

# CHAPTER-20

## **ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM: NAVIGATING THE ROLE OF NGOS IN THE EMPOWERMENT OF WORKING WOMEN IN INDIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The empowerment of women in India has been a focus area for numerous Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working tirelessly to address socio-economic disparities. This study aims to explore the pivotal role played by NGOs in promoting gender equality and enhancing the status of working women of India. It delves into the strategies employed by these organizations, such as education, skill development, healthcare initiatives, and advocacy programs, to uplift women from marginalized communities. It also highlights the impact and successes achieved by NGOs in empowering working women, including increased financial independence, improved access to education, heightened social awareness, and greater participation in decision-making processes. Moreover, it will highlight the impact of these efforts on women's lives, families, and the broader community, shedding light on the transformative power of NGO interventions in the lives of working women in India.*

**Keywords:** NGOs, women's empowerment, challenges, advocacy and activism.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

NGOs play a crucial role in promoting women's empowerment across various spheres including education, healthcare, economics, leadership, legal rights, and social equality. They aim to address gender disparities and societal barriers hindering women's progress by utilizing strategies like awareness programs, skill development workshops, policy advocacy, resource allocation, and building support networks (Fortmann, L., 2006). Ultimately, NGOs strive to enhance women's autonomy and participation in economic, social, and political spheres, thus fostering a more equitable and inclusive society.

Women's empowerment in India is a multifaceted issue, marked by numerous challenges including gender biases, limited access to education and economic resources, healthcare disparities, and entrenched cultural norms (Kumar, H., 2005). Despite these obstacles, India has a history of influential female leaders and activists advocating for gender equality. Various efforts, including governmental policies, NGO initiatives, grassroots movements, and advocacy campaigns, have been implemented to address these challenges. Key factors driving women's empowerment include education, economic independence, healthcare access, legal reforms, political engagement, and shifts in societal attitudes (Nayak, P., & Mahanta, B., 2012). Organizational initiatives focus on skills development, decision-making empowerment, and creating supportive environments for women's advancement.

Despite progress, persistent challenges including gender-based violence, wage disparities, underrepresentation in leadership, and cultural biases hinder full

empowerment. However, ongoing efforts aim to overcome these obstacles and foster a more inclusive environment for women in India. This study explores how NGOs can empower women by providing essential support, recognizing the crucial role of women in the nation's advancement. Despite inherent entrepreneurial potential, barriers like patriarchal structures and lack of governmental support often limit women's opportunities. Thus, NGOs play a crucial role in empowering and educating women for immediate economic self-sufficiency (Kumaran, M., 2014). In India, NGOs operate independently from the government, addressing societal issues and serving marginalized communities.

## **2. HISTORY OF NGOS WORKING FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

The advancement of women's empowerment has become a prominent objective in the development strategies of numerous nations. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as pivotal agents in facilitating this process (Nikkhah, H. A., & Redzuan, M. R. B., 2010). In India, the lineage of NGOs traces back to the colonial era when these entities were established to tackle prevalent social concerns. Post-independence, NGOs continued to proliferate, addressing a spectrum of challenges nationwide (Kudva, N., 2005). Notably, the trajectory of women's education transitioned from a slow progression in pre-independence India, largely limited to the upper echelons of society, to a significant expansion in independent India. The 1970s witnessed a notable surge in NGO numbers driven by heightened awareness and activism.

The adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, with a focus on promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, underscored global recognition of these objectives (Fortmann, L., 2006). This sentiment was echoed in India's Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-07), which prioritized the implementation of the National Policy for Empowerment of Women. This policy emphasized a three-fold strategy encompassing economic empowerment, social empowerment, and gender justice (Shivagami, G., & Prasad, T. R., 2017).

In India, many NGOs undertake women empowerment initiatives, often supported financially by governmental and corporate entities. These endeavors aim to enhance the socio-economic status and overall well-being of women within society (Torri, M. C., & Martinez, A., 2011). These initiatives predominantly focus on thrift-related activities while also addressing various issues through training programs and capacity-building exercises. Some NGOs in India specifically target women's empowerment through Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

The empowerment of women is not confined to India but is a global imperative in the developmental agendas of nations worldwide. Research indicates that women, predominantly engaged in voluntary community work, possess the awareness, skills, and sensitivity necessary to address women's issues effectively. However, NGOs committed to women's empowerment encounter numerous challenges.

In India, NGOs have evolved to address a broad spectrum of issues, including poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, environmental conservation, and human rights. They operate across local, national, and international levels, collaborating with various stakeholders (Banks, N., & Hulme, D., 2012). Despite their significant contributions, NGOs face challenges such as regulatory constraints, bureaucratic hurdles, and funding issues. Nevertheless, they remain vital components of India's societal framework, driving social change and contributing to the nation's development trajectory.

