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Empowering rural women through microfinance: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract---Microfinance services are an essential tool for empowering rural women and enhancing their ability to make effective economic decisions. This study aims to explore the role of microfinance institutions in improving women's participation in economic activities and developing their skills in general, and in analyzing the Algerian situation for the empowerment of rural women in Algeria in particular. Multiple indicators are used to measure empowerment, such as market participation, savings mobilization, and skills development through training programs. The study focuses on the factors that contribute to the empowerment of rural women, along with an analysis of the challenges and opportunities faced by these institutions in achieving their objectives. The results indicate a positive impact of microfinance in improving the well-being of rural women, giving them access to and control over resources, and supporting small investment projects that contribute to raising their standard of living. Microfinance also promotes literacy and increased participation of women in economic decisions within the family and community, raising self-esteem and self-confidence. The study emphasizes that the success of these programs depends on overcoming challenges such as weak financial infrastructure and social awareness, which constitute an opportunity to promote sustainable development and achieve gender equality in rural communities.

Keywords---rural women, economic empowerment, social empowerment, microfinance.

Introduction

In recent decades, women's empowerment has become a top priority on the sustainable development agenda, recognizing the vital role women can play in achieving economic stability and growth, especially in rural communities. Rural women constitute a large proportion of the rural population in developing countries, and according to the World Bank, 70% of the world's poor are women. However, they face significant challenges in accessing financial resources and economic opportunities. In this context, microfinance is an effective tool for promoting financial inclusion, as it provides rural women with opportunities to access the capital needed to start or expand small businesses, which enhances their financial independence and contributes to improving their and their families' standard of living.

Microfinance provides a range of financial and non-financial services to poor or low-income individuals who traditionally lack access to traditional banking services. Microfinance focuses more on alleviating poverty by providing financial services to poor women to engage in income-generating activities, as women are the most excluded element in society economically in general and traditional banking in particular. Therefore, microfinance services allow for the economic integration of women, making them an effective element in society and in the economic cycle, by financing and supporting their small projects.

Algeria's actual and current experience is limited to one traditional model, represented by the National Agency for Microcredit Management, which plays a limited role in empowering rural women, given that this model focuses on financing women in urban areas, and does not focus on rural financing, whether in the agricultural sector or otherwise. Algeria also knew another model of Islamic microfinance, which stopped providing its services since 2014, due to its failure to recover the installments of loans granted through this program.

Achieving rural women's empowerment through microfinance is not without multiple challenges, including social and cultural barriers, difficulties in accessing financial institutions, and lack of financial awareness, on the one hand. On the other hand, microfinance stands out as a promising opportunity to empower rural women, especially in light of the expanding use of digital financial technologies that open new horizons for improving access to finance.

Problem of the study:

Microfinance is a powerful tool for women's empowerment. The higher the income, the better the borrower's asset position. It essentially promotes self-employment. This study proposes a conceptual framework for the general relationship between microfinance and women's empowerment.

For this reason, we will try through this research paper to answer the following question: How can microfinance contribute to empowering rural women, and what economic and social opportunities does it provide for them?

Study hypotheses:

- Microfinance has an important role in empowering rural women.
- Microfinance in Algeria enhances the role and status of rural women in their society by achieving financial independence.

Importance of the study: The importance of the study appears in the role of microfinance in empowering rural women economically and socially, by providing them with financing opportunities and establishing small income-generating projects, or developing their small projects, thus ensuring that they provide income and financial independence, which contributes to strengthening the status of rural women in society, and this is done by providing a group of financial and non-financial services.

Objective of the study: This study aims to explore the challenges facing rural women in accessing microfinance, and to evaluate opportunities that can contribute to enhancing their ability to benefit from this development tool, leading to achieving sustainable economic and social empowerment.

Study method: In our study, we adopted the descriptive analytical approach in presenting and analyzing documents and reports on the status of rural women and their access to financing and control over financial resources, in addition to the inductive and deductive approach to the various aspects of the theoretical research study.

