of NGOs have been working on micro-credit programs to serve the women at rural as well as urban areas. The public sectors have also come forward to offer micro-credit for the poor along with large number of NGOs. Some of the top NGOs and GOs involved in field level micro-credit activities are Grameen Bank, *brac*, ASA, PROSHIKA, BRDB, USS, department of

youth development under the Ministry of Youth and Sports etc. More than 60% of all poor households have been found one way or other involved in micro-credit programs in the country. It comes 37% of all households across the country which has faithfully relied on micro-credit as they completely made themselves dependent on micro-credit based programs for mere survival (World Bank, 2005; Ahmad, 2007). Since the credit is of small amount, the poor sometimes avail the opportunity of taking it from more than one organizations. In most cases, the poor are forced to do it, because they lack savings and capital which generally prevent them from undertaking any productive economic activities; thus credit help them generate self-employment. Credit is therefore widely considered as most effective way for the poor to create the opportunity of self-employment. Other informal as well as traditional lending systems may be available in Bangladeshi society but not risk free for the poor, causing them lots of suffering (Khandker, 1998). Micro-credit programs offered by NGOs and GOs for the poor seem able to remove those sufferings as they are no more interested to borrow money from traditional lenders. Most important part of micro-credit is to help the poor to be involved in income generating activities that bring the confidence back to them, facilitate to come out from the vicious circle of poverty. Positive implications of micro-credit programs, particularly in reducing poverty, have been shown in many empirical studies conducted in recent years (Imai and Arun, 2010; Imai and Azam, 2012; Imai et al., 2012; Lensink, 2012). The major problem is the situation of unemployment and partial employment that continually persist among the poor which could solely be held responsible for causing the state of poverty in a country like Bangladesh. Micro-credit perhaps addresses the situation of unemployment to a greater extent and that is the reason for millions of Bangladeshi poor to have expressed their strong faith in micro-credit by involving themselves in it. The target group of micro-credit programs is mostly women as it is believed that women having access to credit and savings may be inspired to be involved in income generating activities which in turn will help them have autonomy and decrease their socioeconomic dependency on men (Parmar, 2003; Amin et al., 1998; Das, 2007). Moreover, it has been proven that women's active participation in micro-credit programs make them more confident, and husbands also treat their wives with respect and dignity as the wives contribute to household income, resulting in frequent interspousal discussions that lead to institutionalize gender parity within the household (Amin et al., 1998; Hasehmi et al., 1996).

There have also been a number of instances with negative implications of the impacts of microcredit as it was seen as being anti-patriarchic as it reduced the dominance of the male members of the family and generated a feeling of vulnerability and worthlessness amongst the males (Paul-Majumder and Begum, 2000). Despite that unintended outcomes of micro-credit use, felt in the early stages of introduction of the program, it is considered a program of

merits and has wider recognition by the poor. Micro-credit as a program for women is a preferred instrument for employment generation that has led to improvement in status for women and directly contributed to increasing their role in influencing decision making process at the family level. The contributions of micro credit to creation of greater sense of self worth, greater social inclusion, assist in legitimizing a role in household affairs, prevents domestic violence and encouraging education of daughters has been noted in a number of studies (Rahman, 1986; Pitt and Khandker, 1996; Kabeer, 2001). Micro-credit in Bangladesh is therefore deep-rooted and to a greater extent institutionalized which seems to have been recognized as the only means that can successfully address the situation of poverty and can also make the women substantially empowered. As a result, thousands of foreign aided NGOs have grown throughout the country, many of which have only embarked on micro-credit programs targeting the poor of rural and urban areas, though the overall success of it always remains questionable.

Micro-credit, Slums and Urban Poverty

Although, in the beginning, micro-credit programs were introduced in the rural areas of Bangladesh to address poverty, it was extended to people in urban poor. Most of the urban poor live in the slum areas located in different cities of the country. Bangladesh is densely populated and has rapid growth of urbanization in recent years. The capital city, Dhaka, receives constant exodus of people from rural areas that join the ranks of urban poverty (Barrett and Dunn, 2006).

Around 25% of total population of Bangladesh (35 million) lives in urban areas. The growth rate of urban population is 3.5% annually, and this phenomenal growth of urban population has caused innumerable socioeconomic and psychological constraints among the low income groups, forcing them to live in slums scattered throughout the cities.

More than 50% of total population in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, lives in slums. According to population census 2011, total number of population in Bangladesh is 146.10 million; of which almost 5.3 million people live in slums.