### **3. CONCEPT OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

The concept of women's empowerment encompasses various interpretations, oscillating between viewing it as a predominantly individual journey towards assuming control and accountability over one's life circumstances and as a collective political endeavor aimed at bestowing human rights and rectifying social injustices upon marginalized segments of society. Situated within the framework and advocacy of gender equality, the empowerment of women has progressively garnered attention within the agendas of international development entities, primarily as a strategic means to realize gender parity rather than an isolated objective. Enhanced relevance of empowerment emerges with the augmentation of women's education, access to information, and capacity to make informed, judicious choices. Undeniably, the developmental trajectory of women has constituted a pivotal focal point in national planning efforts since the era of Independence (Ralte, M. H., 2024). However, the actualization of empowerment necessitates a contextual understanding within interrelated dynamics. A coherent vision is imperative to dismantle barriers impeding women's liberation, necessitating collaborative endeavors between governmental bodies and women themselves. Endeavors ought to be channeled towards fostering holistic advancement across all spheres of societal engagement for women.

### **4. METHODS ADOPTED BY NGOS FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

NGOs are instrumental in advancing the empowerment of women through multifaceted approaches aimed at tackling gender disparities. They actively promote girls' education, seeking to diminish the literacy gap and enhance access to schooling by

offering scholarships, establishing educational institutions, and organizing awareness initiatives (Krishna., 2023). Moreover, NGOs prioritize women's health concerns, delivering healthcare services, reproductive health education, and access to maternal care while advocating for hygiene and healthcare awareness. Additionally, they facilitate women's economic empowerment through skill enhancement programs, vocational training, microfinance ventures, and entrepreneurship support, thereby fostering financial autonomy and bolstering familial economic resilience. Legal assistance is provided to women encountering discrimination, abuse, or rights violations, alongside efforts to influence policy reforms and societal perceptions to uphold gender equality and women's rights (Ahmed, W., & Jameel, A. 2018). Furthermore, NGOs promote women's leadership and political engagement through workshops, campaigns, and awareness endeavors, aiming to dismantle entrenched gender norms, stereotypes, and cultural practices perpetuating inequality.

- **Research and Analysis:** NGOs conduct comprehensive research to gain profound insights into prevalent issues, evaluate their ramifications, and formulate solutions grounded in empirical evidence.
- **Capacity Building:** NGOs facilitate community empowerment by imparting training, education, and resources to enhance local capacities and skills.
- **Fundraising and Donor Engagement:** NGOs sustain their projects and operational endeavors through soliciting donations, securing grants, and organizing fundraising activities.
- **Advocacy and Lobbying:** Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) actively participate in advocacy endeavors aimed at augmenting public awareness regarding pertinent societal issues, influencing policy formulation, and rallying public endorsement for causes such as environmental preservation, human rights, gender parity, and equitable social structures.
- **Direct Service Provision:** Certain NGOs engage directly in delivering essential services such as healthcare, education, disaster relief, and community development to promptly address emergent needs within communities.
- **Partnerships and Collaboration:** NGOs frequently forge alliances with governmental bodies, other NGOs, corporate entities, and local communities to pool resources and expertise for collective endeavors.

- **Awareness Campaigns:** Utilizing diverse media platforms, social networks, and event initiatives, NGOs endeavor to raise public consciousness on pertinent issues, thereby fostering support and comprehension.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Regular scrutiny and evaluation of programmatic initiatives enable NGOs to gauge their efficacy, identify areas for improvement, and effectuate requisite adaptations.
- **Legal Support and Advocacy:** NGOs extend legal assistance, guidance, and representation to marginalized groups or individuals facing injustices or human rights violations.
- **Networking and Alliances:** Active involvement in networks and alliances fortifies the collective voice of NGOs, augments their influence, and facilitates the exchange of best practices.

The strategies employed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in India are contingent upon factors such as their organizational goals, intended recipients, financial capabilities, and the specific socio-economic and environmental issues they seek to tackle (Jagannathan, S., 2001). In essence, these NGOs serve as agents of transformative influence, augmenting state initiatives and frequently introducing novel approaches to combat a spectrum of societal, economic, and ecological dilemmas.

## **5. GOVERNMENTAL EFFORTS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA**

Various governmental efforts have been implemented in India to promote the advancement of women across a range of societal spheres. Noteworthy among these endeavors are:

- **Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP):** The Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP) initiative, implemented in 2015, stands as a prominent endeavor of the Indian government aimed at ameliorating the declining child sex ratio while concurrently fostering the educational and general welfare of girls at a national scale (Finserv, B., 2024). This initiative is strategically crafted to combat issues such as female feticide and endeavors to enhance the child-sex ratio by actively discouraging gender-biased sex selection practices and advocating for the intrinsic value of female progeny. BBBP prioritizes facilitating girls' access to high-quality education and ensuring their sustained enrollment in educational institutions, thereby augmenting participation and attendance rates at both primary and secondary levels of education. Furthermore, the program addresses instances of gender-based

discrimination and violence against women, while also facilitating women's empowerment through initiatives centered on skill development and economic opportunities (Ahmed, W., et., al. 2020). BBBP operates through cohesive collaboration among diverse governmental departments and stakeholders spanning national, state, and local levels, leveraging a spectrum of measures encompassing awareness campaigns, advocacy endeavors, educational support mechanisms, financial incentives, and policy enactments to engender a more nurturing and inclusive milieu for girls.

