

Women Empowerment in Bangladesh NGOS

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Abstract: *The main objective of this study is to investigate women empowerment in nongovernmental organizations' profile in Bangladesh. It discusses the scope of the women empowerment concept of the four big nongovernmental organizations in Bangladesh such as Grameen Bank, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Proshika and Association for Social Advancement. This paper is based on the literature and studies that highlight the women empowerment issue of these four NGOs. Results showed that two NGOs such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee and Proshika consider their women empowerment issue comparatively from a broader view that includes a number of programmes. On the other hand, the rest of the two nongovernmental organizations initiated the women empowerment activities comparatively from a narrower perspective. The overall findings indicate that the concept of women empowerment in all four nongovernmental organizations is concerned as a global concept where contextual perspective in of women empowerment is less considered. In this connection, this paper argues that due to the low level of focus on the contextual perspective, the contribution of nongovernmental organizations to the women empowerment in Bangladesh is not up to the mark in consideration to the duration they are working towards women empowerment. The findings of the paper would be an important guideline to the policy makers, managers of nongovernmental organizations and development practitioners.*

Keywords: Bangladesh; Women Empowerment, NGOs; Development Organizations; Women in Bangladesh.

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Introduction

Women empowerment through NGOs' activities has been widely focused in the literature. In recent decades the topic of women's empowerment has become acute, especially, in developing countries like Bangladesh. Women's empowerment is of great importance, because it is the most important precondition for elimination of world poverty and enhancement of human rights (DFID, 2000). Most scholars, development partners and feminist activists believe that Bangladeshi women have made considerable

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gains since 1971. But there is an opposite argument about gender equity in women empowerment. In this consequence there is rich academic and development policy debates about how and whether Bangladeshi women were empowered by the new economic opportunities of microfinance and the ready-made garment (RMG) industry since the 1990s (for example, Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996; Kabeer 1999, 2001). This is true that women's empowerment has been one of the top priorities of development agencies and governments around the world, including Bangladesh (Ali and Hatta, 2012). International aid donors, governments, scholars, and other development experts have paid much attention to microfinance as a strategy capable of reaching women and involving them in the development process. However, women's empowerment in the development process has, up to now, been viewed as the achievement of a “better deal” for women, with the concentration mainly on women's well-being (Sen, 2000).

For the last two decades, empowering women in one nation has been largely seen as a driver of economic progress, especially in the transition from a low-income to a middle-income economy (Oqubay, 2015). Even though women's contributions in poor nations are usually unappreciated and ignored, they account for half of the global population and have made significant contributions to development. Therefore, this study was carried out with the goal of determining the status of women's empowerment in Bangladesh, as well as evaluating the involvement of different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in this process.

Empowerment and Women Empowerment

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, 2014). Most definitions of empowerment share the notion that it involves a process and outcome whereby people, organizations, and communities gain mastery and control over their lives and become active participants in efforts to influence their environment (Hui & Tsui, 2004; Rappaport, 1987). Lord and Hutchison (1997) defined empowerment as processes whereby individuals achieve increasing control of various aspects of their lives and participate in the community with dignity. Whitmore (1988) conceived empowerment as ‘an interactive process through which people experience personal and social change, enabling them to take action to achieve influence over the organizations and institutions which affect their lives and communities in which they live.’ The term empowerment refers to measures designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-determination in people and in communities in order to enable them to represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way, acting on their own authority.

The majority of empirical studies do not measure the essential elements of empowerment. Additionally, macro-level studies are especially weak on measuring agency and often do not employ a relevant conceptual framework (Haymanot, 2007). Household-level studies have made significant progress in conceptualizing broader, context-specific frameworks and in specifying indicators that can be said to capture aspects of agency, but considerably more work is required in this area. The lack of empirical research at “meso” levels presents an important gap, as does the relative lack of rigorous research on policy and programmatic efforts. Alsop & Heinsohn (2005) mentioned empowerment: the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Empowerment of women is defined as ‘the process by which women take control and ownership of their lives through expansion of their choices. Thus, it is the process of acquiring the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability has previously been denied’. According to Kabeer, changes in the ability to exercise choice can be thought of in terms of changes in three inter-related dimensions which make up choice: resources which form the conditions under which choices are made; agency which is at the heart of the process by which choices are made; and achievements, which are the outcomes of choices. In broader sense, the Reference for Business (2019) lists eight main components in empowerment such as morals, self-image, growth, power, learning, access, options and positive thinking. The notion of empowerment is a multidimensional approach. It includes the agency and opportunity structure, physical and psychological; aspects of change, a process of conflict, a positive notion, gender power relation and roles and process of evaluation and mutual direction.

