Report On

Empowering Women: How Brac Bank's Small Loans are Transforming Women Entrepreneurs

By
Tasmim Pasha
20204029

An internship report submitted to the BRAC Business School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelors in Business Administration

Brac Business School
Brac University
January 2024

Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The internship report submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The report does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where it is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The report does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I/We have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

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Student Full Name: Tasmim Pasha

Student ID: 20204029

Supervisor's Full Name & Signature:

____

Ms. Afsana Akhtar
Assistant Professor
BRAC BUSINESS SCHOOL
BRAC University

Letter of transmittal

To,
Ms. Afsana Akhtar
Assistant Professor
Brac Business School
Brac University
KHA 224, Progati Sarani, Merul Badda, Dhaka 1212

Subject: Submission of Internship Report

Dear Afsana Ma'am,
I am writing to you to submit my internship report with the title of **"Empowering Women: How Brac Bank's small Loans are Transforming Women Entrepreneurs"** as the last part of my academic bachelor journey.

The report illustrates various aspects of the company, industry and my learning experience as an intern. I have put my utmost effort to cover as many areas as possible and keep it comprehensive and I hope I have provided a fair representation of all the mentioned aspects.

Thank you for your generous consideration and guidance. I hope the report will be able to provide valuable insights and meet the academic standards.

Best regards,
Tasmim Pasha
ID 20204029
Brac Business School
Brac University
Date: 18th December, 2024

Non-Disclosure Agreement

This agreement is made and entered into by and between BRAC Bank Limited and the undersigned student at Brac University to safeguard sensitive information from unauthorized access.

Intern: Tasmim Pasha
Bachelor of Business Administration
BRAC University

Acknowledgment

Praising the Almighty, I would wholeheartedly like to express my utmost gratitude towards everyone who has supported me during my internship and academic Journey.

My Supervisor, Ms. Afsana Akhtar ma'am and co-supervisor Shamimul Ehsanul Haque sir for all the support, guidance and considerations throughout the journey.

I am also very grateful to BRAC bank for providing me with the opportunity to work with such a dynamic team and giving me the practical insight and experience of the banking industry of Bangladesh. With special thanks to Faruque Ahmed sir, my supervisor at BRAC Bank Limited.

Lastly, I would love to thank my friends and family members for supporting me and pushing me through the hurdles to be a better individual.

Will always remain as a well-wisher to all these wonderful people and the organizations.

With full Gratitude,
Tasmim Pasha
ID 20204029

Executive Summary

This report consists of BRAC Bank's small loan program and how the small loans help women entrepreneurs to excel in their careers. When you think about the social barriers that women face when they want to start their own business, the small loan plan offers a good way to deal with these problems by providing specialized financial services. The program helps women who want to grow and expand their businesses by giving them shorter loan terms, lower down payments, and lower interest rates. This gives more women, especially those who live in rural or underprivileged areas, access to chances.

The research highlights key issues in the women entrepreneurship in Bangladesh such as the socio-economic structures straddled by BRAC Bank loan products, the influence the loans exudes on womens' businesses' potential, and how the loans assist in circumventing the financial barriers. But it also looks at the broad impacts that include enhancing economic self sufficiency, increasing social status, and contributing to local economic development. Thus, women business owners in this campaign gain self-reliance and self-assurance and also break the conventional notions of gender roles while ensuring that they create employment in society.

These results show how important it is to connect financial inclusion programs to bigger goals for social development. They also show how important BRAC Bank is for empowering women as an important driver of economic growth.

By providing insights into the effectiveness of these small-scale loans, this research demonstrates how focused financial solutions may promote women, nurture communities and facilitate sustainable economic development.

Table of content

Chapter 2: Organization Overview

List of Figures and Tables

Note: All the above mentioned figures and tables are self made through critical evaluation through experience, hence no links or reference have been provided.

List of Acronyms

BRAC:	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
BOM:	Branch Operating Manager
BM:	Branch Manager
HR:	Human Resource
ERP:	Enterprise Resource Planning
SME:	Small and Medium Enterprises
ESG:	Environmental, Social and Governance

Chapter 1: Overview of Internship

1.1 Student Information:

Student Name:	Tasmim Pasha
Student ID:	20204029
Program:	Bachelors in Business Administration
Department:	BRAC Business School
Major:	Human Resource Management
Major:	Marketing

1.2 Internship Information:

1.2.1 Company Information

Period:	
Company Name:	BRAC Bank Limited
Department:	Human Resource
Address:	Borak Mehnur, 51/B Kamal Ataturk Avenue 4th and 5th Floor, Road No. 6, Dhaka - 1213

1.2.2 Internship Company Supervisor's Information:

Name:	Faruque Ahmed
Department:	Human Resource
Designation:	Cluster Manager

1.2.3 Job Responsibilities

During my time as an HR intern at BRAC Bank, Banani Branch I was given various tasks and responsibilities that allowed me to gain great insight into both administrative and customer service operations in the banking business. One of my key responsibilities was to generate income statements and solvency certificates for clients, ensuring that all documentation was correct and satisfied the bank's compliance requirements. I also played an important part in supporting consumers with account opening processes by filling out paperwork and checking their information, which streamlined the onboarding process.

In addition to these responsibilities, I served as a link between consumers and customer service officers, directing clients to the proper individuals depending on their requirements and ensuring a positive customer experience. I also helped to retain the operational efficiency by checking daily vouchers to detect and correct any missing points or mistakes therefore upholding the bank's commitment to accuracy and dependability. Furthermore, I assisted with the customer service representatives with their regular activities, offering help as required to guarantee consistent service delivery.

As part of my job I also encouraged conversations with customers who are residing overseas, using my interpersonal and communication skills to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers. I also performed different administrative activities as assigned by the Branch Operating Manager (BOM)/Branch Manager (BM), ensuring that operational tasks were accomplished efficiently and were on time.

Aside from that I helped plan and execute corporate events like Pitha Uthshob and the 16th of December festivities. This included decorating the venue and aiding with catering which highlighted my ability to work with and support the staff in creating a welcome and joyous atmosphere.

Overall, my internship at BRAC Bank provided me with a thorough grasp of banking operations, improved my customer service abilities, and boosted my ability to handle many duties in a dynamic work environment.

1.3 Internship Outcomes

1.3.1 Contributions of the Student

While I was interning in Brac bank, Banani Branch; I was given the opportunity to make some significant contributions that helped me grow professionally and personally. I was in charge of the clients' income statements and their solvency certifications helping them to effectively fulfill their demand for finances. Thus, by systematically completing account opening documents I ensured a smooth and error-free onboarding process enhancing the overall customer experience.

At the same time, I had to engage with customers to guide them to the relevant customer care representatives and ensure their enquiries were dealt with promptly. My attention to detail was useful in highlighting and correcting problems in daily vouchers, therefore helping the bank to maintain its high level of accuracy. Additionally, I assisted the customer service officers in some of their daily operations that contributed to making the team's functions smooth.

I also got to assist overseas clients where my communication abilities became an asset while trying to mend any gaps and making sure everything ran smoothly without any errors. Moreover, as an HR major my administrative efforts in carrying out work provided by either the BOM or BM helped in ensuring that the operation activities were done on time.

Furthermore, I organized events such as Pitha Uthshob and the 16th December celebrations in which I helped with the decoration and serving food, making it quite jolly and interactive.

These experiences allowed me to make substantial contributions to the bank while honing my skills in customer service, operational efficiency, and collaboration.

1.3.2 Benefits to the Student

During my time in BRAC Bank it has proven to be highly beneficial to me personally and professionally. Through fostering professional relationships with customers and other team members I was able to work towards improving my communication and interpersonal skills. While assisting customers, responding to their inquiries, and engaging with foreign clients I became increasingly comfortable with the interactions I was expected to manage.

I also cultivated a keen eye for detail while looking over daily vouchers and preparing financial documents like income statements and solvency certificates. These responsibilities demonstrated to me the importance of paying attention to detail as well as the need to be responsible in ensuring the smooth operations of things.

Then, while fulfilling the administrative functions assigned to me by the Branch Operating Manager and Branch Manager it provided me with an understanding of the other functions of a bank that are unseen but are important for the operation of the bank. And working with customer service officers and event organizers helped me develop a balance in my life and improved my management of time and multitasking in general.