Study axes:

Section One: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework.

Section Two: Challenges Facing Rural Women's Empowerment Through Microfinance.

Section Three: Microfinance and the Empowerment of Rural Women in Algeria.

I. Theoretical and conceptual framework:**1. The concept of economic empowerment of rural women:****1.1. Economic empowerment:**

The concept of empowerment has been extended as a term to express an individual process in which the individual takes responsibility and control over his life and situation. Empowerment generally aims to create an individual capable of bearing responsibility and making decisions, in addition to participating effectively in society. Empowerment aims to increase the control of individuals over their life affairs, increase their self-confidence, and their independence so that they become able to solve their problems themselves. (Modi, 2014)

Economic empowerment means "all practices, actions, activities and procedures that lead to developing the capabilities of individuals in their various forms, and motivating them in order to create the conditions that enable them to be active individuals and real contributors to the processes of generating income and wealth in society." (Pakkanna, 2018)

2.1. Women Empowerment:

Women's empowerment is a central and complex issue facing modern societies. However, there is no single or agreed-upon definition of "women's empowerment," as the term "empowerment" is not common in most languages. Although the term "women's empowerment" is widely used in the areas of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, the term is often used in specific contexts, including economic empowerment, political participation, and girls' education. In addition, most data on gender equality focuses on measuring the number of males versus females, without providing sufficient indicators of women's actual empowerment, especially at the global level, indicating a significant gap in information on this crucial aspect.

1.2.1. Definition of women empowerment:

As for women's economic empowerment, it refers to the process of supporting women to access and control available resources and assets, and to reduce the marginalization and deprivation they may suffer from, in a way that enhances gender balance and achieves equal benefit from development opportunities, which helps to lift women out of the cycle of poverty and enables them to participate effectively in the economy.(Unions)

Women's empowerment is defined as their ability to be financially empowered, control decisions that affect their lives, and free themselves from violence. Moreover, women's empowerment is the process that allows those who have been prevented from making strategic choices in life to gain this ability. Empowerment as a process through which women fit in and take steps to shape their lives by expanding their choices.

2.2.1. The role of microfinance in empowering women:

Microfinance empowers women economically by providing working capital and supporting women to generate a steady income for their families. Enabling women to access microfinance services, mainly financial services such as loans, savings, insurance and transfer services, and non-financial services such as training, will enable them to establish their own income-generating microenterprises, either to start a new business or to improve and develop their existing ones. The expected outcome is economic empowerment, which is manifested through ownership in income-generating activities, asset ownership, increased income, savings and decision-making.(Hda, 2020)

2. Microfinance as a tool for rural women's empowerment:

1.2. The concept of microfinance:

The concepts and definitions of microfinance vary according to the regions and the donors, but they share the goals they seek, especially development, poverty alleviation and job creation. Below we will try to put a space for this concept (Belmahi, 2024)

There is no comprehensive and final definition of microfinance, as it varies from one country to another, as the concept of microfinance can be understood as Microfinance can mean anything from a handful of alms given by a village cleric to what public banks give to their poor clients to start their own micro-enterprises.(Judy, 2011)

Microfinance allows individuals with limited incomes, who aspire to obtain funds in order to establish or develop income-generating activities, to obtain financial and non-financial services, and these services are represented in particular in micro-loans, micro-savings, micro-insurance and support for micro-projects.(LEDGERWOOD, 2018)

Microfinance concepts share the fact that they are based on three basic points, and they cannot function if one of them is absent, and they are as follows:(Belmahi, 2020)

- The small amount of microfinance operations: This is what makes the use of the word micro associated with all microfinance operations.
- The target group is the poor: that is, microfinance targets the vulnerable group of society that does not have sources of income and does not have the ability to resort to traditional financing institutions.
- Reducing poverty: The goal of microfinance is to reduce poverty by helping poor families establish their own small income-generating projects, thus lifting them out of the cycle of poverty.