Hossen, Islam and Majumder (2016) considered women empowerment as one of the main tools to ensure the wellbeing of the women in the world. The United Nations Population Information Network indicates that women’s empowerment consists of five dimensions: 1) women’s sense of self-worth; 2) choices; 3) access to opportunities and resources; 4) the power to control their own lives; and 5) the ability to influence the direction of social change. Accordingly, the issue of women’s empowerment depends upon having sufficient control over resources, personal capacity, and sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy, as well as on changing traditional ideology (Sen & Batliwala, 2000). Fatema (1994) defines empowerment as an essential process that includes the confrontation and acquisition of psychological readiness, analytical and organizational skills. According to her explanation, empowerment possesses both an individual and a collective dimension.

Nazneen, Hossain and Sultan (2011) want to see women empowerment as ‘double continuum of women’s empowerment’ that includes the main dimensions of difference among the various discourses. They have a range of meanings along a continuum from empowerment as a mainly individual trajectory with a clearly economic pathway, to views of empowerment as essentially collective, fundamentally political, and about the distribution of power. The NGOs remain very much on the right hand side of the figure, seeing their direct role as individual and collective empowerment of poor people, particularly women, mainly in economic terms. Donor discourses similarly focus on individual empowerment, but also see women’s empowerment as situated within the economic growth process; the political focus seems fixed on local politics and service delivery issues. However, the donor discourse is generally concentrated in the bottom half of the quadrant. The women’s movement occupies the top left-hand corner, the space in which women’s empowerment comes to have a strongly collective and political meaning. Political parties appear to have a more varied presence on this map. Political party discourse generally focuses on the upper half of the diagram. All the actors with the exception of women’s organisations take an instrumental view on women and women’s rights and needs, and yet women are, in different ways, envisaged as part of the overall strategy, not as marginal to it. To some extent their view of women’s empowerment is constitutive and an indicator of Bangladesh’s progress.

NGOs and Women Empowerment Discourse

The literature gives a certain level of confusion about the definitions of the term non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Willetts (2002) argues that there is no generally accepted definition of an NGO and the term carries different connotations in different circumstances as many diverse types of bodies are now described as being NGOs. Ulleberg (2009) argues that it is a nearly impossible task to enumerate the various NGO characteristics when it comes to their aims, strategies, resources, target groups, tools, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. While the term is widely used, there are also many other overlapping terms used such as ‘non-profit’, ‘voluntary’ and ‘civil society’ organisations. However, it must be independent from the direct control of any government. According to Turner and Hulme (1997, 2000), ‘NGOs are generally registered organizations, community groups, professional associations, trade unions, corporate charity organizations whose aim is to improve the wellbeing of their members and of those areas in which they exist’. It covers a range of organisations within civil society, from political action groups to sports clubs. To consider this, it can be argued that all NGOs can be regarded as civil society organisations though not all civil society

organisations are NGOs. NGOs take different forms and play different roles in different continents, with the NGO sector being most developed in Latin America and parts of Asia. Lewis and Kanji (2009) argue that the roots of NGOs are different according to the geographical and historical context. Cleary (1997) argues that although there is debate regarding the definition of NGO, it is widely accepted that these are organisations which pursue activities to relieve the suffering, promote interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services and undertake community development. The World Bank defines NGOs as 'private organisations' that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services or undertake community development (Risal 2014).