At the same time, taking part in the organization of special events such as Pitha Uthshob and the celebration of 16th December motivated me to be more creative as well as to work with other people which has greatly contributed to the sense of belonging in the workplace. This enabled me to become more organized.

Lastly, my internship gave me really valuable insights into how banking works, helped me improve my problem-solving skills, and provided me with practical skills that will be useful for my future career.

1.3.3 Challenges Faced as an Intern

My internship period in BRAC Bank was a time of great learning and challenges that helped me rise to the occasion and become more adaptive to any dynamic work environment. One of the major challenges was handling different tasks simultaneously such as preparing the financial documents, customer service, and administrative tasks. A balance between the different tasks, in this regard, requires efficient time management and prioritization skills.

Some other major challenges were related to accuracy and attention to detail like reviewing the daily vouchers or filling out account opening forms. Since banking operations require a lot of precision any mistake may lead to serious problems so I needed to be really focused and meticulous with my job.

Then, there was interaction with customers which was also quite challenging especially when dealing with language barriers or trying to resolve complex queries among foreign clients. These situations also tested my communication and problem-solving skills which needed to be exercised with much patience for a hassle-free customer experience.

I have also found adapting to the high speed that is characteristic of banking such as meeting tight deadlines with a high performance level expected put pressure on me but also enabled me to work efficiently and calmly under stressful conditions.

These experiences really taught me to work in a team and juggle priorities. Overall, although these challenges were demanding, they are valuable lessons that helped me build resilience, improve my skills, and be prepared for my future professional role.

1.3.4 Recommendations

During my internship with BRAC Bank, I had a variety of obstacles that helped me learn and adjust to a fast-paced work environment. One of the most difficult issues was managing many obligations at once, such as preparing financial paperwork, assisting clients, and conducting administrative chores. Managing these activities required me to swiftly improve my time management and prioritisation abilities.

One major problem was maintaining accuracy and attention to detail, especially when reviewing daily vouchers or completing account opening procedures. Because accuracy is critical in banking operations, any error may result in catastrophic consequences, thus I had to be very attentive and cautious about what I was doing. Working with diverse consumers, particularly those from foreign nations, may be difficult at times, especially when dealing with language barriers or answering complex enquiries. These circumstances tested my communication and problem-solving abilities, requiring me to be patient and adaptive in order to give a positive client experience.

Also, adjusting to the fast-paced banking atmosphere was challenging at first. The strain of tight deadlines and the expectation to perform at a high level was overwhelming, but it motivated me to work effectively and remain cool even when things were unpleasant.

Contributing to event planning, such as decorating and serving food during programs like Pitha Uthshob or the 16th December festivities, was difficult in terms of coordination and time management in addition to my normal responsibilities. These experiences taught me how to cooperate effectively with people and manage several things at once. Even though these trials were difficult, they taught me valuable lessons that helped me become more resilient, improve my talents, and prepare for future opportunities.

Chapter 2: Organization Overview

2.1 Introduction

BRAC Bank Ltd. is a private commercial bank which was established in 2001 with the mission of promoting economic development by assisting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). It was founded by BRAC; the world's biggest non-governmental development organisation, with the goal of providing financial services to the underserved as stated in its motto, ***"Astha Obichol"***.

The bank has established itself as a valued partner in Bangladesh's financial environment via its creative and customer-centric strategy. Its activities prioritize sustainability, transparency, and boosting the country's economic progress. BRAC Bank serves a diversified customer base, including SMEs, retail consumers, and corporate clients, and provides a comprehensive variety of financial products and services tailored to their specific requirements.

2.2 Company Overview

The Bank has set the aim to include unbanked and underbanked communities while providing world-class financial solutions at the same time to retail, small, and medium-sized business, and corporate customers. Through their innovation and openness to the customer, they have developed an image of being one of the most trusted financial organizations in the country.

Core Values and Mission

Brac Bank operates under a set of core values known as CRYSTAL:

- **C**ustomer-centricity
- **R**esponsible citizenship
- **Y**outhful spirit
- **S**implicity
- **T**ransparency
- **A**ccountability
- **L**oyalty

These values guide the bank in its daily operations, fostering trust among customers, employees, and stakeholders.

Key Statistics

- **Headquarters:** Dhaka, Bangladesh
- **Established:** July 4, 2001
- **Parent Organization:** BRAC
- **Branch Network:** Over 190 branches nationwide
- **SME Unit Offices:** More than 450 SME units
- **ATMs:** Over 375 ATMs across Bangladesh
- **Employee Strength:** Approximately 8,000 employees
- **Stock Exchange Listing:** Listed on the Dhaka and Chittagong Stock Exchanges

BRAC Bank operates through three main business segments:

1. **SME Banking:** It is known as the pioneer and plays a crucial role in financing small businesses which drives their growth and sustainability.
2. **Retail Banking:** They offer a wide range of personal banking solutions starting from savings accounts to home loans, deposit schemes, and digital banking services.
3. **Corporate Banking:** They provide financial solutions to large corporations including trade finance, cash management, and treasury services.

Achievements and Recognitions

- They are recognized as the ***"Best Bank in Bangladesh"*** by various prestigious global financial organizations like Asiamoney and The Banker.
- They are the winner of the ***Sustainable Bank of the Year Award*** in South Asia from the Financial Times' *Banker Awards*.
- They have been rated as one of the ***highest capitalized banks in Bangladesh*** maintaining strong financial health and stability.
- Lastly, they are the market leader in digital transformation with innovative banking solutions like mobile apps, internet banking, and integration with mobile financial services like bKash.

Commitment to Sustainability and CSR

Brac Bank places a high degree of emphasis on ESG issues. The projects of CSR undertaken by the bank are related to education, healthcare, women empowerment, and environmental sustainability. The bank is very supportive of green banking and focuses on ensuring environmental sustainability in its operation and financing decisions.

2.2.1 Company History and Background

Foundation and Establishment

BRAC Bank Limited was established on July 4, 2001 under the dynamic leadership of Sir Fazle Hasan Abed who is also the founder of BRAC-Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee-the largest non-governmental development organization in the world. The bank was established as part of BRAC's vision to foster financial inclusion, empower the underprivileged, and ensure socio-economic development in Bangladesh.

The main purpose when BRAC Bank was initiated included the facilitation of SMEs regarding their financing requirements, which were not adequately addressed by conventional banks. By enabling the small businesses, BRAC Bank intended to trigger economic growth in the grassroots levels which again would have a trickling effect on employment generation, poverty reduction, and economic development.

Early Growth and Milestones

- **2001-2005:** In its initial years, BRAC Bank focused on building its SME banking portfolio. It introduced **collateral-free loans** for small business owners, which quickly gained popularity. The bank also began expanding its physical branch network to increase accessibility.

- **2006:** BRAC Bank was listed on both the **Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE)** and **Chittagong Stock Exchange (CSE)**, raising its profile as a reliable financial institution.
- **2007:** The bank achieved the milestone of disbursing over **50 billion BDT** in SME loans, becoming a market leader in this segment.

Diversification and Digital Transformation

As the bank matured, it diversified its offerings to include retail and corporate banking, complementing its SME focus. In addition, BRAC Bank embraced **technology and digital transformation**, becoming one of the first Bangladeshi banks to adopt innovative banking solutions:

- **2010:** The launch of **eBiz**, an online platform for corporate clients, marked the beginning of its journey into digital banking.
- **2013:** Partnered with bKash, Bangladesh's leading mobile financial service provider, to strengthen its position in the remittance and mobile banking sectors.
- **2016:** Introduced the **BRAC Bank Mobile App**, allowing customers to access banking services 24/7.
- **2017:** BRAC Bank launched its **agent banking** services to reach rural and underserved communities.

Recognition and Achievements

Over the years, BRAC Bank will recognized both locally and globally for its exceptional contributions to the banking sector and its commitment to financial inclusion:

- Recognized as the **pioneer in SME banking in Bangladesh**.

- Winner of the **Best Bank in Bangladesh** award by multiple international publications, including The Banker and Asiamoney.
- Awarded for its focus on **sustainability and green banking**, aligning its operations with environmental goals.

