



Research Article

Exploring the Role of NGOs in Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh

Md. Sobuj Mia, Md. Yeasir Arafat, Md. Ismail Hossen Imran

1. Department of Political Science, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh; mdsobujahmedjibon@gmail.com
2. Department of Political Science, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh; s2211143179@ru.ac.bd
3. Department of Political Science, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh; s2210643148@ru.ac.bd

Copyright © 2025 by Authors, Published by **Demagogi: Journal of Social Sciences, Economics and Education**. This is an open access article under the CC BY License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Received : August 17, 2025

Revised : September 13, 2025

Accepted : October 19, 2025

Available online : December 01, 2025

How to Cite: Md. Sobuj Mia, Arafat, M. Y., & Md. Ismail Hossen Imran. (2025). Exploring the Role of NGOs in Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh. *Demagogi: Journal of Social Sciences, Economics and Education*, 3(5), 358–373. <https://doi.org/10.61166/demagogi.v3i5.128>

Abstract. Women's empowerment is an important issue in the socio-economic context of Bangladesh, which is directly related to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 and 10, but patriarchal society, poverty, veiling, child marriage, dowry, gender-based discrimination limit the opportunities for women's empowerment. The objects of this study examine the actual status of women's empowerment in Bangladesh and the effectiveness of initiatives taken by NGOs in recent decades. Through secondary data, policy reports and descriptive analysis, it examines how NGOs are addressing issues such as gender equality, microfinance, education, skills training, healthcare and legal awareness. The findings show that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as BRAC, TMSS, Proshika, UNDP, ASA, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad have been working towards women's political, economic, social and educational empowerment through initiatives such as microfinance programmed, skill development, education, healthcare and legal awareness. Despite their success, NGOs face challenges including patriarchal practices, child marriage, poverty, debt traps and

difficulties in coordinating with government agencies. The study provides practical suggestions for enhancing collaboration with the government, awareness-raising campaigns, ensuring the presence of local resources, skills training programmed, incentives in the education sector, providing soft loans, implementing laws to prevent child marriage, dowry and violence, ensuring a women-friendly environment and quotas in the workplace, and increasing women's direct participation in decision-making. Overall, this study provides clear insights for NGOs, policymakers and other stakeholders to ensure women's empowerment.

Keywords: NGOs, Women Empowerment, SDGs, Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment is a fundamental driver of socio-economic and political development. Yet, many women in rural Bangladesh still face profound barriers that limit their participation in decision-making, economic activities and political processes. Poverty, patriarchal social norms, child marriage, dowry practices and limited access to education and health care limit women's ability to fully exercise their rights and potential. Although government initiatives exist, these measures are often insufficient to address the complex and multifaceted challenges facing rural women. Women's empowerment has been defined as the process of providing women with the tools, confidence and opportunities to make independent choices, achieve their goals and participate fully in society on an equal basis with men (Chen and Tanaka, 2014). This includes expanding access to education, health, decent work, political representation and social justice. As United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and United Nations Global Compact highlight through its 7 principles, women's empowerment and autonomy and improving their political, social, economic and health status are not just a means to development but are a goal in themselves. Over the past few decades, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a crucial role in bridging the empowerment gap in rural Bangladesh. Through microfinance programs, skills training, literacy and education initiatives, legal awareness campaigns, and advocacy for women's rights, NGOs such as BRAC, Grameen Bank, ASA, and Bangladesh Mahila Parishad have created opportunities for women to achieve economic independence, social recognition, and political participation.

Women's empowerment in Bangladesh is closely linked to global development goals. Of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 5 (Gender Equality) emphasizes the elimination of gender-based disparities, while SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality) emphasizes the need for inclusive social, economic, and political societies for all. NGOs play a critical role in advancing these global goals by addressing the structural and societal barriers that women face at the local level. Despite their significant contributions, NGOs face multiple challenges. Cultural resistance, deep-rooted patriarchal norms, veiling, dowry practices, child marriage, poverty, legal vulnerabilities, and weak coordination with government agencies often limit the effectiveness of their programs. Nevertheless, the growing impact of NGO initiatives has enabled many women to transition from dependency to self-reliance, increasing