Ahmed (2010) defined nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) by citing World Bank reports. According to these reports, NGOs are defined as "any group or institution that is independent of government and has humanitarian or cooperative, rather than commercial, objectives". Specifically, the World Bank focuses on NGOs that work in the areas of development relief or environmental protection, or those that represent poor or vulnerable people. The activities of NGOs in many developing countries are very helpful and advantageous. NGOs have been undertaking great tasks for humanitarian, environmental protection, and sustainable development programs. To improve the social and economic empowerment of the poor, NGOs are running many development programs around the world. Those extend over a very wide range, such as educational programs, micro-credit programs, social welfare programs, pure drinking water and sanitation programs, family planning and HIV programs, agriculture programs, human rights and advocacy programs, women empowerment programs and so forth. One Bangladeshi NGO, the Grameen Bank, has seen worldwide expansion of its program. The Bank's objectives, organizational structure, and method of delivering microcredit to the poor have been replicated in certain Asian, African, Latin American, and European countries. NGOs activities have achieved remarkable success over the past two decades. It was not an easy job, and NGOs have struggled with a lot of barriers. The efforts of NGOs helped Bangladesh in establishing an independent nation. According to Newaz (2003), in 1990, international development organizations provided their resources through NGOs to increase the government's delivery system to reach the poor in order to create indirect pressure on the government to attain efficiency. Even though government policy toward NGOs has not been specified, the NGOs are still engaging in meaningful cooperation with the government to create a better nation, and they are now playing effective roles in sustainable development involving disadvantaged people in Bangladeshi societies.

The development NGO discourse on women's empowerment in Bangladesh, with its particular emphasis on social justice and equality is superficially similar to that of women's organisations. Bangladesh has a high concentration of development NGOs, with about 80 percent of villages containing some NGO programs (World Bank 2006). The expansion of the NGO sector was fuelled by donor funding in the 1980s and 1990s, when NGOs were seen as alternative service delivery channels in Bangladesh (Sanyal 1991; World Bank 2006), particularly given state inefficiency in distributing public goods and the rise of the neoliberal discourse which privileged the market and stressed rolling back the state. Various basic services, both economic and social, are provided by development NGOs 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 managed to highlight their role in promoting poor women's development as service-users, economic agents and development workers through their various programmes. They are also successful in espousing gender goals in their programmes through reducing gender disadvantage in accessing services, provision of training and skills, and awareness-raising on gender related matters (Goetz 2001). In fact, they have emerged as complementary avenues for poor women to access basic services alongside state run services over the last two decades. However development NGOs have been criticised by scholars for emerging as 'new' patrons and maintaining a clientelist relationship, for not effectively challenging patriarchal structures, and for not developing formal structures that ensure downward accountability to women. The target populations of NGOs are poor people and women. NGOs offer a wide range of services those are fundamental to people's daily struggle to survive. These include credit, education, health, agricultural extension, and sanitation. NGOs' objectives are to empower these people in terms of their awareness and participation in development activities, and improve their financial and social capitals toward quality of life (Islam, 2014).

The microfinance institutions in Bangladesh are working for women's empowerment in order to reduce poverty. Women's empowerment is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It means not only extrinsic control, but also a growing intrinsic capability; greater self-confidence and an inner transformation of one's consciousness enable women to overcome external barriers to accessing resources or changing traditional ideology, and monitoring and evaluating them, and can create an environment that is conducive to women's empowerment (Batliwala, 1994). In this study women's empowerment is defined as the achievement of expanded rights and opportunities including education, economic self-reliance,

ownership and inheritance of property, political participation, and the elimination of all forms of gender-based discrimination, violence, abuse, harassment, and exploitation. Chowdhury & Chowdhury (2011) use a panel data survey to measure individual level outcomes such as labour supply, asset accumulation and family planning and household level outcomes such as children education and household expenditure per annum from participating in a credit program. These outcomes would then be compared to outcomes that can be achieved from borrowing loans from a non-program source. By comparing these outcomes, the benefit of micro finance is extracted, which in turn, is further analysed in terms of whether they indicate empowerment of women.