Rural poor migrate to cities, especially to Dhaka, as they perceive that the opportunity of getting employment in Dhaka is better, though many of them end up in slums after migration from the village, often forced to live a wretched life without basic amenities available in slum condition (Islam, 1996; Das, 2003). Majority of slum dwellers live below poverty line; and the slum children often grow half-fed, half-clothed without education and basic health care. The adult members of the slums do not have permanent employment; struggle to manage a livelihood every day, resulting in intermittent starvation along with family members. Thus, urban poverty prevails in the slums and urban poverty is definitely a spill-over of rural poverty in the context of Bangladesh.

Some of the NGOs that directly work with slum dwellers to deal with their poverty are: ASA, *brac*, PROSHIKA, Plan International, Aparajeyo Bangladesh and many other local NGOs.

Nongovernmental interventions prefer rural habitats for their micro credit rather than the squatter settlements of the poor in urban areas. The three main reasons are that the NGO's do not see a government policy that allows the poor to stabilize and settle in the urban habitat chosen by themselves. Secondly, frequent efforts are made to evict slum dwellers for projects and development of the government and also to satisfy major business interests, and also for the fear of deviance and possible criminal activities (World Bank, 2005). Despite this reluctance, about 71.5% of slum dwellers are covered by some forms of micro credit through the NGOs (CUS, 2005). Although more micro-credit based activities have been designed by the NGOs to create self-employment and self-reliance for the slum dwellers, there is still enough space left for NGOs to expand micro-credit based activities for the poor living in the slums. Along with NGOs some GOs like Urban Social Services (USS), Cooperative Department, Youth Development Directorate etc have also undertaken initiatives through micro-credit based programs to make the slum dwellers self-reliant. NGOs working in the slums provide collateral free micro-credit generally to the women on the basis of group formation which is described as group-lending practice, attempting at empowering the women by involving them in economic activities. Micro-credit is also given to the male slum dwellers either individual based or group based for the same purpose which inspires them to start up a small business (Mckernan, 2002). The activities under micro-credit based programs designed by NGOs and GOs for slum dwellers aim at the Millennium Development Goals proposed by United Nations. The Millennium Development Goals that are supposed to be achieved through micro-credit based programs are:

- Reducing extreme poverty and hunger. It is believed that micro-credit has a positive effect on production and economy that can reduce poverty and hunger.
- Ensuring full course of primary schooling for every child by 2015. Micro-credit programs inspire the credit borrowers to send their children to schools and give incentives to finish primary schooling.
- Promoting gender equality and empowering women. Micro-credit programs are introduced directly for the empowerment of women as they get opportunity to involve themselves in income-generating activities. Since the women contribute to the family financially, they can influence decision-making process and thereby a kind of gender equality evolves in the familial context.
- Reducing child mortality by two-thirds and maternal mortality by three-quarters during the period of 1990—2015. Micro-credit borrowers are often made aware of health status of their children and mothers

which help them take care of health of infants and pregnant mothers that reduces mortality rate.

- Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. The spread of HIV/AIDS and malaria must be halted by 2015. The urban poor, who receive micro-credit, are made aware about the precautions to fight HIV/AIDS.

Micro-credit programs initiated in the slums throughout the country are believed to have been playing instrumental role in achieving the above-mentioned Millennium Development Goals in the context of Bangladesh. It has indeed gained considerable recognition from different quarters as an effective weapon to deal with the situation of urban poverty, thereby creates an environment where the urban poor get an opportunity to uplift their socioeconomic situation.

Micro-credit and Empowerment of the Poor

Micro-credit program is seen as an approach to access to credit, and thereby a window for the poor to gain economic empowerment (Yunus, 1994; Morduch, 1997; Zahan and Reza, 2008), though initially considered as a critical input for the employment of women were extended to men and the whole of household. (Hasehmi et al., 1996; Chen, 1996).

There has been criticism of micro-credit programs that it created pressure on women borrowers as their workload increased and repayment of loans under stringent rules and regulations became burdensome for them, resulting in lowering the status of women and also made them more vulnerable (Montgomery et al., 1996; Goetz et al., 1996). Moreover, patriarchal values and norms rooted in the ground of Bangladeshi society prevent the women from being actively and sincerely involved in micro-credit programs which, in many cases, causes considerably disempowerment to them.