- **Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK):** The Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK), instituted in 2017 under the aegis of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, constitutes a governmental endeavor directed towards the empowerment of women, primarily those residing in rural locales, through a multifaceted array of developmental interventions encompassing assistance provisions, skill augmentation initiatives, and community involvement endeavors. Serving as pivotal nodes for activities geared towards women, MSK centers endeavor to foster women's proactive involvement across social, economic, and political domains at the grassroots level. A core tenet of this initiative is the dissemination of information pertaining to governmental initiatives targeting the welfare, health, educational pursuits, legal rights, and empowerment of women. MSKs provide an assortment of capacity-building workshops, vocational training sessions, and supportive services spanning domains such as women's health, nutritional well-being, maternal and childcare, legal advocacy, counseling, and financial literacy. Through facilitating the execution of diverse governmental schemes aimed at the betterment of women, MSKs assume a crucial role in ensuring efficacious delivery and widespread outreach, operating at both national and district tiers. By furnishing a platform for women to access information, hone skills, and engage in communal endeavors, the Mahila Shakti Kendra endeavors to foster women's empowerment and augment their societal, economic, and political agency (Mahila Shakti Kendras, MSK).
- **Pradhan Mantri Matri Vandana Yojana (PMMVY):** Established in 2017, the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) is a governmental initiative designed to offer financial aid to expectant and nursing mothers during their initial childbirth, with the primary objective of enhancing maternal and infant health outcomes. Qualified recipients receive monetary incentives directly deposited into their bank accounts, contingent upon factors such as timely registration of pregnancy and adherence to antenatal care practices. By concentrating on mitigating income loss, fostering improved dietary practices,

and fostering a culture of healthcare-seeking behaviors among expectant mothers, PMMVY endeavors to curtail maternal and neonatal mortality rates by ensuring the provision of comprehensive healthcare and nutritional services.

- **Ujjwala Yojana:** Launched in May 2016, the Ujjwala Yojana represents a pioneering social welfare endeavor designed to furnish complimentary LPG connections to women hailing from Below Poverty Line (BPL) households throughout India. With the primary objective of mitigating the financial obstacles associated with procuring LPG connections, the initiative strives to advocate for cleaner cooking methodologies, thereby mitigating the deleterious health repercussions stemming from indoor air pollution, with a particular focus on women and children. Targeting economically disadvantaged women identified through the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) data, the Ujjwala Yojana aspires to empower these women by minimizing the time expended on fuel acquisition, enhancing safety measures, and facilitating their participation in other productive endeavors.
- **National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW):** Established in 2010 by the Government of India under the Ministry of Women and Child Development, the National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) is dedicated to advancing the social, economic, and political empowerment of women through the coordination of diverse governmental initiatives tailored to their well-being and advancement. NMEW facilitates synergistic collaboration among governmental ministries, departments, and stakeholders to bolster economic opportunities for women, encompassing endeavors such as skill enhancement, entrepreneurial education, and facilitating access to financial resources. Furthermore, the mission endeavors to enhance women's health and nutrition by ensuring improved access to healthcare services and fostering awareness of pertinent health issues. Operating at national and state levels, NMEW strives to cultivate a conducive environment for comprehensive development and empowerment of women across various domains, addressing their multifaceted needs and challenges while fostering avenues for their inclusive societal participation.
- **Sukanya Samridhi Yojana (SSY):** The Sukanya Samridhi Yojana (SSY), initiated in 2015 as part of the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao campaign, is a governmental savings scheme designed to encourage financial planning for the prospective educational and matrimonial expenses of female children. By urging parents or legal guardians to establish SSY accounts in the names of girls under

the age of 10, the scheme provides tax advantages under Section 80C of the Income Tax Act, thereby stimulating long-term savings endeavors while ensuring the future welfare of the girl child. Permitting partial withdrawals for specified purposes such as higher education or marriage costs, SSY functions as a platform for sustained savings while aligning with the broader objective of empowering and securing the future of female children in the Indian context.