their decision-making power, social standing, and participation in community development. In this context, the current study aims to examine the role of NGOs in promoting women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh. It explores the multifaceted contributions of NGOs in the economic, educational, social, and political spheres, as well as highlighting existing barriers. By analyzing these dynamics, this study attempts to provide a comprehensive understanding of how NGOs help women overcome systemic inequalities and move towards gender equality. Existing literature highlights that NGOs have played a major role in promoting women's empowerment in Bangladesh through education, microcredit, and social awareness initiatives. Studies show that microfinance and community programmes have improved women's income, decision-making power, and mobility (Hashemi, Schuler & Riley, 1996; Goetz & Gupta, 1996), while educational projects such as BRAC's non-formal schools have widened access to learning for rural women (Lovell & Fatema, 1989). Scholars argue that empowerment must combine economic, educational, and social dimensions to ensure lasting impact (Kabeer, 2016). However, challenges such as patriarchy, child marriage, purdah, and weak law enforcement still restrict progress (Parveen, 2007; UNICEF, 2024). Recent studies recognise that NGOs like BRAC, TMSS, and Grameen Bank have achieved notable success but call for stronger coordination with government policies to overcome persistent inequalities and achieve sustainable gender empowerment (Nazneen et al., 2023; UNDP Bangladesh, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Research means a systematic finding and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new results (Arafat, 2024a). This study follows a qualitative and descriptive research approach based entirely on secondary data. It does not involve any field survey or interviews. The main purpose of the research is to examine how non-governmental organisations (NGOs) contribute to women's empowerment in Bangladesh. To achieve this, relevant books, journal articles, government publications, NGO reports, and credible online sources were carefully reviewed. Information was collected from national and international reports such as those by BRAC, TMSS, ASA, Grameen Bank, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, UNDP, UNFPA, and UNICEF. The data were analysed through descriptive discussion to understand the actual situation of women's empowerment and the effectiveness of NGO initiatives in the social, economic, educational, and political sectors. The study also explored the barriers and challenges that limit the success of these programmes. Overall, this research relies on secondary information and provides a clear and comprehensive understanding of how NGOs are helping to improve the condition and status of women in Bangladesh through various empowerment activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Women Empowerment

The term "empowerment" first appeared in the 1920s, but initially it did not receive much attention. The term became increasingly popular in western society after the 1970s. The meaning of 'empowerment' has created a lot of confusion as it

varies according to the particular setting and situation in which it develops (Islam et al., 2024). Empowerment's prevailing ideology refers to increasing the power of a low power group so that it is equal to high power group. The term empowerment refers to measures designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-determination in people and in communities to enable them to represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way, acting on their own authority. Empowerment means giving an individual or a community more autonomy to say and decide what happens to them and how to represent their interests in a responsible way. Women empowerment is the process of providing women with the tools, confidence and opportunities to make independent choices, achieve their goals and fully participation in society on an equal footing with man. It refers to the process of increasing women's access to control over the strategic life choices that affect them and access to the opportunities that allow them fully to realize their capacities" (Chen and Tanaka 2014). This entails ensuring equal rights, expanding access to education and healthcare, promoting decent work, and increasing women's representation in political and economic decision-making process and implementation. Women empowerment is not just a buzzword; it's a powerful movement. Empowered women lead in everywhere in life like business, education, politics, and communities. They break barriers which work as a hinder of female empowerment and inspire others to do the same (Stuarttan, 2024). The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is a highly important end in itself (UNFPA, n.d.).

The United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to achieve a sustainable world by 2030 by eliminating poverty and inequality, improving the quality of education and health services, achieving gender equality, addressing climate change, urbanization and industrialization, and other issues. The issue of women's empowerment is related to two goals of the SDGs: Gender Equality (SDGs 5) and Reduced Inequalities (SDGs -10). Achieving gender equality is a fundamental goal for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world for women, as recognized by UN Sustainable Development Goals 5. Gender Equality (SDGs- 5) emphasizes the empowerment of women to ensure equality between women and men in the society. If women's empowerment is ensured, artificial inequalities between women and men will be eliminated in society. Which will help to achieve the goal Reduced Inequalities (SDGs- 10). The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, United Nations Global Compact described women's empowerment through 7 main principles.

Figure 1: Seven Principles of Women Empowerment



Source: Developed from the Information of UN Women and United Nations Global Compact

Women Empowerment Related NGOs in Bangladesh

NGOs work outside the government to address social, political, cultural, environmental and humanitarian issues such as human rights, poverty alleviation, discrimination and community development. Researchers investigate that women's empowerment has become a prominent issue in developing countries like Bangladesh. Since the 1980s, NGOs have been providing various basic services, both economic and social, alongside the government, such as healthcare, non-formal education, legal aid, microcredit, social safety net programmes, agricultural extension and social forestry, safe water and sanitation etc. NGOs have highlighted their role in promoting poor women's development as service-users, economic agents and development workers through their various programs. They are also successful in espousing gender goals in their programmed through reducing gender disadvantage in accessing services, providing training and skills, and awareness-raising on gender related matters (Goetz & Gupta, 1996).