The very concept of 'empowerment' is confusing and at times misleading too. Although it is difficult to reach a consensus about the definition of empowerment, an effort is made to explain empowerment from social work point of view and to evaluate the micro-credit based programs designed and implemented to address the problem of urban poverty. The reflection of urban poverty in the context of Bangladesh is well detected in slum areas located in different cities and towns across the country. Micro-credit programs are undertaken by NGOs and GOs to involve the slum dwellers, particularly women, in economic activities for self employment which is believed to bring about empowerment for the women. Women in Bangladesh like any other societies face gender bias that has been strongly rooted in social, cultural, economic, political, legal structures linked with larger social system which confines them within the household, denies them access to multifarious institutions available in the society (World Bank, 2001). Micro-credit

programs in the slums do not seem to have brought that empowerment for the women who challenge gender bias or correct gender discriminatory practices. The interventions of micro-credit programs do not deal with structural barriers that pull the women back from making any progress in life (Moser, 1991). It has been reported by many researchers that a significant portion of credit taken by the women and the income-generating activities in which the credit is invested are one way or the other controlled by male relatives (Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1996; Fernando, 1997; Rahman, 1999). Still micro-credit encourages the women to challenge patriarchal norms as they are provided with financial resources and economic activities which are conventionally exclusive to men and it also makes the women more visible in public affairs. It is understood that involvement of women in economic activities is in fact empowering which in turn naturally ensure women's empowerment in the social and political realm (Mayoux, 2002). Micro-credit helps the women come out from traditional social isolation and they gradually build up gender-based solidarity among themselves through lending- groups which transcends ethnic, class, and caste differences and help them remain united to effectively challenge structural and institutionalized gender-based oppression (Khandker, 1998; Mayoux, 2000; Rankin 2001). It is further understood that micro-credit provides financial services as well as social and political consciousness which encourage the women raise initiatives, develop skills, make literate, resulting in greater women's awareness of their rights and inspire them to be organized for social change (Amin, Becker, and Bayes, 1998; Mayoux, 2000; Rankin 2001).

There is no doubt that one of the fundamental goals of feminist empowerment is to abolish gender oppression and patriarchal values and norms. This is a very complex issue. Ending gender oppression and patriarchy cannot be achieved by micro-credit programs alone. This requires mass movement with a robust societal commitment. Therefore, NGOs or any development practitioners in feminist liberation can play only a supportive role, rather than playing central role in the whole process of bringing social change (Parmar, 2003). The way empowerment of the women has been conceptualized in development discourse through micro-credit programs seems to be misleading. It is felt that the concept of empowerment used in development circles through implementing micro-credit based programs in the context of Bangladesh has the real potential to disempower women as they remain dependent on micro-credit; and empowerment does not come from within, rather it has been brought about temporarily from outside.

Empowerment may be defined as the process of exploring and discovering one's internal strength and capacity that may be used to bring change in the institutions, behaviors and ideologies which cause one's experience of oppression and exploitation in everyday life. Empowerment is therefore gaining greater autonomy over one's life and building confidence to challenge and fight one's subordinate position in society (Parmar, 2003). It is to be noted that empowerment

has to be based on one's self-strength, self confidence and self image that inspire the person to fight all odds and thereby gain an inner force which brings the person self-autonomy and self-dependency that cause greater welfare for all people. Certainly in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, a dent has been made by women through utilization of micro credit at least in the above areas of building their own assertiveness.

Gandhian approach to empowerment and development has been much appreciated in today's world. The basic values of this approach is to be fair and respectful to all, emphasizing self-strength and facilitating self-directed transformation to bring desired changes, that are considered important and meaningful to people, a situation created according to the will of people. Western social work model has sketched four fundamental human values that respect human dignity and human worth. These are: social justice, service to humanity, demonstration of integrity and competence (Pulla and Mariscal, 2013). These values are very much found in Gandhian approach. Strengths-based practice of social work has borrowed many of these values that are being followed while dealing with the clients. A strengths-based approach encourages the persons to identify and build on their self-strength that helps them reach their goals and also motivate them to retain or regain independence in everyday life (Pulla, 2012). This approach puts emphasis on human empowerment gained and extracted from self strength and self independence, and it also focuses on social justice may be established through distribution of societal resources and that inevitably ensures client empowerment (Cowger, 1994). Cowger (1994) states that:

“Empowerment-based practice also assumes social justice, recognizing that empowerment and self-determination are dependent not only on people making choices, but also on people having available choices to make. The distribution of available choices in a society is political. Societies organize systems of production and the distribution of resources, and that affect those choices differentially. Across societies, production and distribution are based on varying degrees of commitment to equity and justice” (Cowger, 1994, p.263).