Ownership and Management

BRAC Bank is a publicly traded company but retains its strong connection to BRAC, which remains its principal shareholder. This unique ownership structure allows the bank to combine financial profitability with social impact. BRAC Bank operates under the guidance of a skilled board of directors and a professional management team, ensuring operational excellence and strategic growth.

Expansion and Impact

Today, BRAC Bank operates a vast network of:

- Over **190 branches**,
- **375+ ATMs**,
- **450+ SME unit offices**, and
- **7,000+ employees**.

It serves millions of customers across all segments, including SMEs, retail banking, corporate banking, and remittance services.

Contribution to Financial Inclusion

Since its inception, BRAC Bank has disbursed loans to over **700,000 small businesses,** creating opportunities for economic growth and employment generation. It remains a champion of financial inclusion by offering products like collateral-free SME loans, agent banking, and partnerships with mobile financial services like bKash.

2.2.2 Mission, Vision, and Core Values

2.2.1 Vision:

BRAC Bank’s vision is to be the **most customer-centric and sustainable financial institution** in Bangladesh. The bank strives to:

- Deliver world-class banking solutions tailored to the evolving needs of customers.
- Foster economic empowerment by enabling businesses and individuals to thrive.
- Maintain a balance between profitability and social responsibility, ensuring long-term impact and growth for all stakeholders.

2.2.2 Mission:

BRAC Bank's mission is to build a profitable and socially responsible financial institution that:

- Focuses on market and business with growth potential, particularly in the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector.
- Provides financial solutions that add value to customers and stakeholders.
- Supports economic growth and financial inclusion by reaching underserved and unbanked communities.
- Upholds the highest standards of ethics, transparency, and sustainability in all aspects of its operations.

2.2.3 Core Values:

BRAC Bank's operations are guided by a set of core values represented by the acronym **CRYSTAL**:

1. **C**ustomer-centricity: Putting customers at the heart of all activities and delivering exceptional service that meets their needs.
2. **R**esponsible Citizenship: Acting responsibly toward society, the environment, and all stakeholders, contributing to the nation's progress.
3. **Y**outhful Spirit: Embracing innovation, creativity, and dynamism in adapting to changing markets and customer demands.
4. **S**implicity: Offering easy-to-understand and accessible financial products and services that simplify customers' lives.
5. **T**ransparency: Upholding honesty, integrity, and openness in all business dealings and interactions.
6. **A**ccountability: Taking responsibility for actions, decisions, and commitments to ensure trust and reliability.
7. **L**oyalty: Building long-term relationships with customers, employees, and partners by demonstrating dedication and mutual respect.

2.3 Management Practices

2.3.1 Leadership Style

The way BRAC Bank runs is autocratic, where the power of decision making remains with the CEO and the senior leadership team. This style establishes clear orders and expectations, allowing minimal employee input in the decision-making process.The CEO controls these heads, they are likely to make most of the strategic and operational decisions because this model has strong discipline over departments. The performance of each department will be monitored by the top management at a high level so that best can be achieved out of every section in an Organization.

Advantages of Autocratic Leadership Style

- **Centralized decision making:** This leadership style provides faster decisions, this helps BRAC Bank, to take rapid decisions as digital payment is a vast and increasing market.

- **Need for Direction and Accountability:** The autocratic style gives an employee a clear idea of what is expected from him or her as his goals will be outlined.

- **Uniformity in Vision:** Centralizing leadership is crucial as it keeps the mission, values and objectives of a company synchronized, this is important for aligning departments like Business Development, Tech, Accounts to the strategic goals of the company.

Disadvantages of Autocratic Leadership Style

- **Low Employee Engagement:** The leaders not reaching out for employees input can result in a low spirit among the staff, feeling neglected or devalued by the company means they may feel less interested in making the company succeed.

- **Less Innovation:** It will have a less chance of solving effectively, as employees are limited in contributing to creative solutions. This affects tech teams and business development teams such as sales and marketing who provide new perspectives on product development and customer experience.

- **Over Reliance on Leaders:** The senior leadership of the organization are the key to success, and this can create bottlenecks as it is high risk if leaders are unavailable or puzzled.

2.3.2 Human Resource Planning

When a bank plans to expand its portfolio one of the key considerations is ensuring that the necessary workforce is in place to support the growth. To achieve this usually the head of the department responsible for expansion, which begins by collecting and analyzing data from various branches. This data provides insights into employee turnover including how many employees have recently left their roles or are anticipated to leave.

After analyzing and identifying gaps in the workforce the head of the department contacts the TA with the actual requirement. The requirement includes elaboration on the number of employees, the skills and expertise required, and the location or branch where the vacancies are to be filled. The Talent Acquisition team begins the recruitment process with the mindset of filling the bank with qualified candidates who can manage an expanded portfolio with efficiency.

2.4 Marketing Practices

Brac Bank's TARA Banking follows various marketing strategies aimed at empowering and attracting women entrepreneurs by building trust for financial inclusion and they focus on empathy-driven branding as a supportive partner in women's empowerment. At the core of the strategy is customized loan products that include but are not limited to smaller loan sizes, flexible repayment terms, and lower interest rates to meet the unique needs of women entrepreneurs. TARA Banking also provides workshops and financial literacy campaigns to train women in managing their finances and using loans effectively. Further, the bank collaborates with NGOs, women-focused organizations, and community networks to extend its services to under-served sections; especially in rural areas. Besides that, TARA presents success stories by providing social recognition initiatives celebrating achievements of its borrowers to inspire and motivate women. It also uses digital banking channels in the promotion of online tools and mobile applications to facilitate ease of service delivery for its customers. By coupling community outreach- a very traditional practice with digital marketing, TARA is well-placed to ensure ease of access and relevance to women entrepreneurs of different demographics.

2.4.1 Target Merchants

The major target for most areas of activities concerning TARA Banking is women entrepreneurs, whether urban or rural. Micro and small entrepreneurs include owners operating grocery shops, salons, tailoring shops, or other enterprises from home. Agricultural activities would cover farming, poultry and fisheries where the beneficiaries are women. Artisans or craftswomen producing handmade products include people dealing in textiles, pottery and handicrafts among others. These include service-based entrepreneurs like tutors, daycare providers, and event managers. Additionally, TARA provides support for women involved in e-commerce through online platforms like Facebook Marketplace or Daraz. This diversified targeting ensures that TARA banking reaches out to a wide range of women; helping them cross financial barriers to becoming entrepreneurs.

2.4.2 Marketing Channels

TARA Banking combines traditional and digital channels for promoting its services. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are in wide use for advertisement, customer testimonials, and campaigns centered on women's empowerment. Paid advertisements are placed on digital platforms targeting the target audiences, mainly urban entrepreneurs. Conventional media-TV and radio ads-are utilized to highlight motivational success stories. Print ads in newspapers and magazines push the bank's services to offline audiences. Community outreach-including roadshows, fairs, and workshops-directly reaches out to women both in urban and rural areas. Referral programs, for example, provide incentives for its current customers to recommend the services offered by TARA; this will boost growth through word-of-mouth. Further exposure comes with the cooperation of influencers and well-known women

entrepreneurs; services are advertised through localbranches by organizing events, brochure d istribution, and consultations provided personally. In such a way, the multichannel strategy allows TARA Banking to stay within reach for an extensive target group while creating awareness and engaging audiences.

2.4.3 Critical Marketing Gaps and Challenges

Despite all its efforts in marketing, TARA Banking still faces several challenges in reaching its potential. Another critical gap in reaching rural areas is the lack of digital opportunities and failure in traditional approaches. TARA banking also faces cultural and social barriers since many women may not be able to take loans due to societal pressure, lack of family support, or fear of failure. Besides, financial literacy is also a big problem, as many of the potential customers do not know how to deal with loans, interest rates, or even the process of repayment. There is also competition from microfinance institutions that have greater rural penetration and simpler loan processes. Moreover, many women perceive bank loans to be too bureaucratic or intimidating, even when TARA has simplified its procedures. Another gap is in the process of personalized marketing messages, which may not reach the various needs of women entrepreneurs across many sectors and regions. The post-disbursement retention of customers needs improvement; TARA can expand the connection through services such as mentorship or business growth advice. Lastly, reliance on word of mouth has confined the business from scaling up in unexplored markets; outreach has to be much more proactive and embedded in innovative methods.