2.2. The concept of rural microfinance:

Rural finance refers to financial services provided in rural areas for both agricultural and non-agricultural purposes. Agricultural microfinance provides financing for working capital and investment in irrigation systems, storage facilities and machinery, for example, and covers a wide range of products including microcredit, microsavings, microinsurance and cash transfers.(LEDGERWOOD, 2018)

Given that many MFIs were established with the goal of serving the poor and that agriculture is a major source of employment, income and food security in rural areas, their mandate is to meet the financial needs of poor agricultural households. MFIs tend to offer more rural financial services for both agricultural and non-agricultural purposes. While product innovation has enabled MFIs to reach poor rural households with loan and savings products and, in many cases, training and other services, agricultural finance services generally remain part of their portfolios.(LEDGERWOOD, 2018)

3.2. Objectives of Microfinance:

Microfinance aims to achieve a set of economic and social goals alike, as microfinance is considered an economic and social act at the same time. These goals can be summarized as follows:

1.3.2. Economic objectives of microfinance:(Belmahi, 2024)

- Profitability for microfinance institutions: One of the advantages of microfinance is that it combines a social goal with a commercial goal.
- Job Creation: The microfinance industry aims to combat poverty by creating jobs through the establishment or development of micro-enterprises.
- Increasing GDP: Increasing the GDP resulting from the activity of micro-projects for the poor, financed by microfinance institutions, is considered one of the most important goals of the microfinance industry.
- Creating added value: Micro-enterprises financed through microfinance institutions are among the most important sectors that create added value in various economies, rich or poor.
- Stimulating local economies by creating diverse demand for a wide range of goods and services, especially those related to nutrition, education and health services.
- The strategic importance derived from micro and small projects in themselves, as they are the driving force behind economic growth and provide the necessary materials for major industries.

2.3.2. Social objectives of microfinance:

- Empowering individuals, i.e. giving individuals who considered themselves a burden on society the opportunity to prove their abilities and competencies.
- Eradicating poverty: Eradicating poverty is the basis for the emergence of microfinance institutions, thus improving the health status, nutritional level and educational level of members of poor families.
- Strengthening the role of women in society: One of the goals that the microfinance industry seeks to achieve is to empower women and strengthen their role in society.
- Creating social links: Microfinance aims to create social links in many cases, especially between microfinance institutions and individual beneficiaries, and in groups of beneficiaries of solidarity loans among themselves.

II. Challenges Facing Rural Women Empowerment Through Microfinance:

1. Challenges of women's empowerment between developing and developed economies:

The challenges facing women in poor economies differ from those facing women in rich countries. In developed countries, women enjoy levels of education, financial freedom, and the ability to own financial assets, unlike poor countries where women mostly suffer socially and economically. We find high rates of women who suffer from illiteracy and ignorance, due to the living conditions in which they grow up, which do not allow women to receive an education or acquire income-generating projects. These societies often force women to marry at an early age, without taking into account the economic status of the family that is formed in the future, and thus poverty deepens among this group, especially after childbirth.

Below are examples of the difference in challenges to women's empowerment between rich and poor countries.:(Lamichhane, 2020)

- In Japan, women are highly educated and skilled, but they face challenges in self-confidence and significant social pressures. They are routinely expected to be ideal mothers and wives, which marginalizes their professional roles and reduces their participation in the labor market.
- In the United States, women are better off than in many other countries, but they still face a variety of challenges. The gender pay gap persists, women are underrepresented in public office, and there is a persistent subconscious bias against them.
- A large proportion of women in poor countries suffer from poverty, especially in rural and remote areas, where the social context and psychological orientations of these societies are among the biggest challenges to women's empowerment. Women there suffer from lack of skills and illiteracy, high unemployment rates, low wages compared to men, limited access to and ownership of financial assets, and underrepresentation in public and political systems. Although women are the mainstay of the family, their contributions are not sufficiently appreciated economically. Women in Nepal face many challenges, including weak economic empowerment, limited right to make household decisions, scarce financial assets, unsafe work environment, and early marriage.