Strengths perspective is applied to build on people's aspirations, strengths, resources and resiliency that engage them in different actions attempting at achieving social justice and personal well being (Pulla, 2012). The central part of strengths perspective is client empowerment; discovering client's strength and thereby fostering empowerment; which is given highest priority (Cowger, 1994).

Micro-credit based programs launched in slum areas in Bangladesh to reduce urban poverty do not show any evidence yet in terms of either reducing poverty in the urban areas or making the poor considerably empowered. No study so far presents that a certain number of slum dwellers have substantially improved their socioeconomic condition and thereby have left slum living in order to enjoy a better living. Much of the discourse on empowerment through micro-credit programs is confined to building a level of skill

to become economically empowered but certainly not in the direction of challenging strongly rooted patriarchy that creates gender discrimination at the family as well as community level in the slum areas and also in the greater society. International studies show that micro-borrowers always remain tied to very rudimentary type of trading, manufacturing, and other economic activities, despite the fact of taking micro-credit for a long time. Arguments are that one does not come out of micro credit and as a mechanism it is incapable of building oneself up to the extent that one can leave the profile of a debtor behind has also found credibility. The authors' anecdotal evidence suggests that it is hard to come out of the cycle of poverty if only limited amount is allowed to be borrowed to survive and maintain sustenance. Research from Africa also corroborates that micro credit has not been very helpful in assisting the poor to come out of poverty; rather it unfortunately sustained the poverty (Thabethe *et al.*, 2011). Research elsewhere also indicated that micro credit as a poverty reduction strategy remains in a contested terrain (Rogaly, 1996; Kidder, 1997; Ahmad, 2003; Affleck and Mellor, 2006). The final salvo perhaps comes from the findings of other researchers who have found that micro credit only benefits the better off among the poor, but the ultra-poor always remains outside micro-credit network (Rogaly, 1996; Kidder, 1997).

The life line for the micro-credit borrowers to remain involved in some kinds of business once they decide to receive microcredit appears to create a dependency relationship on this mechanism (Ahmad, 2007). Slum dwellers or the women living in slums and taking micro-credit regularly indeed become dependent on micro-credit, often a life-long process which never ends and perhaps never generates the surplus to come out of the original indebtedness. Micro-credit has increased dependency of the poor and has created a situation of disempowerment for the poor in the context of urban poverty in Bangladesh. Considering the situation created because of micro-credit programs, the very system of it has been described as debt-trap and debt-burden syndrome (Muhammad, 2010; Ahmad, 2007). It has also been shown in a study conducted in Bangladesh that micro-credit results in indebtedness which creates poverty traps for the women (Shillabeer, 2008). Another study shows that instead of ownership of assets, the micro-borrowers of *brac* had to sell their personal belongings to repay the debts. And among the beneficiaries of Grameen Bank 57% of women micro-borrowers reported that they suffered more with spousal verbal aggression after they started taking loans and 13% reported that both verbal and physical violence went up since they took loans (Ali and Hatta, 2012).

A few other shocking revelations in the field of micro-credit practice seems to be that the empowerment of women is something that is done *to* them, instead of it being a real achievement by women for themselves. It appears to be a project work, undertaken and imposed from above and outside by an NGO or GO involving women as beneficiaries

planned by development workers and have very limited stake in the processes of empowerment (Parmar, 2003). Moreover, much-talked empowerment of women through micro-credit is full of ambiguity. Particularly in Bangladesh a view that development workers taking the responsibility of bringing empowerment for women in fact banishes women's struggle to fight gender discrimination and gender oppression, but at best it placates- the issues can be seen from the following quote from a woman who was involved in a micro credit from Grameen Bank:

'In the past my father-in-law would never stop my husband from beating me. But after I joined Grameen Bank he said to my husband, "You had better stop beating and scolding your wife... She can bring you loans from Grameen Bank. If you want you can start a business with the money she brings!"' (Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley, 1996, p.649).

The above statement appears to be an expose of the kind of empowerment that is brought to the women through micro-credit. Our argument is that Bangladesh similar to other Islamic nations within Asia requires a simultaneous program that develops the inner strength or self-ability of the women that can effectively challenge the patriarchal dominance in order to establish gender equity. We posit that an occasional Prime Minister-ship or becoming President of the nation is not an indication of the achievements in the realm of gender equality and further we argue that talk of empowerment of women through micro credit in Bangladesh and in South Asia is explained through a myopic view of male developmental professionals and is not decreed and determined by women themselves of improvements in their self-worth, confidence and inner abilities. Dependency on micro-credit and its entrapped dictated activities generate disempowerment for the poor since their struggle is absorbed and forcefully directed towards achieving specific goals envisioned and prioritized by an outside party (Kabeer, 2001).