- **Stand-Up India:** Stand-Up India, inaugurated in April 2016, constitutes an initiative with the goal of fostering entrepreneurship among women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs). By facilitating access to collateral-free bank loans for the establishment of new ventures in manufacturing, services, or trading domains, the scheme endeavors to mitigate historical discrepancies in credit accessibility while advancing economic empowerment among marginalized communities and women. By integrating components such as entrepreneurial development programs, business skill enhancement training, and mentorship initiatives, Stand-Up India aspires to cultivate a supportive ecosystem conducive to the promotion of entrepreneurship and economic empowerment among women and marginalized communities, thus contributing to the broader objectives of job creation and economic advancement.

Together, these initiatives form an extensive structure aimed at promoting the empowerment of women across diverse domains such as education, healthcare, economic growth, entrepreneurial endeavors, and social support systems.

## **6. CHALLENGES FACED BY NGOS WORKING ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

Despite the diligent endeavors of NGOs, the circumstances for numerous women remain disheartening as they continue to lack autonomy and control over their own decisions and financial resources (Zwingel, S., & Zwingel. (2016)). There remains substantial work to be undertaken in this regard, with the government needing to play a significant role. NGOs can offer assistance in supporting governmental efforts, yet it is crucial for the government to prioritize empowering marginalized and disadvantaged women, especially in rural areas (Gupta, M. (2021)).

**Embarking on women's empowerment projects poses various hurdles for NGOs operating in India. Here are some key challenges they might encounter:**

- **Inadequate Funding:** NGOs may encounter difficulties in securing sufficient financial resources to back their endeavors for empowering women, potentially constraining their outreach and hindering the sustainability of their initiatives.
- **Resource Constraints:** NGOs may find themselves with restricted access to crucial resources like technology, transportation, and personnel, impeding their capacity to execute programs with efficacy and proficiency.
- **Cultural Obstacles:** Cultural norms may pose challenges for NGOs engaged in women's empowerment efforts, as entrenched traditions may resist shifts that challenge conventional gender roles and expectations.
- **Awareness Deficit:** Some women might remain unaware of the services and assistance offered by NGOs, thereby limiting their ability to access and derive benefits from these resources.
- **Familial and Community Opposition:** Women could encounter opposition from their families and communities when attempting to engage with NGO programs, thereby impeding their ability to avail themselves of the support and services provided.
- **Insufficient Government Backing:** NGOs may face hurdles in garnering government support for their women's empowerment initiatives, which could curtail their potential for expansion and wider impact.
- **Capacity Limitations:** NGOs may find themselves constrained in their ability to extend services and support to a large number of women, particularly in remote or rural areas, due to capacity limitations.
- **Educational and Training Barriers:** Numerous women in India may lack access to educational and training opportunities, which could impede their capacity to leverage the programs and services offered by NGOs.
- **Language Challenges:** NGOs might encounter language barriers when engaging with women from diverse linguistic backgrounds, hampering effective communication and the delivery of culturally sensitive services.
- **Sustainability Concerns:** The long-term sustainability of women's empowerment initiatives by NGOs might be jeopardized, especially if they heavily rely on external funding or lack a viable business model (Jameel, A., & Ahmed, W. 2021).

- **Political Uncertainty:** Political instability and conflicts in certain regions of India could pose risks and logistical challenges for NGOs working on women's empowerment, affecting their ability to operate safely and effectively.
- **Limited Healthcare Access:** Many women in India may confront obstacles in accessing basic healthcare services, which could undermine their ability to benefit from NGOs' programs focusing on women's health and well-being.

Addressing these hurdles necessitates a comprehensive approach that involves forging partnerships, advocating for supportive policies, and tackling systemic issues such as gender inequality, poverty, and disparities in education and healthcare access (Khan, MW & Ahmed, W. 2021).

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The cooperation between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governmental initiatives represents a robust alliance aimed at advancing the empowerment of women. NGOs assume a crucial role in supplementing governmental efforts by offering tailored assistance, bridging disparities, and customizing interventions to cater to the distinct requirements of women. Their grassroots presence, coupled with specialized knowledge, augments the efficacy of governmental programs. Through collaborative efforts, NGOs and governmental initiatives generate a synergistic effect, broadening the scope and impact of endeavors directed towards women's empowerment. NGOs contribute flexibility, ingenuity, and a nuanced grasp of local dynamics, ensuring that interventions remain pertinent and adaptable to specific contexts. Concurrently, governmental initiatives furnish the requisite infrastructure, funding, and policy backing to amplify initiatives. This collaborative model not only maximizes the effectiveness of interventions but also fosters sustainability by establishing a unified and comprehensive framework for promoting women's empowerment. Ultimately, the partnership between NGOs and governmental schemes serves as a dynamic catalyst for positive transformation, reflecting a collective dedication to addressing the multifaceted obstacles impeding women's advancement and nurturing an environment where women can flourish and actively contribute to socioeconomic progress. This collaborative endeavor underscores the potency of a unified strategy in unleashing the full potential of women and constructing a more just and inclusive future.

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