NGOs, not being bound by institutional structures, have spread their activities to the marginalized level, where the presence of government institutions is inadequate. In patriarchal societies like Bangladesh, women are often trapped in the web of biological and socially constructed artificial discrimination and remain backward. NGOs have created an environment for women where opportunities for women's participation have been created in education, economy, and politics. Emphasizing socio-economic issues in women's empowerment, they have focused on issues such as poverty alleviation, microcredit projects, employment creation through

training and skills provision, and elimination of wage inequality. One of the most important development tools for reducing poverty and enabling the impoverished, particularly women, to escape it is a microcredit program. In the education sector, they have ensured a participatory environment through facilities such as scholarships, sanitation and uniform facilities, and women-sensitive curricula. They are protecting women's freedom by creating social awareness to prevent violence against women, dowry system, child marriage, divorce, and rape. NGOs have been putting pressure on the government to organize women at the grassroots level to voice their opinions, participate in decision-making processes and implementation, exercise their voting rights, and ensure the presence of women everywhere from unions to the National Parliament. While the role of the state in women's empowerment is negligible, NGOs like BRAC, TMSS, ASA, Proshika, CARE, UNDP, Polly Sree, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Bangladesh Nari Pragati Sangstha (BNPS), Tarango, The Manusher Jonno Roundup, Grameen Bank, SNAD Foundation, Nijera Kori, Shakti Foundation, OWDEB, NUK, and DRIP have shouldered the crucial responsibility of women's empowerment and ensuring gender equality.

Economic Empowerment

Empowerment is one of the operational approaches of NGOs working. Moreover, economic empowerment is one of the most important areas where NGOs in rural Bangladesh have made a strong impact. In many villages, women were once fully dependent on their husbands or families for money. They had little control over income and very few chances to work outside the home. NGOs have tried to change this situation by creating opportunities for women to earn, save, and manage money on their own. One of the main ways NGOs support economic empowerment is through microfinance and small loans. Rahman (1997) examined how BRAC contributed to women's empowerment in Bangladesh. Again, the impact of local NGO-led microcredit initiatives on the empowerment of rural women is analysed by Moriom (2024). Organisations such as Grameen Bank and BRAC provide small amounts of credit to rural women so they can start small businesses like poultry farming, handicrafts, or running small shops. BRAC's microcredit programme has contributed significantly to rural women's empowerment (Rahman & Bhuiyan, 2022). These activities not only help women contribute to family income but also give them confidence and decision-making power. When women can earn their own money, they often spend it on food, children's education, and healthcare, which improves the whole family's well-being. But, without technological management assistance, microcredit is ineffective (Rozzani, Rahman, Mohamed, & Yusuf, 2013).

NGOs also run training programmes to teach women useful skills. For example, some organisations train women in sewing, tailoring, or handicrafts, while others focus on farming techniques or small-scale entrepreneurship. With these skills, women are better prepared to manage their own activities and increase their earnings. Another important contribution is the creation of self-help groups. Many NGOs form groups where women save money together, discuss their problems, and support one another in business. These groups reduce isolation and create solidarity among rural women. Despite these positive changes, challenges remain. Some women still face

pressure from their families not to work outside, while others struggle to expand their businesses due to lack of larger loans or access to markets. In some cases, women remain borrowers for a long time without moving towards full independence. Overall, economic empowerment through NGOs has given many rural women a chance to move from dependency to self-reliance. While the progress is uneven, the change is clear: women now have more financial voice in their families and communities than before.

Educational Empowerment

Education means a systematic approach to a particular topic or course to make someone fully understand it by a certain organization or person within a proper environment and infrastructure (Arafat & Fahmida, 2024). It is another important area where NGOs have worked to empower rural women in Bangladesh. For a long time, girls in villages had fewer chances to go to school because of poverty, early marriage, and social customs. Many families believed that educating girls was less important than educating boys. NGOs have tried to break this belief by creating programmes that focus on women's learning and literacy. One of the main contributions of NGOs is adult literacy programmes. Many rural women never had the chance to go to school when they were young. NGOs like BRAC and ASA set up evening schools or community centres where women can learn to read, write, and do basic maths. These simple skills help women manage their businesses, understand loan records, and take part in family decisions with more confidence (BRAC Education Programme Bangladesh, 2019; BRAC, n.d.; ASA, n.d.).

NGOs also support girls' education by offering scholarships, free books, or school supplies to encourage parents to send their daughters to school. Some organisations even run their own schools in rural areas where government schools are far away. By reducing the cost and distance, these efforts make it easier for girls to continue their studies. BRAC provides education to 3.17 million students and members across Bangladesh, and over 14 million children have graduated from its pre-primary and primary schools (BRAC Education Programme Bangladesh, 2019; BRAC, n.d.). TMSS runs 35 institutions and programs like RPL and RTO, helping thousands of students complete education and secure employment, while reducing child labour and school dropouts (TMSS, n.d.). ASA operates 15,504 education centers and 62 learning centers, serving 492,214 students in rural areas (ASA, n.d.). Another important initiative is skill-based education. Instead of focusing only on traditional subjects, NGOs teach practical skills such as computer use, sewing, or mobile banking. This kind of training prepares young women for jobs or small businesses and connects them to the modern economy. BRAC has also facilitated women's collective empowerment through various programmes (Nazneen, Sultan, & Chowdhury, 2023). BRAC's programs particularly target girls, with 55% of participants being girls and women, and over 1.8 million adolescents accessing lifelong learning through clubs and community centres (BRAC, n.d.). Innovative boat schools provide education to more than 14,000 children in remote wetland areas (Chowdhury, 2020). Studies show BRAC school graduates achieve high pass rates, with girls often performing better than boys in exams (Mamun, 2022).