Akhter, Kun and Chukwunonso (2018) investigate that women's empowerment has become a prominent issue in developing countries. A microcredit program has been considered as a major development tool for poverty alleviation and lifting the poor, especially women, out of poverty. Bangladesh is one of the densely populated countries in the world. This paper examined the way in which microcredit schemes have improved the empowerment of women in rural Bangladesh. The data was collected from 324 rural women borrowers on a field study from six villages in the district of Tangail, Bangladesh through the administration of questionnaires. This survey was conducted during the period of July to December, 2016. Data was also collected from women non-borrowers to compare the impact between borrowers and control-groups. Data has been analyzed by SPSS software and also Logistic Regression is used to estimate the enhancement of women's empowerment for those who associate with microcredit programs. A significant outcome of this research showed that microcredit has a positive improvement on women's empowerment. The results confirmed that microcredit has both a significant and positive impact on women's empowerment. Ali and Hatta (2010) investigated the success rate - does microfinance truly empower or is it a case of disempowering through "empowerment"? The effectiveness of microfinance today has been a debatable subject in the economic and social work realms, in which it is considered a viable tool for women's empowerment. Although there are scores of studies that demonstrate that microfinance has a significant impact on livelihood and improves the living standards of women by reducing poverty, this paper contests those claims. Chowdhury & Chowdhury (2011) argue that microfinance has long been associated with generating empowerment of women. Over 90% of their clients in Bangladesh are women. The rising demand for credit may seem to indicate the popularity of the program. However, analysing why demand for credit is rising among women may offer a way to analyse empowerment of women.

Methods and data

The article is based on content analysis using existing available literature. I followed the type of papers similar to those of Joffres et al. (2008) and Islam and Hossain (2014). Content analysis is the systematic description of behaviour, asking ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’ and ‘how’ questions within formulated systematic rules to limit the effects of analyst bias. The search for relevant literature was completed in two stages. First, we examined peer-reviewed articles found in electronic databases (Academic Search Premier, Academic Common, Aseline, Informit, Ingenaconnect, Science Direct, Scopus, Social Science Citation Index and Social Science Research Network (SSRN), and PsycARTICLES) using keyword searches including ‘NGOs’ NGOs in women empowerment, and NGOs for women empowerment in Bangladesh. Altogether, by 30 August 2019, I had read 110 articles and discarded 70. Finally, I considered 42 articles and 10 reports which we found more relevant for this article. I also reviewed relevant published and unpublished national and international reports and documents.

NGOs’ and Women Empowerment in Bangladesh

This paper focuses on four large services such as BRAC, Proshika, Grameen Bank and ASA. With keywords searching this paper also analyses the key organisational documents, organisational mission and vision statements, annual reports, gender policies, and gender training materials, for researching the organisational discourse on women’s empowerment. The reasons for choosing these four NGOs are (a) their sheer size, outreach, and influence on women’s lives in the Bangladesh development context; (b) that they serve as models for other NGOs in designing gender sensitive mechanisms; and (c) they have come to represent a particular variant of women’s empowerment more towards individual economic empowerment and promotes a collective empowerment model; their comparison provides an opportunity to explore a small number of differences in NGO discourses on women’s empowerment. Four organizations conducted gender training for their members, but the key focus was on staff training to ensure empowerment and equity for women employees (Nazneen 2008) which is illustrative of their position on women’s empowerment. The following Table presents a brief mission, vision and values of those NGOs which clearly show that all of these NGOs are women empowerment focused particularly on the marginal and poor women.

Table 1: Mission, vision and values of NGOs

Name of NGO	Mission	Vision	Values
BRAC	A world free from	To empower people and	Integrity

Name of NGO	Mission	Vision	Values
	all forms of exploitation and discrimination where everyone has the opportunity to realise their potential.	communities in situations of poverty, illiteracy, disease, and social injustice. Our interventions aim to achieve large-scale, positive change through economic and social programmes that enable men and women to realise their potential	Innovation Inclusiveness Effectiveness
Grameen Bank	Banking for the poor	By providing comprehensive financial services, empowering the poor to realize their potential and break out of the vicious cycle of poverty.	
Proshika	PROSHIKA envisages a society which is economically productive and equitable, socially just, environmentally sound, and genuinely democratic.	PROSHIKA's mission is to conduct an extensive, intensive, and participatory process of sustainable development through empowerment of the poor.	
ASA	The vision of ASA is to establish a poverty free society.	The institutional mission of ASA is to support and strengthen the economy at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid by facilitating access to financial services for the poor, marginalized and disadvantaged.	Innovative and non-conventional management for achieving cost-effectiveness and sustainability.