2. Obstacles to microfinance in financing rural women: (Tariq, 2020)

The services provided by microfinance institutions are still concentrated in urban areas, and thus rural areas are deprived, with fewer services and higher rates of poverty and financial exclusion.

- Despite significant improvements in women's access to financial resources since the spread of microfinance in the 1990s, there remains a gap in equality in access to and control over these resources. While microfinance can contribute to women's empowerment and improved well-being, it is far from equal. Many available programs do not provide loans large enough to enable women to purchase assets such as land and housing. In addition, some loans require collateral or guarantees.
- In some cases, the man can benefit from the proceeds of the loan taken by his wife or negotiate directly with the lender to obtain the loan in her name. In these cases, increasing the woman's contribution to the family income does not necessarily lead to an improvement in her status or to greater equality between the spouses.
- Women living in extreme poverty do not benefit from microfinance services. Microfinance services are directed at poor women, but exclude the poorest women because they are unable to pay the installments due to them, thus depriving a large portion of rural women who need these services.

3. The contribution of microfinance to empowering rural women:

Empowerment is a multidimensional social process that aims to enable individuals to control their lives and enhance their capabilities to employ them in personal and social spheres. This process seeks to enable individuals to identify and work on important issues, which contributes to enhancing their effective role within their communities. Women's empowerment in particular includes five basic

elements: women's awareness of their self-worth; their right to choose and make decisions; their access to available opportunities and resources; their ability to control the course of their lives, whether within the family or in the public sphere; and their potential to influence the course of social change to create more just economic and social systems at the local and international levels. Through this, the contribution of microfinance to women's empowerment is through: (Modi, 2014)

- Upgrading the socio-economic status: Successful global experiences in this field have proven that microfinance contributes effectively to women's social and economic empowerment. Women's economic empowerment was often not possible due to lack of knowledge and awareness related to business. However, financial and non-financial services provided to women in poor rural areas, such as providing small loans, micro-savings services, insurance, in addition to training and support programs, contributed to enhancing women's economic and social capabilities. This encouraged women to benefit from successive loans, which led to improving their standard of living and that of their families, and achieving significant progress in their quality of life.
- Independence in making life decisions: Empowering women is one of the key factors to enhance their self-confidence and give them independence in decision-making, whether at the individual, family, or work and project levels. One of the biggest challenges facing women in rural and traditional communities is their lack of self-confidence and deprivation of decision-making, as they are characterized by their complete dependence on the man who is the main breadwinner of the family and has the authority to make decisions. This situation is also attributed to the lack of awareness, education, and prevailing customs and traditions. Hence, integrated microfinance programs targeting rural communities are an effective means of enhancing the role of women in these environments. These programs contribute to restoring women's confidence and enabling them to play active roles in society, which enhances their ability to make independent decisions. This is achieved through the non-financial services provided by microfinance institutions, and women owning small income-generating projects, which gives them greater independence from the prevailing traditional male roles.
- Strengthening the status of women in the family and society: Microfinance contributes to enhancing the status of women within the family and society, and leads to changing their traditional role in the family. Microfinance can enable women to participate in household decision-making, financial management and other important matters. The status of women in the family and society can be measured through a set of indicators such as:
 - Spousal Consultation Index: reflects the extent to which the husband consults his wife on household matters.
 - Individual autonomy index: expresses the degree of autonomy that a woman feels, especially with regard to physical movement outside the home and spending money.
 - Power Index: Refers to reports on women's actual decision-making ability.
- Financial freedom Greater financial independence for rural women increases their bargaining power, reduces violence against women and enables them to gain more influence over household decision-making. Among the elements that financial freedom provides are: The resulting Women's empowerment through microfinance: mobility, economic security, ability to make small purchases,

ability to make larger purchases, participation in major decisions, relative freedom from family domination, political and legal awareness, participation in political campaigns and protests.