2.5 Financial and Accounting Practices

BRAC Bank Ltd. is empowering the women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh with small loans needed by them. This, in return, promotes financial inclusions and develops the financial soundness of the bank itself. The main discussion will cover a glance at BRAC Bank's performance through revenues, costs and expenses, solvency, efficiency, liquidity, accounting practices, amongst others, to see how these help the women entrepreneurs of this country.

2.5.1 Revenue

The major items of revenue for BRAC Bank include interest income on loans and advances, investment income, and fees from different banking services. In 2022, the bank recorded an interest income of BDT 31.37 billion from BDT 24.23 billion in 2021, reflecting expanded lending activities, including loans to women-led SMEs.

2.5.2 Costs and Expenses

The bank's expenses consist of interest on deposits and borrowings, operating expenses, and provisions against loan losses. Interest expenses for 2022 stood at BDT 12.95 billion from BDT 7.91 billion in 2021. Operating expenses, comprising salaries, administrative costs, and other overheads, have also increased to reflect the bank's growth and expanded operations in 2022.

2.5.3 Solvency

Solvency ratios are the ones that determine the capability of a bank to pay all its long-term liabilities. BRAC Bank has a strong capital base, as the Tier 1 capital reached BDT 81.20 billion in September 2024 from BDT 73.49 billion in 2023. This robust capital position allows the bank to absorb potential losses and keep going with its lending activities, among others, towards women entrepreneurs also.

2.5.4 Efficiency

Efficiency ratios, such as the cost-to-income ratio, reflect how well a bank utilizes its resources. Although specific figures for 2022 are not provided, BRAC Bank continues to invest in technology and infrastructure to improve its operational efficiency and thereby efficiently serve more women entrepreneurs.

2.5.5 Liquidity

Liquidity ratios reflect the bank's ability to pay its immediate obligations. As of September 2024, BRAC Bank had total deposits of BDT 723.32 billion and net loans of BDT 574.89 billion, representing a loan-to-deposit ratio of approximately 79.5%. This, therefore, conveys that the bank is in a good liquidity position and, as such, can afford to give out loans to women entrepreneurs.

2.5.6 Accounting Practices

BRAC Bank presents its accounts according to internationally accepted accounting principles, guided by the regulatory requirements stipulated by Bangladesh Bank. It ensures that its financial reports are audited by reputed external auditors to make sure that the presentation of financial statements is transparent and accurate. This good accounting practice would build trust among the stakeholders for the bank in its women entrepreneurs' empowering initiative (BRAC Bank, 2022).

Empowering Women Entrepreneurs

BRAC Bank has taken some initiatives to empower women entrepreneurs:

- Collateral-Free Loans: It extends more than 95 percent collateral-free loans to women-owned SMEs for easier access to finance. The Business Standard 2024

- Training Program: The bank imparts training programs such as 'Uddokta 101', 'Amrai TARA', 'Shabolombi TARA' to bring about the developments in women-owned SMEs. The Business Standard 2024.

- International Support: British International Investment has pledged $50 million as a loan to BRAC Bank in 2024 to grow SMEs, putting much emphasis on women-led businesses. -The Business Standard, 2024

These initiatives, therefore, are not only developing women entrepreneurs but also increasing the financial outcomes for BRAC Bank through its enlarged customer base and higher prestige as a financial leader in inclusion.

2.6 Industry and Competitive Analysis

2.6.1 Porter's Five Forces Analysis

1. **Competitive Rivalry (High)**

   - **Presence of Established Competitors:** The Bangladeshi banking sector is crowded with both public and private banks, many of which have introduced women-centric banking products to cater to this growing segment. Some examples can be Eastern Bank's "EBL Women Banking" and Dhaka Bank's "Shaan." This makes it challenging for TARA Banking to maintain its unique appeal.

- **Differentiation through Customization:** To stand out in this competitive market TARA banking offers a wide range of tailored products such as collateral-free loans for women entrepreneurs, savings schemes, priority banking, and exclusive privileges for personal and business growth.

- **Customer Retention Challenges:** While BRAC Bank has a strong reputation customers in the banking sector can switch to competitors if more attractive terms, interest rates, or benefits are offered elsewhere. Hence, TARA Banking mitigates this by incorporating financial literacy programs and other value-added services that builds a deeper customer loyalty.
- **Continuous Product Innovation:** In order to stay ahead of competitors BRAC Bank must regularly innovate and upgrade its TARA Banking offerings to meet evolving customer needs. The bank's strong focus on customer experience and women's empowerment gives it an edge but ongoing effort is required if they want to keep themselves going.

2. Threats of New Entrants (Moderate)

- **High Barriers to Entry in the Banking Sector:** The Bangladesh banking industry is closely regulated by Bangladesh Bank and thus heavy capital, compliance with the legal framework and operation expertise also warn the entry of new competitors.
- **Emerging Players in Niche Markets:** Despite the high entry barriers; fintech startups and microfinance institutions have been making inroads by targeting niche markets such as women-centric segments with low-cost digital solutions. These entities pose a moderate threat to TARA Banking by offering convenience and affordability.
- **TARA's Strong Brand Backing:** As we know Brac bank is backed by its parent organization BRAC and has a strong reputation for empowering underserved communities. This credibility acts as a major competitive advantage thus making it difficult for new entrants to match its trust and brand value among women customers.

3. **Bargaining Power of Customers (High)**

- **Customers Have Numerous Choices:** The women customers now have access to a variety of financial services tailored to their needs despite the fact their competitors are offering similar products, and non-banking financial institutions (NBFIs) which also cater to women entrepreneurs and small businesses, increasing customers' bargaining power.

- **Demand for Personalized Services:** Today's customers expect not just financial services but also personalized advice, accessibility, and financial education. If TARA Banking fails to meet these expectations, customers may shift to competitors offering more value.
- **TARA's Value Proposition:** BRAC Bank addresses this challenge by offering a differentiated value proposition through TARA Banking. It provides features like discounted processing fees, tailored loan products, priority services, networking opportunities, and capacity-building initiatives for women. These efforts help retain customers and reduce switching behavior.

4. **Bargaining Power of Suppliers (Low to Moderate)**

- **Suppliers in the Banking Industry:** In the banking ecosystem, suppliers include technology providers (for digital banking platforms), external financial institutions, and regulatory bodies. For TARA Banking, the Bangladesh Bank plays a key role in setting regulatory frameworks and influencing operational policies.
- **Technology Dependency:** As TARA Banking expands its digital footprint, its reliance on technology vendors increases. However, BRAC Bank's strong

relationships with suppliers and in-house technological capabilities reduce its dependence on external sources.

- **Regulatory Pressures:** While regulatory bodies like the Bangladesh Bank ensure stability in the sector, frequent changes in compliance requirements may impact costs and processes. Nonetheless, BRAC Bank's history of compliance and robust governance allows it to adapt effectively.

5. **Threat of Substitutes (Moderate to High)**

🎬 **Availability of Alternatives:** The rise of microfinance institutions, mobile financial services (e.g., bKash and Nagad), and agent banking solutions offer substitutes for traditional banking. Many women, particularly in rural areas, prefer these services for their convenience, ease of access, and simplified processes.

🎬 **Digital Disruption:** Fintech companies providing app-based financial services and mobile wallets are increasingly appealing to tech-savvy women customers. These alternatives are particularly attractive for basic banking needs, such as deposits, withdrawals, and payments.

🎬 **TARA's Competitive Advantage:** Their C.A is blending physical branch services with robust digital solutions and this initiative also differentiates itself through its focus on women's empowerment, offering value-added services like mentorship, skill development, and business networking, which substitutes cannot fully replicate.

