

Women's Economic Empowerment

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Theme: Economic Empowerment | **Location:** Nepal



BACKGROUND

Heifer International's *Strengthening Smallholder Enterprises of Livestock Value Chain* (SLVC) program in Nepal aims to empower women and improve their livelihoods. Started in 2012, the program emphasizes the importance of household dynamics and involves family members, community leaders and social groups as secondary project participants. The program's set of trainings, discussions and reflections create an environment conducive to personal growth and inspire behavioral change in people.

This brief is part of a larger study that analyzes indicators of women's empowerment across demographic variables.

METHODOLOGY

Using a mixed method approach, the study (November 2021 – May 2023) involved 251 respondents, including 176 women participants and 75 men respondents from the same households. The qualitative study involved 10 focus group discussions, as well as key informant interviews with project stakeholders. Secondary data from the nationally representative Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) database for Nepal, Bangladesh and India were used to corroborate their findings.

This brief focuses on the results of women's economic independence.

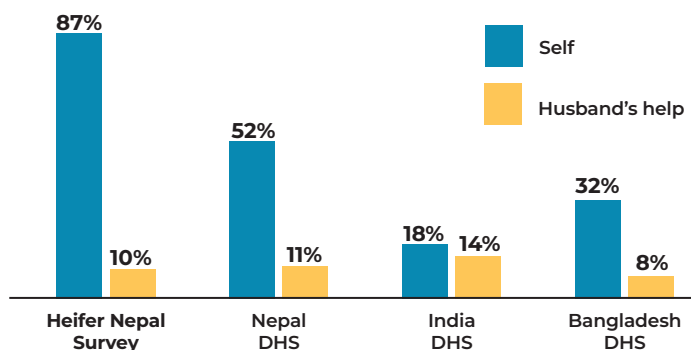
Primary Finding: Creating an environment that enables women's access to the formal financial sector, along with empowering them with financial literacy, results in women achieving higher levels of financial independence.

Key words: Financial Independence, Economic Empowerment, Nepal, Women's Empowerment

Rationale

This brief highlights how the economic empowerment of women corresponds to women's financial independence. Findings show that when women earn wages and control their own money, they work and save more, improve their sense of self and invest in better healthcare, education and standards of living for their families.

Figure 1: Percentage of women who manage finances on their own or with husband's help



Sources: Heifer Nepal Survey; Demographic and Health Survey

Managing Finances

The level of women's access to formal financial institutions varies significantly between Nepal, India and Bangladesh. When it comes to managing finances, women in Nepal have a greater degree of autonomy compared to women in India and Bangladesh, possibly reflecting differing employment rates within the region. According to DHS data, 31.9 percent of women in India and 49.4 percent in Bangladesh were employed at any time in the preceding 12 months, compared to 68.2 percent in Nepal.

In India, 18.1 percent of women were deciding how their cash earnings were used, while 32.4 percent of the women in Bangladesh were primary decision makers when it came to finances (Figure 1). Nepal performs better, with 51.8 percent of women reported to be the primary decision maker in managing their personal finances. This number increases to 86.9 percent for women who participated in the Heifer study, suggesting that the intervention successfully improved the financial autonomy of women.

PRE-INTERVENTION CHALLENGES

Before the SLVC intervention, women in the Heifer Nepal program faced a combination of extreme poverty, limited agricultural knowledge, a lack of formal education, restricted decision-making powers and multiple forms of disempowerment based on gender, caste, class and economic conditions. They had limited resources, had heavy work burdens at home and lacked time for personal needs and health care. Men also faced disempowerment, due to economic and social factors, that led them to migrate for work. These circumstances caused disharmony in communities.

The SLVC program brought transformative changes, enabling women to empower themselves through self-help groups, cooperatives and improved economic situations.

Ownership of Assets

When women participants had more access to assets and inputs, their personal well-being and that of their households was positively impacted. Findings show that women participants also achieved a significant level of economic empowerment through training and capacity building in personal leadership, gender sensitization and economic development, financial access through savings and loans, the development of cooperatives, business skills and animal management. This gives participants greater control over their personal income and reduced their risk of experiencing abuse. The research also shows that owning assets can be an empowering experience for women that boosts their self-confidence, expands their participation in decision-making and increases their bargaining power within their households.

DHS data show that 41 percent of women have a bank account in Nepal. In contrast, Heifer’s study shows that 77 percent of the women in its program have a bank account (Figure 2) — a higher percentage than the 73 percent of males in their families who hold one. This illustrates the intervention’s success at improving access to formal financial institutions for women.

Figure 2: Percentage of women who say they have a bank account

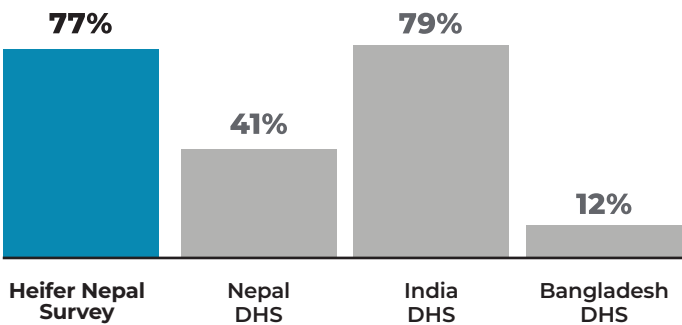
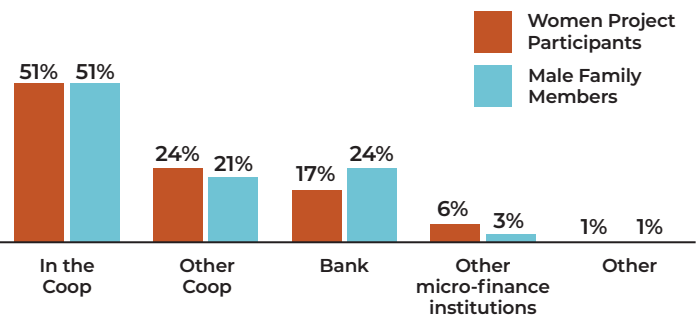


Figure 3: Preferred methods of savings



Saving Habits

Figure 3 highlights that a substantial number of participants, both men and women, in the SLVC program in Nepal save their money in Heifer-supported cooperatives. Some choose non-Heifer cooperatives or banks to save their income. Men tend to save more in banks than women.

Women in South Asia traditionally save informally, often resulting in loss during financial crises. Such savings are crucial for meeting essential needs, especially during crises. The trend of women openly depositing their savings in formal institutions through the SLVC program is a significant step towards gender equality in Nepal.

Conclusion

This brief highlights how Heifer Nepal’s programming improves women’s lives through economic empowerment. It emphasizes that when women have control of their finances, they work more and save more, improve their sense of self and invest in better living standards for their families. In Nepal, Heifer’s SLVC intervention has significantly improved women’s financial autonomy, with a high percentage of women in the program becoming the primary decision maker for their personal finances.