- **Positive approach**

Towards child development: Rural women use part of their earned money for their childcare and on special occasions such as festivals and religious festivals, and buy clothes for their children and themselves from this income. The earnings are often used for their children's education, to buy medicines for family members and to help the family in emergencies.

III- Microfinance and empowerment of rural women in Algeria:

1. Women in rural Algeria:

Despite the great efforts made by the Algerian government to improve the lives of rural populations through large investments aimed at opening up these areas and reducing regional disparities, some disparities still exist, and although rural women are not considered a homogeneous group, they represent only 10% of all working women.

In terms of housing, about half of them live in large family homes, while precarious housing constitutes only 6.7% in rural areas, two-thirds of which are concentrated in the north of the country. 97.6% of rural households are connected to the electricity grid, but only a small percentage have access to natural gas (7.7%). The use of coal is very limited (1.2%), while most rural residents rely on bottled gas in the AGas access is 89.1%. Water access is 81.6% in these areas.

Traditional activities such as wood gathering are also rare among rural women in Algeria. Despite the increase in the number of educated girls in these areas, the illiteracy rate among rural women remains high, at 41.3%. In terms of economic activity, 68% of extractive industries are concentrated in rural areas, while real estate and financial activities remain very low, representing 1.8% and 3.5% respectively.

Data indicate that 47% of working women are employed in the agricultural sector, while 13.3% are employed in non-agricultural activities. Reports also show that 3.8% of women manage livestock farms, while 4.1% of managers of small farms ranging from 0.1 to 5 hectares are mostly illiterate, with a rate of up to 85%. (NationS Unies, 2014)

2. Algerian rural women's access to and control over financial resources:

In the following, we will try to analyze the extent to which rural women have access to finance and the difficulties they face compared to men, based on an analysis of the different mechanisms that exist. Finance will be understood to mean both government subsidies and different loans. Consequently, some results of strategies, programs or projects, disaggregated by sex (when data are available),

will be presented in order to study women's access to different financial mechanisms.

Microfinance in Algeria is limited in its official institutional form through two models that still provide their services, namely the National Agency for Microcredit Management, and the Islamic microfinance model that stopped providing its services after its inability to recover loan installments, represented by the Algerian Zakat Fund. In the following, we will try to analyze the contribution of the traditional microfinance model, and the extent of its contribution to financing the rural sector and rural women in Algeria.

1.2. Definition of the National Agency for Microcredit Management ANGEM: (ANGEM, 2024)

The mechanism established in 1999 as a tool to combat unemployment and poverty, managed by the National Agency for Microcredit Management, targeting, without age limits, people who want to start their own micro-projects, but do not have the necessary financing. The idea took its final form through the recommendations presented to the international forum held in December 2002, on the subject of "The Microcredit Experience in Algeria", which included many interested and active people in the field of microfinance. The National Agency for Microcredit Management (ANGEM) was created by Executive Decree 04-14 of January 22, 2004, as amended.

The agency consists of 49 state coordination committees, including groups of employees working to accompany beneficiaries from micro loan to Circle level. In addition to the joint guarantee fund for microcredits, which operates under the supervision of the agency, it guarantees loans for the benefit of entrepreneurs who have received a notification of subsidies from the National Agency for Microcredit Management. Through its micro-loan grants and the support it provides to entrepreneurs with micro-projects, the agency aims to:

- Creating jobs and reducing the poverty rate in society, as it is aimed at people who are unemployed but are able to carry out a micro-sustainable livelihood activity with little financial support and on flexible and comfortable terms.
- The programme encourages self-employment and home-based work, in addition to traditional industries and crafts, especially among women.
- It also supports the stability of rural populations in their original areas, by creating economic activities for them that produce goods and services and generate income.