Social Empowerment

Social empowerment is a critical aspect of women's overall development, as it reflects their growing participation, confidence, and visibility within society. NGOs in Bangladesh help people, especially women and the poor, to stand on their own feet and take part in society with confidence. They raise awareness about education, rights, and equality, helping people break free from social barriers. By giving training and support, NGOs encourage women to speak up, make their own decisions, and work together for a better and fairer society. Bangladeshi Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are fundamental to women's social empowerment, with major actors like Grameen Bank and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) providing microcredit programs that go beyond simple financial assistance. These programs, alongside organizations like Nijera Kori which focuses on consciousness-raising, enhance women's autonomy by increasing their physical mobility, bolstering their confidence, and giving them a decisive role in household finances (Hashemi et al., 1996). The Grameen Bank microcredit model, initiated by Muhammad Yunus, is a pioneering strategy for socio-economic development and social empowerment, specifically targeting impoverished women through a non-collateral, trust-based lending mechanism (Rahman, 2022; Chidambaran, 2023). This replicable approach directly promotes women's economic advancement and their ability to generate self-employment, with a profound commitment evident in the fact that over 96% of the Bank's clients are female (Rahman, 2022). Consequently, the model has demonstrated success in fostering entrepreneurship, improving core social indicators, and generating sustainable social change across multiple global regions (Chidambaran, 2023). NGOs like the SNAD Foundation empower vulnerable women in Bangladesh through skill-building workshops, vocational training, and business development services, helping them create sustainable livelihoods. By promoting entrepreneurship and employment opportunities, SNADF enables women to achieve financial independence and improve their overall standard of living. These initiatives not only enhance women's economic status but also raise awareness about their rights and advocate for gender equality in the workforce. Such efforts align with SDG 5: Gender Equality, which aims to ensure equal opportunities and leadership roles for women across all sectors, thereby contributing to their social empowerment. Participation in these NGO-led initiatives allows women to build confidence, improve decision-making skills, and expand their mobility within both household and community spheres. Another NGO, The Shakti Foundation, that empowers women socially by giving out loans, like the JAGORON Loan, which helps them become leaders and decision-makers (Shakti Foundation, n.d.).

They add support through gender workshops and health programs to boost women's confidence and standing in the community (Shakti Foundation, n.d.). Regular group meetings and training sessions create platforms where women can discuss social and legal rights, share experiences, and collectively address challenges, fostering solidarity and leadership skills (Kabeer, 2016; Rahman, 2022). Ultimately, the combined efforts of these NGOs establish a robust, multi-faceted support system that hastens women's transition from marginalization to active citizenship,

underscoring their irreplaceable role in achieving equitable and sustainable development across Bangladesh.

Political Empowerment

Bangladesh has historically faced challenges in women's political empowerment, with women having limited opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. In recent years, NGOs have played a crucial role in changing this scenario by providing training, advocacy, and support programs that strengthen women's leadership and participation in local governance. NGOs such as Helvetas Bangladesh, USAID, OWDEB, NUK (Naari Uddug Kendra) and the DRIP Project are working to promote women's political empowerment. Helvetas promotes women's political empowerment in local governance through the *Aparajita Project*. The project strengthens the leadership capacities of elected and potential women representatives, ensures the inclusion of disadvantaged women, and engages male community elites, political leaders, and local government officials to create a supportive environment for women's participation in decision-making. Through the *Aparajita Project*, Helvetas Bangladesh collaborates with four partner organizations operating across 16 districts, 62 sub-districts, and 540 unions to strengthen women's participation in local governance. The project works closely with both elected and aspiring women representatives, as well as their families, community leaders, and local institutions, to create an environment supportive of women's leadership. Beyond community engagement, *Aparajita* also advocates for reforms in national policies and legal frameworks, addressing structural barriers and enabling factors that influence women's political empowerment in Bangladesh (Helvetas Bangladesh, n.d.). The initiatives of USAID, another non-governmental organization, empowers women politically, enabling them to take on leadership roles, access education, and gain financial independence. In 2022, over 300 female leaders underwent training, with 172 assuming leadership roles within registered unions and 21 securing leadership positions in worker community associations (Das, 2023).