source: Based on Annual Report

BRAC uses the term gender equity along with women's empowerment throughout its key documents as well as more specifically, women's rights, and gender justice. Their core vision and mission statement priors gender equity, envisioning a society that is 'free from hunger, poverty, environmental degradation and all forms of exploitation based on age, sex, religion and ethnicity' (BRAC n.d.). This vision of freedom from exploitation, including sexism, is elaborated in its mission statement: BRAC is actively involved in promoting human rights, dignity, and gender equity through poor people's social, economic and

political capacity building (BRAC n.d.) Gender equity is identified as a core BRAC value along with other values such as human dignity, fairness, discipline, participation and professionalism (BRAC n.d.). The issue of capacity building and poverty are frequently linked to BRAC's discourse on women's empowerment, which will be discussed later. The emphasis on rural women is visible in BRAC's official documentation. Its 2007 annual report features images of smiling busy women, more often than of men or children, and typically in rural settings. These images of rural women working or with their families are of BRAC's key client base, and depict its emphasis on the empowerment of individual women through capacity building and reducing poverty.

BRAC's achievement till 2018

Women made up 87% of the clients provided with financial services.

Girls made up over half of the 1.4 million children in schools operated and supported by BRAC.

1.8 million people, including men and boys, reached through gender mainstreaming efforts.

Almost a million women are members of our 12,800 pollishomaj-democratic, womenled institutions through which they build support networks, claim entitlements, and prevent exploitation. 62,594 pollishomaj leaders participated in local power structures

62,907 BRAC school students and parents across Bangladesh oriented on non-discrimination, child sexual abuse, and positive parenting.

Awareness of 219,963 adolescent girls and boys raised on sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

43,682 women graduated out of ultra-poverty

22,164 people accessed skill-based training, 46.22% of whom were female.

3.4 million mothers and pregnant women accessed nutrition counselling.

37,176 Rohingya women and adolescent girls made aware of their rights and provided with legal support

207,538 incidents of domestic violence, child marriage, and dowry prevented.

118,308 women exercised their leadership roles through our school management committees.

Women made up 97% of the clients who received legal services.

1.5 million pregnant women accessed maternity care services.

A comprehensive study, Advancing Gender Equality in Bangladesh, published on the history and impact of our gender quality action learning programme (GQAL), a 20-year experiment in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment agenda, where 2 million women and men took the lead in changing gender relations, social norms, and ending violence against women.

2,109,151 social safety net services and 687,532 social welfare activities accessed,

facilitated by pollishomaj 117,420 incidents of domestic violence, child marriage, and dowry were prevented 62,594 pollishomaj leaders participated in local power structures 12,265 people, particularly women and girls, linked to emergency medical and legal support

90,118 people made aware of human rights and received basic legal education 28,005 complaints received at legal aid clinics. 18,656 resolved through alternative dispute resolution USD 5,178,080 recovered in favour of clients 2,023 incidents of violence reported

1.8 million people reached through awareness-raising efforts on violence against women and children and prevention of child marriage 217,898 adolescent girls and boys reached through awareness-raising efforts on sexual harassment, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and child marriage 62,907 BRAC school students and parents oriented on non-discrimination, child sexual abuse, and positive parenting.

Source: BRAC (2018)

Professor Muhammed Yunus started the Grameen Bank in 1976 as a research project to look into the possibilities of developing a credit system for the rural poor. The idea was turned into an independent bank, the Grameen Bank, in October 1983. Muhammed Yunus and the Grameen Bank were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 (Chowdhury and Somani, 2020). Grameen Bank's major goal is to empower disadvantaged people, particularly women, to become self-sufficient. It also tries to limit the exploitation of high-interest-rate money lenders. As a result, unlike typical money lenders, Grameen Bank offers unsecured loans with low interest rates. According to Rahman (1993), Grameen Bank focuses on reversing the vicious cycle of "poor income, low saving, and low investment" to "more income, more credit, and more investment." Grameen Bank's members are primarily given microcredit loans. In a poor nation like Bangladesh, women are expected to do domestic duties and have limited mobility. According to Rouf (2012), the Grameen Bank assisted its members in participating actively in society. Grameen Bank has more than 96 percent of female members who are taking out microcredit loans, demonstrating the bank's ongoing commitment to women's empowerment (Chowdhury and Somani, 2020). Other programs by Grameen Bank, on the other hand, serve rural populations in a variety of ways. Grameen Bank launched the Village Phone Program in 1997, with the support of Grameenphone, to keep rural women informed by supplying them with phones. The participants in this initiative were called "Village Phone Ladies." This made it easier for them to get market and other service information. They also utilized it as a commercial pay phone, selling airtime to the villages, which became one of the main sources of profits for these village phone women, known as the Flexi load program. Grameen Bank offers scholarships to bright children of its members, not just for school but also for further education. Female students received a

59.7% scholarship in 2018, promoting female literacy. Because of Grameen Bank's success, other microfinance organizations are copying the concept, making people reliant on models like this.