Living in slums hardly has any chance to indulge in their own visions of social change; dictated activities in the name of micro-credit are frequently and consistently implemented as below:

... the beneficiaries of credit programs do not participate in the planning, implementation, or evaluation connected with micro-enterprises in any meaningful or systemic way. These policies are decided by highly centralized administrations primarily accountable to respective donors of NGOs (Fernando, 1997, pp. 156-7).

Slum women are given loans after they form groups that have liability to repay weekly installments with high rate of interest to micro-credit agency which may be regarded as 'social collateral'. This is often burdensome and is a matter of great anxiety for an individual micro-credit borrower living in the slums. Rahman (1999) discusses that the byproduct of this social collateral brings unprecedented tension and antagonism among the women group members, since they remain under severe pressure from family members, micro-credit staff and group members to repay and

meet loan installments (Rahman 1999; Rankin, 2001). One woman micro-borrower said:

When a woman fails to make her installment on time, she experiences humiliation through verbal aggression from fellow members and bank workers in the loan centre...In an extreme case peers may take the defaulter to the bank office (Rahman, 1999, p.72).

The loan defaulters appearing in the agency frequently face an outburst of anger from the fellow members and the agency staff. In extreme situations group members may make decisions to take the defaulter's saleable household items or personal belongings to sell or mortgage them out to get required money for paying the installment (Rahman, 1999). Even sometimes an individual borrower fails to repay loan installment goes through humiliating experiences from the peers themselves. One such microcredit member states:

"When we failed to make weekly repayments our group members asked, why did you eat chicken yesterday? Why did you send your son to a movie? Why did you buy new cloths? Why are you arranging a wedding for your daughter?" (Fernando, 1997, p.160).

Women in the slums are mostly targeted to provide with micro-credit as development workers perceive that women are basically shy, passive, submissive and less troublesome therefore more reliable than men to work with. Both agency staff and the participating women admit that women are accepted in micro-credit program because of their positional vulnerability, *to contribute to family welfare and thereby making them empowered*. Agency staff feels that:

"women are more reliable and more disciplined than men. Working with women is easier for us". They also comment, "It is hard to work with male members in the field. They do not come to meetings, they are arrogant, they argue with bank workers and sometimes they even threaten and scare bank workers...our superior officers have decided not to recruit new male members, although we do not have written instruction about it" (Rahman, 1999, p.69).

Weekly meetings of the borrowers in micro-credit programs have been characterized as 'culture of discipline' of the peers (Rogaly, 1996). An observation of a meeting recorded:

"Members must salute, sit on the floor in rows, and chant at weekly meetings. In some centres the members are required to do physical drills" Furthermore, women are required to address the predominantly male staff members as 'sir...Women who miss meetings or fall behind in their repayments are publicly scolded and may be visited in their homes by bank workers or other members" (Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley, 1996, p.649).

It is obvious that by participating in the weekly rituals group members "plainly cast them in a subservient role". Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley (1996, 649) explain that women members "become experienced in interacting with male authority figures". One micro-credit borrower shared her experience about her friend who also borrowed credit but failed to repay the loan installments for several weeks and she was later brought to the agency centre by other group

members, she was asked by the agency official to sit in a room and she was subsequently locked inside. "The woman felt so humiliated that she hanged herself from the roof-fan by using her own *sari* (woman's clothing)" (Rahman, 1999, p. 70). The evidences presented in the discussions perhaps prove adequately that reducing urban poverty or making a difference in urban poverty through micro-credit based programs implemented in the slum areas in Bangladesh may be strongly questionable, though the programs help the poor survive somehow with meager amount of cash money for income generating activities; but sustainability of their survival is in jeopardy if the credit is withdrawn.