The DRIP Project, implemented by UN Women in collaboration with UNDP and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, aims to strengthen women's political participation, representation, and leadership through the "Her Vote, Her Seat" campaign (FundsforNGOs, 2025). Similarly, another notable organization, the Naari Uddug Kendra (NUK), a national nonprofit women's organization established in 1991, mandated to promote political empowerment of women and girls in Bangladesh (Nari Uddug Kendra, n.d.). However, the efforts of NGOs in Bangladesh have been instrumental in advancing women's political empowerment. Through training programs, advocacy, community engagement, and policy reforms, organizations such as Helvetas Bangladesh, USAID, the DRIP Project, and many others have strengthened women's leadership capacities and encouraged their active participation in governance. But, the political landscape of Bangladesh for sustainable development is very complex and fraught with difficulties. Contemporary research by Arafat (2024b), Arafat and Fahmida (2025a, 2025b) highlights historical and systemic political factors that reinforce hierarchical structures and complicate accountability, while Arafat et al. (2025) examine how national integrity and institutional barriers

further influence behavior of different actors. By addressing structural barriers, fostering inclusive environments, and promoting gender equality, these NGOs are not only enabling women to take on leadership roles but also contributing to a more equitable and democratic society. Their continued commitment ensures that women's voices are heard, their rights are protected, and their potential as political leaders is fully realized.

Figure 2 : Supporting Representation and Leadership of Women in Local Governance



Source : Helvetas Bangladesh (n.d.)

Challenges and Limitations

Women's empowerment is a burning topic all over the world, especially in the context of developing countries like Bangladesh. Although NGOs has been made a significant progress in the areas of education, health, employment generation, social awareness, political participation, elimination of gender inequality ensuring women's empowerment, especially in rural areas, many challenges still exist. Culturally and traditionally, two sets of social norms influence the position of Bangladeshi women: patriarchy and purdah. In a male-dominated, patriarchal social system in Bangladesh, men dominate women and dictate the terms of relationships through family, marriage and inheritance (Parveen, 2007). In a male-dominated social system, women are often treated as commodities for consumption. Men are the primary decision-makers and the main earners of the family, and women are subordinated to men as domestic workers. Women's empowerment in Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country, is also constrained by the observance of purdah, which is the custom of veiling and segregating women. Purdah is long practiced in Bangladesh and follows Islamic values and cultural norms. This tradition has far-reaching consequences on women's freedom, mobility, education, healthcare and societal participation. Many women find it difficult to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to lead a life of dignity while still maintaining purdah (Rahman, 2020). The Shariah-based personal laws that determine important matters of life, like marriage, divorce, custody of children, inheritance and the like, are widely seen as gender-biased. Early marriage

contributes to a lower level of literacy among women, as well as a lower level of participation in economic activities. Furthermore, the dowry-based marriage system still victimizes rural Bangladeshi women (Parveen & Leonhäuser, 2004). Although the government has introduced the Prevention of Child Marriage Act 2017, it is hardly implemented properly. Bangladesh reports the third highest prevalence of child marriage in the world, and the highest in South Asia (UNICEF, 2025).

Gifts and debts are well-established in society in various ways, which value women as commodities. As a result, families with daughters suffer from anxiety about their daughters' marriage. Violence against women, attempts to suppress women under the guise of religious and social norms are obstacles to women's empowerment. Although the government has enacted various laws at different times to protect women's rights and prevent violence and sexual harassment, they are not properly implemented. NGOs are successfully running micro-credit projects for the socio-economic development of women. Many women are completely at bankrupt today in the vicious cycle of debt. Although the number of women in the job market has increased significantly in the last decade, creating a suitable environment for women in the job market is still a challenge. Wage inequality, insecurity, sexual harassment by colleagues, limited participation, and the abolition of the previously existing women's quota system have made women's free participation in the job market uncertain. Although NGOs are trying to create employment for women through skills and training work, they are rarely seeing the light of hope due to economic crisis, shortage of adequate manpower, technical and infrastructural crisis, and lack of cooperation. The number of women in education has increased significantly in the last decade. 69.85% of the students enrolled under the Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPM) run by BRAC are women (Lovell & Fatema, 1989).