2.2. Loans granted by the National Agency for Microcredit Management according to the financed sector: (ANGEM, 2024)

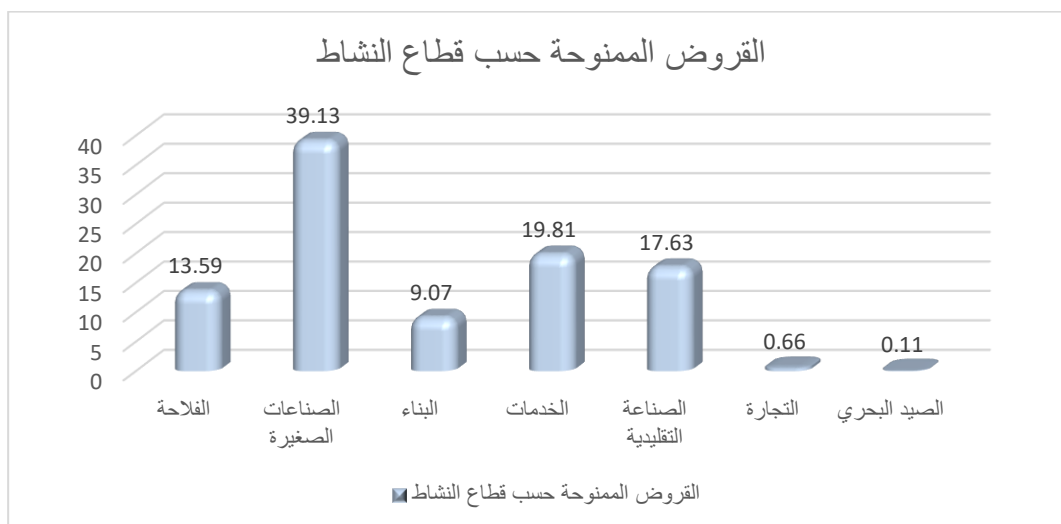


Figure No. 01: Loans granted by the National Agency for Microcredit Management by sector of activity.

Source: Prepared by researchers based on data from the National Agency for Microcredit Management.

Figure No. (01) above shows the distribution of micro-loan grants of the National Agency for Micro-Credit Management according to the sector of activity, where we find the highest percentage of loan grants for small industries at approximately 40% of the total loans granted. Small industries often mean crafts and handicrafts or those that depend on simple equipment and small machines, followed by services at approximately 20%, traditional industry at a rate of 17.63% and agriculture at a rate of 13.59%. As for the construction and public works sector, it represents a rate of nearly 9%, which is a significant rate if we take into account the size of micro-enterprises. As for the trade and fishing sectors, the rate of benefit from loans in them does not exceed 1% combined, and this is due to the policy of managing the supply in granting micro-loans by the agency.

From the above, we conclude that the National Agency for Microcredit Management does not directly target the empowerment of rural women, especially in the agricultural sector, but rather its role is focused, especially in urban areas, and on some sectors rather than others. Therefore, it can be concluded that the most important microfinance device in Algeria does not play its role in empowering rural women, and does not integrate the most excluded individuals and groups in society into the economic cycle by providing financial resources and non-financial services.

3.2. Loans granted by the National Agency for Microcredit Management by gender of the beneficiary:(ANGEM, 2024)

From Figure (02) below, it is clear that the percentage of benefit from micro-loans of the National Agency for Microcredit Management for Women represents 63% of the total number of loans, while the number of loans granted to men represents 37% of the total number. This is due to the agency's policy orientation towards

financing women more than men, which represents the application of one of the principles of microfinance in empowering women, because women in the absence of the necessary financing to establish a small project, whether manual or home, often causes unemployment and thus poverty, especially for women who do not have a breadwinner for their families, unlike men who have multiple and different opportunities for work, whether in rural or urban areas. Based on the above, microfinance was generally directed to help poor women finance their projects, or to create new projects. Therefore, the high percentage of loans provided to women compared to loans benefited from by men is due to the supply of loans from the National Agency for Microcredit Management as a result of its policy in granting loans, and not due to the demand for loans by beneficiaries.