Human Rights and Strength Approach to Poverty

The concept of human rights of social work has connected with the concept of human needs. Scholars have argued that human needs concepts are central to social justice and human rights (Gil, 2004; Witkin, 1998; Wronka, 1992). But human needs and human rights often reinforce each other; and meeting human needs are central to develop a democratic society (Noonan, 2005). Human rights cannot be established without meeting human needs. It used to be thought earlier that teaching about human needs should be an integral part of entire social work education (Bisno, 1952; Boehm, 1956; Stroup, 1953). Boehm (1958) argued that human needs are universal and culturally specific, but suggested that the focus of social work should be on human social functioning and resource distribution at societal level. The preamble of the Code of Ethics of NASW adopted in 1997 states: "The primary mission of social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people". This is worth noting from social work point of view that without meeting basic human needs human well being is impossible; and human well being is directly correlated with human rights. But Ife (2012) argued that social work should move from beyond needs-based approaches and adopt rights-based practice, though emphasized rights related to needs and vice versa. Therefore, social work practice is generally directed to meeting basic human needs that in fact establish human rights too. Ensuring human needs fulfillment and human rights establishment indeed brings human empowerment. The practice of social work help individuals, groups, or communities enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning, solve their own problems and create societal conditions favorable to this goal. So the empowerment of the women could be ensured through the practice of social work as it helps them to have autonomy to control over their own lives and enhance their living standards (Parsloe, 1996). Empowerment is something which is basic in social work practice. Social workers facilitate a situation where people themselves take initiatives to protect their rights that lead them to become confident and empowered. It is people's initiatives; social worker is only a facilitator here. From

social work point of view, empowering the poor is possible if they themselves are allowed and helped to analyze the sources of their problems, explore their needs and develop their own strategies for the reduction of poverty (Mayo, 2000). Women empowerment in social work practice means women will have enough confidence for self maintaining, problem solving and will feel stimulated to participate in community affairs for wider interest. Evidences show that the poor living in the urban areas in Bangladesh are yet to be genuinely empowered, though micro-credit programs implemented by NGOs and GOs claim to have empowered the urban poor in Bangladesh. Social work practice with the poor may make a difference in this regard. Human rights and empowerment perspectives of social work could be effective to deal with the poor in urban areas as social work profession creates an environment where individual, groups and communities become self-reliant on their own. Individual empowerment requires self-strength to take power over their lives, being able to influence each other and bringing change required to reduce poverty in a country like Bangladesh (Croft and Beresford, 2000). But individual empowerment is not effective without empowering groups, communities and organizations. When a group is empowered then all the members of the group gain positive experience for improving living standards. Empowerment strategies followed in social work practice improve coping skills, self-confidence and greater control over one's life that in fact result in meeting human rights and bringing full-fledged empowerment (Ali and Hatta, 2012; Adams, 2003).

Conclusions

The study makes an effort to reevaluate the impact of micro-credit in addressing the situation of urban poverty in Bangladesh. Qualitative and quantitative studies have been reviewed to explore and analyze the merits and demerits of micro-credit programs that are implemented in the slums to reduce urban poverty. The authors argue that adopting micro-credit paradigm to alleviate or reduce urban poverty does not appear to be realistic and in many cases the entire process is misleading and misguided. Poverty alleviation through micro-credit in the context of Bangladesh is not perhaps possible as the approach has severe limitations in the very process of implementation of it. Moreover, the approach is simplistic one as the concept of poverty defined in a narrow sense in terms of mostly income, though poverty is a broad concept that includes varied dimensions. The concept of empowerment that is supposed to have been brought about for the slum dwellers because of the implementation of micro-credit programs is also confusing. Some micro-credit literatures have highlighted the merits of micro-credit which may not fully be acceptable, ignoring many constraints inflicting the slum dwellers due to involvement in micro-credit.

Micro-credit creates a situation where the poor develops a

permanent dependency on credit from which the poor can never come out. Slum dwellers, especially the poor slum women, survive on credit and it seems to be a debt-trap for them. It is to a greater extent placating phenomenon. Much publicized women empowerment that has supposedly been brought about in the slum areas appears ambiguous. Development workers fighting battle for the empowerment of these destitute women in fact dis-empowers them by forfeiting their rights, preventing them from fulfilling their own desire, priorities, and visions. Micro-credit does not explore the inner strength of the poor, their capability, even does not help them restore self-confidence and it is implemented to extract benefits that is supposedly bestowed on the poor, but not planned and implemented by the poor themselves according to their will. The success of micro-credit seems to be only confined to raising awareness in relation to different social issues, making the poor literate, giving training in some trades and supporting them by giving micro-credit repeatedly. The strength of the poor is not explored in micro-credit programs. Therefore, self-directed transformation by the poor is no way possible through micro-credit initiatives. Perhaps, human rights and empowerment perspectives along with strength-based model of social work practice can better deal with the situation of urban poverty in a country like Bangladesh.

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