However, this progress does not tell the entire story. Countless young girls continue to face barriers to access education, particularly in rural Bangladesh. Poverty, early marriage, and cultural norms act as stumbling blocks in the path of these young girls, limiting their opportunities and dreams (Dihan, 2024). Due to a lack of proper education and skills, Bangladeshi women only minimally participate in gainful economic activities or engage in political movements. Although the allocation of reserved seats has ensured some women's participation in decision-making and policy-making processes at the national level, starting from the local government. However, most women in rural areas are still not aware of their rights and politics. Women's participation in direct candidacy is at zero quota, which is one of the obstacles to women's empowerment. Although women were present in various positions, including the Prime Minister, Speaker, and Leader of the Opposition, during the previous government. But that does not represent the whole story. Even in the 21st century, women, especially in remote areas, are completely deprived of advanced maternal healthcare. Maternal mortality is occurring due to malnutrition, early pregnancy, and various other reasons. NGOs has lack of infrastructure and technologies. There is a lack of cooperation between NGOs working on women's empowerment and the government. NGOs operate in isolation, resulting in very few seeing the light of hope. This is creating obstacles in the implementation of the UN's

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of Gender Equality (SDG 5) and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10).

Recommendations

Women's empowerment in Bangladesh requires coordinated action by NGOs and the government to address the identified social, cultural, educational, economic and political barriers in rural and urban areas. An effective legal framework needs to be established to prevent violence against women, child marriage, dowry practice and abuse of women. Although there are many laws to prevent violence against women, they are rarely implemented in practice. NGOs need to strengthen their collaborative coordination with government agencies to ensure proper implementation of the Child Marriage Prevention Act (2017) and existing laws against violence and harassment. Strengthening institutional capacity for law enforcement agencies, training judicial and law enforcement officials on gender sensitivity and raising public awareness about women's legal rights are crucial to ensure effective implementation (Hasan, 2015; UNICEF, 2025). The patriarchal social system and the practice of veiling significantly limit women's mobility, decision-making and access to opportunities. To address socio-cultural barriers, awareness campaigns should be carried out at the initial stage, targeting communities in collaboration with NGOs and community partners. Religious and community leaders, educators and NGOs should collaborate to educate families about the importance of girls' education, the value of women's participation in the workplace and the benefits of equitable treatment, gradually reshaping established social attitudes. Women's access to education and the quality of education need to be increased. Vocational programs, financial assistance, various incentives including sanitation, clothing, community awareness campaigns by NGOs to raise awareness among parents, and programs that provide safe learning environments can help retain girls in school and reduce the rate of child marriage. Integrating vocational and technical skills training into both formal and non-formal education programs enables young women to achieve economic independence and make meaningful contributions to the family and community economy (Dihan, 2024; UNICEF, 2024).

Policies that ensure wage equity, safe working environments, and supportive workplace infrastructure are essential for increasing women's participation in the labor market (Islam et al., 2024). Women's quota systems in employment need to be reinstated or improved to ensure women's equal participation in the job market. Microfinance programs should be optimized with flexible repayment terms and financial literacy training to avoid debt traps and sustainably empower women entrepreneurs (Rahman, 2022). Access to health care, especially maternal and reproductive health care, needs to be expanded. NGO mobile clinics, trained community health workers, and culturally sensitive public health outreach initiatives can reduce the risk of preterm birth and maternal mortality by ensuring maternal nutrition, educating women about the risks of early pregnancy, and ensuring that these services reach remote and underserved areas. Coordination between NGOs and government agencies is crucial to ensure that these services reach remote and underserved areas (UNICEF, 2025). Political empowerment NGOs aim to build

women's leadership skills, raise awareness about legal rights, and encourage and motivate women's direct participation in elections at the local and national levels. Leadership training at the grassroots level and raising public awareness about women's political rights are needed to increase support for women's political candidacies beyond reserved seats, especially in rural areas where political participation is low (Rahman, 2020). Mentoring programs and community support can encourage women to take an active role in decision-making processes, strengthening their voices in both policy and social change (UNDP Bangladesh, 2022). NGOs should develop modern infrastructure and technology. Through concerted efforts by governments, NGOs, and communities to address socio-cultural norms, education, economic opportunities, healthcare, political participation, and legal frameworks for women's empowerment, Bangladesh can create an environment where women, no longer bound by traditional barriers, can fully exercise their rights, participate equally in society, and contribute to sustainable national development by 2030, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the role of NGOs in women's empowerment in Bangladesh, with visible impacts across the economic, educational, social, and political spheres. NGOs have brought about positive changes in women's lives by ensuring access to education, providing vocational programs, extending healthcare services in remote areas, offering maternity support, implementing microcredit schemes, and expanding technical training and skill development. They have also created safer workplace environments, promoted social awareness, and taken legal measures against child marriage, dowry, and gender-based violence, while increasing women's participation in politics and decision-making processes. Organizations such as BRAC, ASA, PROSHIKA, CARE, UNDP, Grameen Bank, and Bangladesh Mahila Parishad are playing an effective role in enhancing women's empowerment at the grassroots level, where the presence of state institutions is often limited. However, despite these achievements, the progress of NGO-led activities remains fragile and uneven due to persistent barriers. Patriarchal social systems, veiling practices, child marriage, dowry, gender-based violence, weak law enforcement, workplace inequality, debt dependency, and limited political engagement continue to hinder sustainable empowerment. The sole efforts of NGOs are not enough; coordinated action is essential. Joint initiatives involving governments, NGOs, communities, and international partners are necessary to address these challenges. Eliminating wage inequality, ensuring safe working environments, enforcing effective laws to prevent child marriage, dowry, and violence against women, expanding vocational education, and strengthening women's direct political participation will further consolidate progress. Overall, through such integrated and multi-stakeholder initiatives, women in Bangladesh can move beyond socio-economic and political marginalization, actively contribute to national development, and support the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