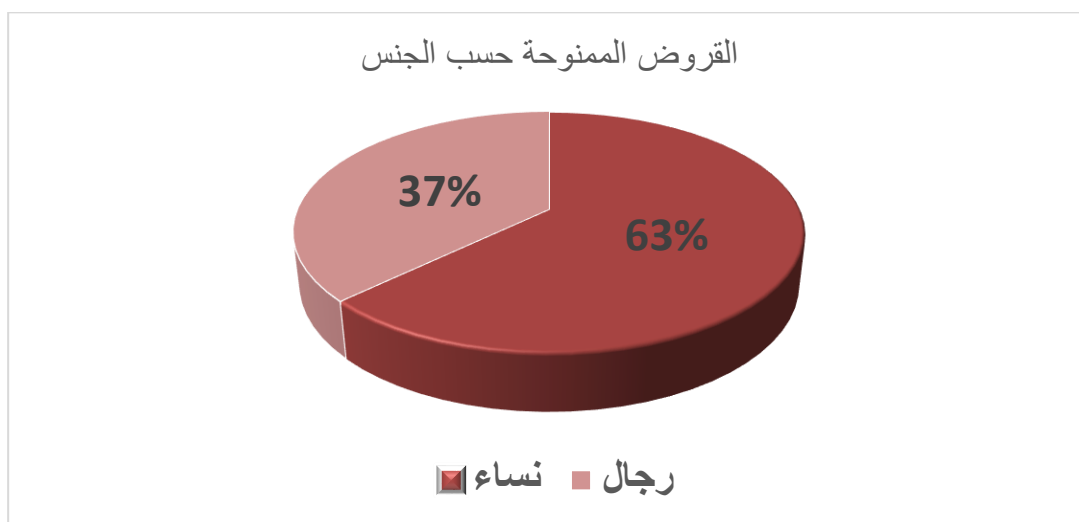


Figure 02: Loans granted by the National Agency for Microcredit Management by gender.

Source: Prepared by researchers based on data from the National Agency for Microcredit Management.

Conclusion

In conclusion of this study on rural women's empowerment through microfinance, it is clear that this financial tool has proven effective in enhancing women's capabilities and increasing their participation in economic activities. Microfinance contributes to improving women's economic and social well-being, helping them achieve financial independence and boost their self-confidence. However, challenges remain, such as weak financial infrastructure, lack of adequate training, and social resistance in some rural communities. Efforts should continue to adapt microfinance programs to better suit the needs of rural women, and expand their scope to ensure that as many women as possible benefit.

The next phase requires a comprehensive approach that integrates finance and education, with enhanced training programs aimed at improving women's skills in managing small enterprises. Moreover, it is necessary to enhance cooperation between governmental and non-governmental entities to provide a supportive and

sustainable environment for these programs. Given the great potential offered by microfinance, investing in supporting rural women is an effective means of achieving sustainable development and promoting gender equality in rural communities. As for microfinance in Algeria, which is mainly limited to the services provided by the National Agency for Microcredit Management, the most important results are as follows:

- This analysis shows that female heads of households and single women face significant challenges in accessing loans and other resources. This is often due to a lack of financial collateral or societal assumptions that they cannot meet financial obligations in the absence of a male partner, limiting their opportunities to achieve economic independence.
- Moreover, married women in our society still need their husbands' approval to access loans, which reinforces the state of economic dependency. This situation should be addressed by promoting ongoing gender dialogue to change the current dynamics and achieve greater equality in access to financial resources.
- Microfinance in Algeria is still limited to urban areas, excluding rural and remote areas, despite the presence of branches of agencies in those areas. However, the specificity of this type of financing requires its practitioners to reach customers instead of waiting for customers to reach financing institutions.
- Microfinance in Algeria does not pay much attention to rural sectors, whether agricultural or non-agricultural.

From this we conclude that despite the major role played by microfinance in empowering women and integrating them into the economic cycle and the wheel of development, the Algerian experience is different, due to the lack of competition in the microfinance sector, and the fact that this sector is limited to a single government institution, subject to central management, and does not actually support the empowerment of rural women, although this is considered one of the objectives for which it was established.

The Reviewer

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