2.6.2 SWOT Analysis

Strengths

1. **Strong Brand Backing:**
    - TARA provides specialist products like financial consulting services created especially for women, collateral-free loans, and customised savings accounts. This focused strategy generates a value proposition of special relevance.
2. **Tailored Products and Services:**
    - TARA provides tailored financial consulting services created especially for women, collateral-free loans, and unique savings accounts. This focused strategy generates a value proposition of its own.
3. **Wide Network:**
    - TARA Banking guarantees availability to women in both urban and rural locations via BRAC Bank's vast branch network, agent banking outlets, and internet platforms.
4. **Focus on Financial Inclusion:**
    - TARA Banking reaches underprivileged women, especially homemakers and small businesses, therefore complementing BRAC Bank's goal of promoting financial inclusion.
5. **Capacity-Building Initiatives:**
    - Programs include mentoring, financial literacy courses, and networking events assist women socially and professionally in addition to financially.

6. **Integration with Technology:**

    - Using the digital infrastructure of BRAC Bank, TARA provides online banking, mobile applications, and agent banking solutions, thereby improving consumer convenience.

Weaknesses

1. **Limited Awareness in Rural Areas:**
    - Despite its potential, TARA Banking may not yet have strong brand recognition in rural or remote areas, where women-centric initiatives are most needed.
2. **Dependency on Traditional Banking Practices:**
    - While TARA uses digital platforms, a significant portion of its operations still relies on traditional banking, which may slow its scalability in rural or tech-savvy urban markets.
3. **Higher Operational Costs:**
    - Tailored offerings and additional services, such as training programs, mentorships, and exclusive privileges, can result in higher operational costs.
4. **Limited Differentiation in Urban Markets:**
    - In urban areas, where competitors offer similar women-focused banking products, it may be challenging to differentiate TARA Banking without significant marketing efforts or enhanced offerings.

Opportunities

1. **Untapped Market of Women Entrepreneurs:**
    - A significant portion of women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh remains unbanked or underbanked. TARA can capture this market by expanding its reach and offering innovative financing options.
2. **Rural Expansion through Agent Banking:**
    - Agent banking allows TARA to penetrate rural areas, bringing banking services to underserved women who lack access to traditional financial institutions.
3. **Partnership with Government and NGOs:**
    - Collaborating with government initiatives and NGOs that focus on women's empowerment can enhance TARA's reach and impact.
4. **Increasing Digital Adoption:**
    - With the rise of mobile and digital financial services, TARA can further leverage BRAC Bank's digital platforms to offer seamless and user-friendly solutions to women.
5. **Global Focus on Gender Equality:**
    - The growing global emphasis on gender equality and women's empowerment aligns with TARA Banking's mission, providing opportunities for funding, partnerships, and international recognition.
6. **Introduction of New Products:**
    - Expanding TARA's product portfolio to include insurance, investment plans, and retirement savings tailored for women can attract a wider customer base.

Threats

1. **Intense Competition:**
    - The growing number of banks and financial institutions offering women-focused products increases competition. Fintech companies and microfinance institutions are also emerging as strong alternatives.
2. **Economic Instability:**
    - Economic challenges, such as inflation or a downturn, may reduce women's borrowing capacity or their ability to save, affecting TARA's business performance.
3. **Regulatory Challenges:**
    - Changes in banking regulations or restrictions on interest rates for loans and savings could impact TARA's operations and profitability.
4. **Substitute Financial Services:**
    - Mobile financial services like bKash and Nagad, along with informal lending channels, pose a threat to traditional banking models, especially in rural areas.
5. **Technological Disruptions:**
    - Rapid advancements in technology and the rise of fintech startups could outpace TARA's ability to innovate, leading to a potential loss of tech-savvy customers.
6. **Customer Retention Issues:**
    - If competitors provide better benefits, interest rates, or incentives, TARA Banking may face challenges in retaining its customer base, especially in urban areas.

Strategic Competitive Strength Analysis

Strategic Competitive Strength Analysis							
		Companies					
Category	**Weight**	**TARA**	**Weight**	**Jaira**	**Weight**	**City Alo**	**Weight**
Tailored Products for Women	0.08	9	**0.91**	8	**0.50**	7	0.56
Accessibility (Urban & Rural)	0.12	9	**0.10**	8	**0.75**	7	0.84
Financial Inclusion Impact	0.05	9	**1.01**	9	**0.70**	6	0.6
Customer Support	0.01	9	**1.13**	8	**0.62**	7	0.7
Market Reputation	0.12	9	**0.10**	8	**0.75**	8	0.84
Technological Integration	0.08	8	**0.70**	8	**0.50**	9	0.72
Financial Literacy and Mentorship Programs	0.08	9	**0.80**	7	**0.44**	7	0.56
Security and Data Protection	0.05	7	**0.57**	8	**0.31**	9	0.35
Affordability of Services	0.09	8	**1.01**	7	**0.55**	7	0.7
Scalability of Solutions	0.05	8	**0.50**	9	**0.35**	6	0.3
Certifications and Compliance	0.1	9	**1.13**	8	**0.62**	7	0.7
Client Relationships	0.05	8	**0.50**	7	**0.27**	9	0.45
Innovation and R&D	0.05	8	**0.50**	9	**0.35**	7	0.35
Ease of Use	0.07	9	**0.79**	8	**0.44**	7	0.49
Total	**1.00**		**9.76**		**7.16**		**8.16**

Table 1: Strategic Competitive Strength Analysis

2.7 Summary and Conclusions

BRAC Bank is dedicated to the economic empowerment of Bangladeshi women entrepreneurs through its groundbreaking TARA Banking initiative with specific financial services catering to their individual needs. There are special loan facilities, savings schemes, and related financial advisory services, exclusively made for females of diversified occupational groups including micro-entrepreneurs, agriculture, artisans, and e-commerce which illustrate financial inclusion in specific aspects of TARA Banking.

This program was developed to remove the financial barriers that could provide the necessary tools enabling women both from urban and rural areas to expand their businesses and be economically empowered. TARA Banking's linkage with BRAC adds immense credibility to the product besides the wide network of branches, agent banking outlets, and digital platforms. This helps TARA to attract a wide variety of customers particularly from underprivileged areas. Furthermore, the combination of capacity-building projects and financial literacy campaigns that TARA undertakes for women also enables them to make prudent choices for sustainable development beyond the core loan offering. While TARA Banking will be successful, there are some challenges that need to be overcome for it to realize its full potential.

One of the most urgent problems is the low knowledge of TARA Banking in rural areas where access to digital tools is still restricted and conventional banking practices are less common. Therefore, TARA has to raise its awareness in these areas by more localized initiatives such as roadshows, seminars, and alliances with nearby NGOs and community organizations. Other challenges for TARA are strong competition-from traditional banks offering similar women-centric products to microfinance organizations with greater rural penetration and easier documentation for lending. TARA needs to constantly innovate its products and services, offer customized services, and increase client loyalty to differentiate itself from such competition. Besides, even though TARA Banking makes use of digital channels, there is still room for improvement, especially in metropolitan, tech-savvy economies where demand for scalable and highly accessible digital banking solutions is great. TARA needs to streamline its digital products in ways that enhance access and convenience therefore, competitiveness in the fast-changing digital space. However, the major obstacles for Bangladesh are the cultural and socio-economic constraints where many women feel the social pressure, lack of family support, or the fear of failure that might impede them in using the financial services.

So, addressing these challenges calls for a multi-layered approach in community outreach, lobbying, and forming strategic alliances with women's organizations and other key stakeholders to help establish an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs. They also have to deal with the still critical issue of customer retention and this is because the program offers financing and financial services, yet many women still could not receive that follow-up care after acquiring the financial assistance they needed.

These are ways in which the company should think of providing, for instance: Mentoring programs and business networking opportunities and after-sales support would allow entrepreneurs to achieve long-term expansion of their companies, thereby increasing consumer loyalty and satisfaction. The areas where TARA Banking can work to increase its influence and keep on acting as a driver for empowering women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh include: rural penetration, differentiation of competition, integration of technology, overcoming cultural hurdles, and increasing post-loan engagement.