Funding

No funding is available.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

REFERENCES

- Arafat, M. Y. (2024a). Research ethics: Meaning and principles. *International Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4887943>
- Arafat, M. Y., & Fahmida. (2025a). History, agendas, and anomalies of Bangladesh politics. *DIROSAT: Journal of Education, Social Sciences & Humanities*, 3(2), 323–341. <https://doi.org/10.58355/dirosat.v3i2.158>
- Arafat, M. Y., Alam, M. M., Raz, N. H., Opee, M. F. S., Tabassum, N., & Fahmida. (2025). Exploring the determinants and barriers of national integrity in the context of Bangladesh. *INTERDISIPLIN: Journal of Qualitative and Quantitative Research*, 2(4), 291–310. <https://doi.org/10.61166/interdisiplin.v2i4.121>
- Arafat, M. Y., & Fahmida. (2025b). Envisioning Accountability through a Mobile Application: a Theoretical Framework. *Journal of Governance and Accountability Studies*, 5(2), 93–111. <https://doi.org/10.35912/jgas.v5i2.2706>
- Arafat, M. Y. (2024b). Student politics, Bangladesh and solutions. *International Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research*, 8(9), 230–236. <http://ijeais.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/9/IJAMR240932.pdf>
- Arafat, M. Y., & Fahmida, F. (2024). Effective class management: A study to enhance education system. *Semarak International Journal of Innovation in Learning and Education (SIJILE)*, 3(1), 47–60. <https://doi.org/10.37934/sijile.3.1.4760a>
- ASA. (n.d.). Education program. ASA Bangladesh. Retrieved September 5, 2025, from <https://asa.org.bd/NonFinancialProgram/PrimaryEducationStrengthening>
- BRAC. (n.d.). Education: Investing in the next generation. BRAC. Retrieved September 5, 2025, from <https://www.brac.net/program/education/>
- BRAC Education Programme Bangladesh. (2019). BRAC. Available at: <https://www.brac.net/program/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Factsheet-BRAC-Education-Programme-June-2019.pdf>
- Chen, Y.-Z., & Tanaka, H. (2014). Women's empowerment. In A. C. Michalos (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research* (pp. 7154–7156). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_3252
- Chidambaran, J. (2023, June 30). How Grameen Bank Empowered Millions Of Women Entrepreneurs. *Madras Courier*. <https://madrascourier.com/opinion/how-grameen-bank-empowered-millions-of-women-entrepreneurs/>
- Chowdhury, Z. (2020, January 20). Boat schools: What learning looks like at the last mile in Bangladesh. *The Good Feed*. <https://blog.brac.net/boat-schools-what-learning-looks-like-at-the-last-mile-in-bangladesh/>

