

Combatting maternal and child malnutrition in Pakistan: using microcredits as ammunition



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Within the field of maternal, newborn and child health, a major obstacle has been undernutrition. Undernutrition is considered to be the number one health risk worldwide and is responsible for 11% of the global burden of disease.¹ In particular, proper nutrition for women and their children is vital due to the adequate nourishment required for optimal growth and development of babies *in utero* and post-partum.¹ The highest prevalence rate of undernutrition is found in South Asia.² Moreover, Pakistan has the third highest global burden of maternal, fetal and child mortality.³ Several interventions have been proposed and implemented in order to lessen the detrimental effects of undernutrition, categorized under nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions. This literature review focuses specifically on the impact of nutrition-sensitive interventions of microcredit loan programs in Pakistan. These programs have been rising in demand, as over 65 million households require financial assistance nation-wide.⁴

A broad literature review was conducted using PubMed, PAIS International, Global Health, and Google Scholar. More than 13 registered microfinance institutions were found within the province of Punjab.

This analysis focused on the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), the largest microcredit program in Pakistan, providing 4.7 million households with monthly cash amounts of Rs.1500.⁵ The four welfare indicators of child nutrition, women's empowerment, household consumption and dietary diversity were chosen as measures of impact.⁶ Three case studies conducted within Punjab were examined in order to assess the impacts of BISP. Collectively, the case studies have shown positive effects on household expenditures and consumption, particularly food. Moreover, the opinions of beneficiaries were primarily positive. Unfortunately, the cumulative findings of these case studies were insufficient to fully answer the research question due to a lack of information on three of the welfare indicators. Researchers and policymakers need to advocate for the inclusion of additional welfare indicators within the research agenda, as its current neglect is detrimental.

This analysis has provided the author with the necessary information for next steps in the field of global health - to design and implement a study in Punjab that will be able to answer the author's proposed research question. It is hoped that the successful creation and implementation of this study will assist in improving microcredit programs within Pakistan and ensuring their complete effectiveness in tackling maternal and child malnutrition.

Global Health Relevancy

Pakistan is located in the center of a volatile geo-political region with several decades of political fragility, complex security issues, and natural disasters.³ As a result, it has made slow progress in achieving optimal maternal, newborn and child health. By evaluating social safety nets within Pakistan, further improvements can be made to catalyze the nation's progress. Moreover, other countries that have microcredit programs can extrapolate the implications of these programs within Pakistan to learn from and improve their own programs.