2.8 Recommendations

As an intern working on the TARA Banking project, I feel there are various tactics that may help it gain traction and reach. To begin, boosting outreach in rural and distant regions via community involvement, such as roadshows, seminars, and collaborations with local women's organisations or NGOs, would be critical. Furthermore, delivering new financial products geared to women entrepreneurs, such as insurance, investment plans, and retirement savings, may meet wider financial demands and attract a bigger consumer base. I also believe that strengthening relationships with NGOs, government initiatives, and social organisations focussing on women's empowerment will increase TARA's brand exposure and assist overcome cultural hurdles. Furthermore, emphasising financial knowledge, particularly in rural regions, will inspire more women to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities. Making the digital platform more user-friendly and adding services like online loan applications and mobile banking might boost engagement with urban and tech-savvy consumers. To maintain long-term client loyalty, post-loan services like mentoring, business coaching, and networking opportunities are required. Finally, enhancing TARA's marketing approach to generate personalized campaigns based on consumer categories will aid in connecting with female businesses in various places.

Chapter 3: Project Overview

3.1 Introduction

BRAC Bank's small loan project for women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh is significantly increasing the critical barrier of capital access that women often encounter while starting or expanding their enterprises. This initiative is tailored to address the specific requirements of women, particularly in rural regions where access to conventional financial services may be restricted. BRAC Bank has facilitated women's business aspirations by providing flexible loan periods, cheaper interest rates, and reduced collateral requirements, therefore increasing financial barriers.

The project meets both the current financial needs of women businesses and fosters long-term financial autonomy. By obtaining loans, women may diminish their reliance on male relatives or conventional support structures, that is the reason for gaining the independence to oversee their own enterprises and money. This feeling of independence is particularly potent within a setting where women are traditionally expected to seek financial support from others. Their loans are granted to these women which allows them to establish and maintain their ventures, thereby directly benefiting their personal empowerment and contributing toward the economic development of the country as a whole.

These women-led enterprises are thriving and contribute a great deal to the creation of employment opportunities. Most of these enterprises which are mainly located in rural areas create job opportunities for others hence promoting local economic development. These businesses create employment and generate income that improves the living standards of entire communities causing a ripple effect which benefits not only the entrepreneur but also the people around them.

Besides economic empowerment the growth of women-owned businesses significantly contributes to changing social behavior. With business growth there is an improvement in the social status for the women and recognition of challenging traditional gender roles that may have previously hindered their roles in the labor market. The changing social setting removes obstacles based on gender and sets examples for future generations of women that they too can and are capable of becoming successful entrepreneurs and leaders in their communities.

The successful women entrepreneurs often act as role models and inspirations and their success stories challenges biases and proves that women are equally capable of achieving perfection in business like men. By gaining economic independence and recognition these women are changing not only their own lives but also societal attitudes toward women's roles in the economy thus driving cultural and social change.

3.1.1 Problem Statement

"Despite the potential of women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh, limited access to capital, cultural barriers, and stringent financial requirements hinder their ability to start or expand businesses, restricting their economic empowerment."

Even though more and more people are realizing that women can be successful business owners, getting access to liquid cash remains a big problem for many women in Bangladesh. Especially for those women who are living in rural areas. When women try to get loans from traditional banks they often have very strict requirements that they cannot meet such as high interest rates and high security needs. They are also largely tied up with the state's cultural ethos and societal sanctions that prevent women from making economic decisions on their own which prevents them from becoming entrepreneurs. Finally, it is rather hard for women entrepreneurs to access capital to either set up or expand their ventures. This aspect makes it somewhat tough for the women to work towards economic independence while contributing to the growth of society at the same time. Although the BRAC Bank Small Loan Scheme has mentioned this in their focus area and exactly how its strategy to enable women's businesses to become independent over the longer term is not precisely articulated.

3.1.2 Literature Review

According to (Chakrabarti, 2020) giving access to finance is known to be the most critical barrier to women entrepreneurs across the globe particularly in third world developing countries like Bangladesh. The shortage of available finance proves disastrous for women in terms of setting up or expanding their businesses leaving both the woman and her business with less economic power and fewer job opportunities. Many research has shown that women are categorized together with higher interest rates, collateral requirements but a stricter repayment schedule of very limited payment period. This situation has generally restricted many women's capacity for entrepreneurship (Alam & Dey, 2018). Thus, it is in this context that BRAC Bank's Small Loan program is thought of as an inevitable initiative to redress such imbalances.

BRAC Bank's commitment strategy aims to meet the needs of women entrepreneurs by offering flexible loan conditions, low-interest rates, and minimal collateral requirements. According to (Rahman & Begum, 2019); gender-sensitive financial policies play a crucial role in supporting women. Various studies have emphasized the importance of universal financial access and loan programs that provide far-reaching guarantees for business growth. As (Kabeer, 2011) argues such financial support serves as a powerful tool for women's empowerment. Microfinance, in particular, enhances women's financial capital and social capital, boosting their confidence and independence.

The strategy that BRAC Bank has decided to pursue in the market targets specific needs that women entrepreneurs have with more flexible loan conditions, a reduced interest rate, and collateral requirement. This would help overcome financial barriers affecting women especially in rural areas with little access to traditional banking as mentioned by (Rahman & Begum, 2019). A number of literature has highlighted how microfinance and small loan programs positively relate to business success on the part of women. In this respect, (Kabeer, 2011) found that microfinance significantly empowers women by providing financial capital and increasing social capital, hence raising their confidence and independence.

This also leads to significant economic benefits of women's financial inclusion, including job creation and reduction of poverty. A research conducted by (Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley, 1996) showed that women who had access to microfinance were more likely to invest in their businesses, thus creating employment opportunities for others and contributing to the local economy. In Bangladesh, for example, women-owned businesses tend to have a positive direct impact on the local economy, (Nawaz, 2014) with many creating jobs and helping community development, particularly in rural areas.

Besides the economic ramifications, access to money carries considerable social consequences. Women who excel in business frequently undergo a transformation in their social standing, attaining acknowledgement and esteem within their communities. This disrupts conventional gender norms and fosters evolving social perspectives on women's involvement in the workforce and leadership (Elson, 1999). Successful women entrepreneurs encourage others and serve as role models who challenge patriarchal standards, showing that women are equally capable of attaining commercial success.

Although the beneficial influence of financial efforts on women entrepreneurs is extensively established, it is crucial to evaluate the long-term ramifications of these programs. According to (Mayoux, 2001) asserts that although access to money can enhance women's financial independence in the near term, it is essential to supplement financial programs with training and support services to guarantee sustained growth and empowerment. The cultural milieu in which these women function significantly influences the effectiveness of such activities. (Hossain, 2018) stated that the persistent gender biases and limited educational and training opportunities for women in Bangladesh may be inhibiting the full potential of financial initiatives such as the BRAC Bank's small loan scheme.

3.1.3 Objectives

- **Broad Objectives**

- **Evaluate the Impact of BRAC Bank's Loans on Women's Entrepreneurial Activities**: The purpose of this will be to establish the impacts of the small loan program on the business of the women entrepreneurs-whether the loans have resulted in business expansion, diversification, or improved profitability-and how such businesses have created value in their respective sectors.

- **Specific Objectives**

- **Examine the Structure and Nature of BRAC Bank's Loan Products for Women Entrepreneurs**: This objective will look at the specific features of BRAC Bank's loan products designed for women, including loan amounts, interest rates, repayment terms, and collateral requirements. The goal is to understand how these products are tailored to address the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh.

- **Assess the Role of Access to Credit in Overcoming Financial Barriers**: This will indicate how much BRAC Bank's loans have overcome the conventional obstacles women face in accessing finance due to lack of collateral, financial illiteracy, and other social stigmas. It will find out the ways in which credit availability has facilitated taking up their ventures by the woman entrepreneurs and expanding them to a sufficient scale so as to sustain themselves in the long run with economic independence.
- **Investigate the Broader Social and Economic Outcomes of the Loan Program**: This will help explain the broader effects of BRAC Bank's small loan initiative in society and the economy. It will study impacts on financial independence, social status, and empowerment of women within the family and the community. Additionally, it will look into how these businesses have contributed toward job creation, community development, and local economic growth.

3.1.4 Hypothesis

"BRAC Bank's small loan initiative for women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh positively impacts business expansion, profitability, and social empowerment by providing accessible financial resources with favorable loan terms, thus enabling women to overcome financial barriers, create jobs, and contribute to local economic growth."