- Das, P. P. (2023, October 2). *5 organizations aiding women's empowerment in Bangladesh*. Borgen Magazine. <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/womens-empowerment-in-bangladesh/>
- Dihan, D. H. (2024, January 2). *Hope and hurdles: Women's empowerment and gender equality in Bangladesh*. *The Business Standard*. <https://www.tbsnews.net/thoughts/hope-and-hurdles-womens-empowerment-and-gender-equality-bangladesh-768154>
- FundsforNGOs. (2025, August 2). DRIP Project: Strengthening women's political participation, representation and leadership – Her Vote, Her Seat campaign (Bangladesh). *FundsforNGOs*. <https://www2.fundsforngos.org/democracy-good-governance/drip-project-strengthening-womens-political-participation-representation-and-leadership-her-vote-her-seat-campaign-bangladesh/>
- Goetz, A. M., & Gupta, R. S. (1996). Who takes the credit? Gender, power, and control over loan use in rural credit programs in Bangladesh. *World Development*, 24(1), 45–63. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X\(95\)00124-U](https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(95)00124-U)
- Hasan, M. Z. (2015). Women empowerment in Bangladesh: Issues and challenges. *NDC E-Journal*, 14(2), 1–16. <https://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/ndcj/index.php/ndcj/article/view/155>
- Hashemi, S. M., Schuler, S. R., & Riley, A. P. (1996). Rural credit programs and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. *World Development*, 24(4), 635–653. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X\(95\)00159-A](https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(95)00159-A)
- Helvetas Bangladesh. (n.d.). *Aparajita: Women Political Empowerment project*. https://www.helvetas.org/en/bangladesh/what-we-do/how-we-work/our-projects/Asia/Bangladesh/bangladesh-women-empowerment?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Islam, M. Z., Tasnim, N., Hossain, M. S., Akter, S., Hasan, M. M., Nahar, J., & Akter, M. S. (2024). Women empowerment through microcredit in rural Bangladesh: Evidence from Lakshmipur District. *Journal of Creative Writing*, 8(2), 34–49. <https://jocw.itc.edu.bd/index.php/jocw/article/view/101>
- Kabeer, N. (2016). Economic pathways to women's empowerment and active citizenship: What does the evidence from Bangladesh tell us? *The Journal of Development Studies*, 53(5), 649–663. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2016.1205730>
- Lovell, C. H., & Fatema, K. (1989, December). The BRAC, non-formal primary education programme in Bangladesh. United Nations Children's Fund. <https://www.irctwash.org/sites/default/files/812-BD89-7122.pdf>
- Mamun, H. A.-R. (2022, October 28). BRAC Education Programme (BEP) and quality improvement in the country's education. *The Asian Age*. <https://dailyasianage.com/news/295877/brac-education-programme-bep-and-quality-improvement-in-the-countrys-education>
- Moriom, B. (2024). Role of microcredit to empower women in Bangladesh: An investigation on two NGOs in Shariatpur District. *Bangladesh Journal of Public Administration*, 32(1), 97–117. <https://doi.org/10.36609/bjpa.v32i1.1185>
- Nari Uddug Kendra. (n.d.). *Nari Uddug Kendra | Centre for Women's Initiatives*. <https://nuk-bd.org/>

- Nazneen, S., Sultan, M., & Chowdhury, N. (2023). Quiet revolution? Women's collective empowerment and BRAC. *Development in Practice*, 34(2), 159–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2023.2185182>
- Parveen, S. (2007). Gender awareness of rural women in Bangladesh. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9, 253–254.
- Parveen, S., & Leonhäuser, I.-U. (2004, October 5–7). *Empowerment of rural women in Bangladesh: A household level analysis*. Paper presented at the Deutscher Tropentag – Berlin 2004, Conference on Rural Poverty Reduction through Research for Development and Transformation, Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen, Germany. <http://www.tropentag.de/2004/abstracts/full/382.pdf>
- Rahman, A., & Bhuiyan, M. A. H. (2022). Empowerment of rural women through microcredit programme of BRAC. *Bangladesh Journal of Political Economy*, 38(2), 261–296. <https://doi.org/10.56138/bjpe.dec2214>
- Rahman, M. M. (2020, August 12). The empowerment of women in Bangladesh: Not just rhetoric. Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. <https://share.google/sKtbvVggKaoCFAPPE>
- Rahman, R. (2022). Women empowerment in Bangladesh NGOs. *NU Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences & Business Studies*, 7(2), 111–126. <https://www.banglajol.info/index.php/NaUJHSSBS/article/view/68084/45637>
- Rahman, S. (1997). BRAC and Women's Empowerment. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 1(1), 151–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097185249700100111>
- Rozzani, N., Rahman, R. A., Mohamed, I. S., & Yusuf, S. N. S. (2013). Applying technology: Issues in microfinance operations. *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research*, 17(3), 374–381. <https://doi.org/10.5829/idosi.mejsr.2013.17.03.12165>
- Shakti Foundation. (n.d.). *Annual Report 2023–2024*. <https://www.shakti.org.bd/assets/publications/1cbe71187d00ed6945e985108aa752d6.pdf>
- Stuarttan. (2024, October 5). *Women empowerment: What it means and its impact in today's society*. Stuarttan. <https://www.stuarttan.com/women-empowerment-what-it-means-and-its-impact-in-todays-society/>
- TMSS. (n.d.). Impact on SDG. Thengamara Mohila Sabuj Sangha. Retrieved September 5, 2025, from <https://tmss-bd.org/impact-on-sdg/>
- UNDP Bangladesh. (2022, June 24). Women empowerment must for development of Bangladesh. <https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/press-releases/women-empowerment-must-development-bangladesh>
- UNFPA. (n.d.). Issue 7: Women empowerment. <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/issue-7-women-empowerment>
- UNICEF. (2024). Bangladesh government steps up efforts to end child marriage, reaching over 6 million nationwide, supported by UNFPA and UNICEF. UNICEF Bangladesh. <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/press-releases/bangladesh-government-steps-efforts-end-child-marriage-reaching-over-6-million>
- UNICEF. (2025). Child Marriage Evidence Profiles 2025. Source: https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/11471/file/o8o4_Child%20Marriage%20Evidence%20Profile-%20Bangladesh.pdf