Explanation: The hypothesis of the study is that BRAC Bank's small loan initiative for women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh has become a milestone in business growth and social empowerment.

The program covers this through the delivery of favorable loan terms such as lower interest rates and reduced collateral requirements, coupled with flexible repayment options. This addresses the key financial barriers that women face at the start or growth of their businesses: limited access to capital, financial literacy, and cultural stigma concerning women's financial independence. It is hypothesized that these designed financial services would help women entrepreneurs increase their business, diversify products, and hence increase profitability, thereby moving towards financial independence and autonomy which is quite beyond the reach of most of them without such help.

The hypothesis goes further to state that the loan program creates general social and economic impacts: as the businesses thrive, women gain social respect and recognition, begin challenging traditional gender roles, and uplift their communities by providing job opportunities and stimulating local economies. Thus, loans given not only empower women entrepreneurs individually but create a ripple positive effect on increasing general economic growth and social dynamics in the areas they belong to.

3.2 Methodology

The methodology for this study will follow a qualitative research study to get in-depth insights into women entrepreneurs' experiences and perspectives who have received small loans from BRAC Bank and together with their perspectives we will be generating the findings and analysis. The primary research will be based on interviews with women entrepreneurs and bank managers while the secondary research will be done through reviewing related academic literature, government reports, and official data from BRAC Bank regarding the loan program. This will allow for a more holistic understanding of how the loan initiative affects women entrepreneurs and their economic empowerment by merging primary data with secondary data.

<u>Primary Research</u>

1. Interviews with Women Entrepreneurs

- **Targeted Sample**: Women who have received small loans from BRAC Bank and run businesses in various sectors, such as agriculture, retail, services, etc. The sample will be diverse to provide a comprehensive view of the program's impact across different industries.
- **Purpose**: These interviews will gather qualitative data about the entrepreneurs' personal experiences with the loan program, the challenges they have faced, and the outcomes of receiving financial support from BRAC Bank. The interviews will explore how the loan has impacted their business operations, including any improvements in business expansion, profitability, and sustainability. Additionally, the study will seek to understand any ongoing challenges they face despite receiving support, such as market access, cultural barriers, or continued financial difficulties.

- **Interview Questions**:
  - What type of business do you run, and how did you decide to start it?
  - How did you hear about BRAC Bank's loan program, and what made you apply?
  - What were the loan terms (amount, interest rate, repayment schedule) like, and how did these terms impact your decision-making?
  - How has the loan affected your business operations (e.g., expansion, profitability, diversification)?
  - What challenges did you face during the application process and in running your business after receiving the loan?
  - How has this loan impacted your financial independence, social status, and relationships with your family or community?
- **Potential Interviewees**: The research has included women like Sahar Rahman(Sahar Rahman Couture) , Safa Shareef(Salon 32), Navin Ahmed(Gala Makeover), Nahila Hedayet(Prive), Rahee Hasan(Rahee Hasan Couture), Nebula(Content Creation), and other women entrepreneurs who represent a range of business sectors.

2. Interviews with Bank Managers

- **Targeted Sample**: Managers or officers at BRAC Bank who are responsible for managing the loan program for women entrepreneurs. This may include branch managers, loan officers, and financial advisors, particularly those working at the Banani branch or other locations involved with the women's loan program.
- **Purpose**: The interviews will provide a deeper understanding of the structure, goals, and operational challenges of the loan program. They will help clarify the eligibility criteria, the application processes, the support systems in place for women

entrepreneurs, and any challenges the bank faces in administering the program. These insights will also shed light on the program's objectives and how it aims to empower women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh.

- **Interview Questions**:
  - Can you describe the main features of BRAC Bank’s loan program for women entrepreneurs?
  - What are the eligibility criteria for women to receive loans, and how does the application process work?
  - How does BRAC Bank support women borrowers during and after the loan disbursement?
  - What challenges have you encountered in managing the loan program, and how do you address them?
  - What impact do you believe the loan program has had on women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh?

Secondary Research

1. Review of Academic Literature and Government Reports

- **Purpose**: To provide a broader context for understanding the landscape of women’s entrepreneurship in Bangladesh, the role of microfinance institutions like BRAC Bank, and the financial barriers that women face in accessing capital. The literature review will focus on studies related to financial inclusion, gender equality, socio-economic empowerment, and the role of microfinance in fostering entrepreneurial success for women in developing economies.

- **Scope**: Reviews of relevant academic articles on women's entrepreneurship, microfinance, and gender equality, as well as research papers and government reports, will be included. This will also include insights into the barriers women face in accessing finance-such as cultural norms, financial literacy, and lack of collateral.

2. Analysis of BRAC Bank's Official Reports

- **Purpose**: This may include the overall analysis of BRAC Bank reports, publications, and accessible data from this program in regard to loan outreach and the effects created, while quantifying loan disbursement success, on-time repayment, the business success of loans outstanding, and impacts on wider socio-economic outputs amongst the target segment of women entrepreneurs.
- **Scope**: It will analyze internal data from the bank, such as the number of loans granted to women, the amount disbursed, repayment statistics, and case studies of successful women entrepreneurs. It will also examine any impact metrics that BRAC Bank has tracked related to job creation, local economic growth, and the economic empowerment of women.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Qualitative research will be done on the data gathered through interviews. The responses from women entrepreneurs will be counted as those from bank managers in order to understand the operational framework of the loan program and its wide objectives. The secondary data will be used to contextualize the primary data; that is, in order to give a wider picture of the impacts of the loan program. This integrated qualitative research design will provide holistic insights into how the small loan initiative of BRAC Bank empowers women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh and explore the wider social and economic implications of the program.

3.3 Findings and Analysis

The following section presents the findings from both primary and secondary research, discussing in detail the impact of BRAC Bank's small loan initiative on business, financial independence, and socio-economic status of women entrepreneurs. The findings are based on interviews with women entrepreneurs and bank managers, as well as an analysis of secondary data from academic literature, government reports, and BRAC Bank's official reports.

Findings from Primary Research

1. Interviews with Women Entrepreneurs

The interviews with women entrepreneurs revealed a variety of experiences and outcomes following their participation in BRAC Bank's small loan program. Some of the key themes emerging from these interviews are discussed below.

- **Business Growth and Expansion**: Many women entrepreneurs also reported that this loan has given them the opportunity to expand their businesses. For example, we have chosen to interview Safa Shareef who was a freelance makeup artist but now after receiving BRAC Bank’s financial assistance she has opened her own salon called ‘Salon 31’. Her success story exemplifies the transformative impact of this loan on women entrepreneurs. Her ability to expand her career to new heights showcases the loan’s tangible benefits. By sharing her experience, Safa can provide valuable insights into how financial support empowers small business owners to scale and thrive.

- **Improved Profitability and Sustainability**: Several participants highlighted that the loans helped them stabilize their businesses by giving them the relief of stable capital. Women entrepreneurs who were uncertain about their business profits were scared to take risks to expand and stabilize their businesses but with the help of Brac bank’s small loan they were able to go ahead with their business operations to stabilize their businesses.
- **Challenges Despite Loan Support**: While the loan program was a great help, most of the women still encountered many obstacles in their fight. Most of the cases were included in the lack of access to market information and infrastructure. According to Sashar, the loan helped her to expand her store, but the hard access to better markets or even to the modern technology had made it a hindrance towards further expansion.
- **Financial Independence and Social Empowerment**: The women interviewed mentioned that the loan program increased their financial independence. Several women kept on saying that the loan gave them the opportunity to depend less on the male members of their families and bestowed a kind of autonomy on them. This independence also brought them more respect in their homes and communities. However, some of the women observed that social norms and gender biases are still formidable barriers, especially in rural areas, where a woman's involvement in business is still looked upon suspiciously.

2. **Interviews with Bank Managers You can elaborate it also**

The interviews with BRAC Bank managers provided insight into the structure and operations of the loan program:

- **Loan Features and Program Structure**: According to the bank managers, loan conditions for women entrepreneurs were softened compared to traditional loans. The bank offers lower interest rates, reduced collateral requirements, and flexible payback conditions. Such features were specifically created with a focus on women's financial constraints in rural areas without access to traditional financial services.
- **Operational Challenges**: Although the program is considered very successful on many aspects, bank managers conceded that the program faces difficulty in reaching all the potential borrowers. Lack of financial literacy, fear of repayment of loans, or even a sort of cultural aversion to dealing with formal financial institutions have been responsible for making some women hesitate to apply for the loan facility. The resource constraints also made the bank's ability to provide enough financial education and post-loan support to women entrepreneurs very limited.
- **Program Impact and Goals**: The bank managers identified women's empowerment through financial independence and the encouragement of entrepreneurship as the most important aims of the loan program. They said that the number of women-owned enterprises has increased considerably due to the program, and the financial stability of many borrowers has also improved.

Findings from Secondary Research

1. Academic Literature and Government Reports

A review of the academic literature and government reports also emphasized that financial inclusion of women in Bangladesh was of essence. The literature has demonstrated that microfinance and small loan access significantly contribute to improving the economic empowerment of women. In Bangladesh, where the barriers to accessing finance by women are higher, such initiatives as BRAC Bank's small loan program contribute significantly to surmounting those barriers (Chakrabarti, 2020; Alam & Dey, 2018). The literature also indicated that, besides financial inclusion enhancing women's economic stability, it would improve their social standing since the woman entrepreneur was viewed as an active contributor to the society (Hashemi et al., 1996).

2. Analysis of BRAC Bank's Official Reports

The company seems to enjoy significant outreach: Official BRAC Bank reports a situation whereby increasing numbers of women get credit. First, only a few cases went all the way to reaching a recovery high level while business initiatives owned and headed by females had greater contributions toward improving the value locally created. Most of the women borrowers reported through the bank's reports that they had increased profitability, creation of jobs, and community development due to their businesses. The reports indicated that although the rate of repayment for loans was high the bank still faced certain challenges with regard to reaching women in more remote and rural areas.

Analysis

These results from both primary and secondary research indicate that the BRAC Bank small loan initiative has indeed reaped a substantial positive effect on the women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. In fact, through better financial management the credit facility has empowered business growth and improved profitability while adding to greater financial independence; therefore, developing a more heterogeneous and inclusive economy. Through loans the women entrepreneurs who participated in the interview described how they can expand their business by creating jobs while gaining financial autonomy.

However, besides such positive results some challenges still remain including social and cultural barriers for full empowerment in rural areas of the country where the traditional roles as housewives that women are supposed to perform limit their significant participation in economic activities. Furthermore, even though the loan terms set by the bank are very conducive, financial literacy remains a big barrier to many women since Bangladesh is still a developing country that may impede their ability to manage and scale their businesses effectively.

It noted that bank managers insist that the need for complementarities in terms of support systems includes financial education, mentorship programs that will let the woman entrepreneurs realize maximum potential from such loans.

3.4 Recommendations

Based on our findings the recommendations from our research for further improving the impacts of the BRAC Bank Small Loan Scheme for Women Entrepreneurs in Bangladesh will be as follows.

These will address the issues and challenges experienced to date while empowering the women more, enabling them to realize their entrepreneurial potential.

1. **Increase Financial Literacy Programs**

As we know many women entrepreneurs face challenges related to financial literacy which limits their ability to manage their finances effectively. Hence, BRAC Bank should implement targeted financial education programs for women borrowers particularly focusing on budgeting, accounting, and financial management. And they can also offer workshops or digital resources that provide basic financial literacy which can empower women to make informed decisions about their businesses and increase the likelihood of long-term sustainability and growth.

2. **Expand Support Services Beyond Loans**

The small loan program will be impactful and there is an opportunity to provide more support to women entrepreneurs. The bank could consider mentorship programs, networking opportunities, and business development services. Also, they can connect with women entrepreneurs with experienced business mentors and peers which will help BRAC Bank to gain the knowledge and confidence needed to grow their businesses. This additional layer of support could help entrepreneurs address the existing operational challenges, increase their market competitiveness, and develop more sustainable business models.

3. Enhance Access to Markets and Technology

One of the recurring challenges mentioned by women entrepreneurs is limited access to markets and technology. To help overcome this BRAC Bank could collaborate with local and international partners to provide women entrepreneurs with access to online platforms, market information, and modern technology. Hence, by providing training on digital tools, e-commerce platforms, and market analysis would enable women to reach broader markets, diversify their products and stay competitive in an increasingly digital economy.

4. Improve Outreach to Rural Areas

While the loan program has made a significant impact many women in more remote and rural areas still face barriers to accessing financial services. To improve these BRAC Bank could expand its network of loan officers and agents in rural regions where face-to-face interactions are essential for building trust. Additionally, the bank could collaborate with local community organizations and women's groups to increase awareness of the loan program and its benefits.

5. Monitor and Strengthen Social Support Systems

Social and cultural barriers remain a challenge for many women entrepreneurs, particularly in rural communities where gender roles are more rigid. BRAC Bank could partner with local NGOs, community leaders, and women's rights organizations to create stronger social support systems that advocate for women's economic empowerment. Initiatives that challenge traditional gender norms, promote women's leadership, and raise awareness about the benefits of women-led businesses could help shift societal perceptions and create a more conducive environment for female entrepreneurship.

6. Promote Long-Term Business Sustainability

The bank should also support women entrepreneurs beyond the point of loan disbursement to make sure that the businesses financed through the loan program are long-term sustainable. It is within the bank's capacity to establish a system whereby intermittent check-ins and follow-up assistance for borrowers can be given to enable them to monitor the progress of their business and offer continued financial or advisory support as their businesses mature. Additionally, it would ensure that through the provision of expanded growth-stage business financing options they would not face financial constraints that could hamper further expansion of their businesses.

7. Create a Gender-Sensitive Loan Evaluation Framework

While loan conditions may be comparatively better than traditional loan products available, even this condition is an area of more personalized loans disbursements catering to women's unique problems in entrepreneurship. So, relating back to their very problems that surround women regarding accessing credit facilities, a framework for assessment at BRAC Bank might be one which is designed keeping in consideration sensitivities. This would further enable the bank to customize loan amounts, interest rates, and payback terms in an even more fine-tuned way and thus treat women equitably at different stages along their entrepreneurial journey.

8. **Strengthen Partnerships with Government and International Organizations**

BRAC Bank may strengthen connections with government agencies and international groups to empower women economically in addition to its internal support systems. They may also collaborate in pursuit of a favorable legal environment in the promotion of better financial access for women and by offering co-funding opportunities to female company owners. The strengthening of these relationships will therefore grant women entrepreneurs more resources and provide a better climate for their growth.

3.5 Conclusion

The Brac Bank Tara banking small loan initiative for women entrepreneurs is a game-changing aspect in offering essential access to capital for women especially in the rural areas where traditional financial services can be hard to reach. They have helped women to start or grow their businesses by providing flexible loan terms, lower interest rates, and less strict requirements for securities which would support their financial independence and boost local economic development.

These interview-based results of research conducted among women entrepreneurs and bank managers revealed several positive outcomes, such as business growth, enhanced profitability of business, and increased social status of women. Sahar Rahman, Sashar, Zayna, Nebula, Rahee among others told how their businesses have grown big enough to create employment opportunities and contribute something to their societies. Through the success stories many of the women expressed financial literacy gaps in communities, hindrances of access to markets, and stigmatization of women's efforts in businesses.

The secondary research included the incorporation of women in finance and they showed how microfinance projects play a pivotal role in empowering gender equality and ensuring long-term economic progress. This part of the research has underlined that further help and assistance is required by women entrepreneurs to break through "barriers related to business experience or knowledge, market access, and socio-cultural factors.". Although the women businesses have gained much from BRAC Bank's small loan initiative there is still more work to be done in maximizing its impact. Such would include expanding financial literacy programs, providing access to mentorship, increasing market access and technology, and also expanding outreach in rural areas. This would be an enhancement of these supportive mechanisms along with addressing the existing barriers.

BRAC Bank can ensure that its initiative empowers not only individual women but also contributes to the greater economic and social development in Bangladesh. With these steps the small loan program of BRAC Bank could really make a difference in creating an inclusive, sustainable, and successful future for women entrepreneurs in the country.

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