ASA primarily works with landless women, who are a marginalized group in society. The major target group of ASA operations is women, who are the most vulnerable members of society, and their involvement is critical to the success of any development initiative in Bangladesh (Shamsuddoha and Nedelea, 2009). The introduction of several initiatives at the government and non-government levels allowed for speedier progress in poverty alleviation. ASA is one of the national NGOs functioning throughout Bangladesh among the different national, international, and local organizations. ASA offers microcredit to rural communities to help them start and maintain various income-generating ventures (IGAs) (Akhter, et al. 2018). Although many studies on diverse income production activities have been conducted, literature suggests that studies on ASA microcredit have not yet acquired significant traction among academics, especially in the area of rural poverty reduction. ASA Bangladesh is a well-known NGO in Bangladesh that works to empower women via trainings, education, microcredit, and health services, among other things. ASA is also one of the most creative organizations, having created Credit Management Systems and Policies aimed at reducing costs and boosting income by disbursing loans to all members in a timely manner. Participants are intended to learn from the ASA model how to reduce operational costs while increasing income via rapid growth and how to achieve early financial self-sufficiency (Rahman, 2016).

PROSHIKA is credited for pioneering the principles and techniques of organization-building among the underprivileged living in rural and urban regions, encouraging them to organize themselves into organizations known as '*samitis*'. The core groups create group federations at the village, union, and thana levels, which have already reached 10,255 larger organizational networks (Moniruzzaman, 2003). These are the foundations of participatory development, and they encourage the poor to acquire and improve their human, socioeconomic, and cultural resource bases. PROSHIKA's 'participatory development' program assists local people in setting their own development agendas based on their own goals, making choices, organizing and mobilizing themselves to demand rights and better access to diverse resources, and participating in decision-making mechanisms (Moniruzzaman, 2004). PROSHIKA thinks that the greatest approach to achieve women's empowerment is to organize grassroots women and mobilize them against their oppressive circumstances. PROSHIKA has undertaken sociopolitical empowerment of women via participatory initiatives such as awareness building and sociopolitical

mobilization in order to achieve this (Moniruzzaman, 2007). PROSHIKA claims to use a "participatory" approach and that its "ideas and programs are never pushed onto groups" (Kramsjo and Wood 1992). Instead, it allows rural communities to "articulate their challenges as well as design programs and actions" (Huda 1989).

BRAC & Grameen Bank have been influenced by the national and international development discourses on poverty reduction, human development, participation and rights in framing women's empowerment within their agenda. Among these various discourses it is poverty reduction which is used by four organisations to frame their agenda. BRAC's organizational overview states that 'Women and girls have been the central analytical lens of BRAC's anti poverty approach...' (BRAC n.d.). It justifies its focus on rural poor women on the basis that 'destitute rural women, while being worst affected by poverty, can play a crucial role as agents of change...' (BRAC n.d.). Aside from poverty alleviation, BRAC also refers to the achievement of 'MDG goals' and second generation development challenges in its discourses on women's rights. Similarly, PROSHIKA's women's empowerment agenda is tied to 'freedom from poverty' and human development (PROSHIKA n.d.). PROSHIKA does not emphasise MDG goals, but stresses participation and community organising by the poor: Empowerment means the poor are united and organised, become aware of the real causes of their impoverishment, build leadership among them and mobilize resources... (PROSHIKA n.d.) National women's rights issues and agendas and the WID discourse have influenced how these organisations develop programmatic goals to promote empowerment. There is a strong emphasis in BRAC's discourse on ending gender-based violence, especially through legal rights training and legal aid provision. PROSHIKA also highlights the need for preventing gender-based violence through the provision of human rights and gender training. In their trainings, conceptualise violence in a comprehensive manner which includes physical and psychological violence and focuses on violence within the family and community as is conceptualised by the women's organisations. However, the programmes are designed to benefit individual women rather than the wider structures that underpin the gender inequities in the system. This means it pursues accountability to women on an individual rather than a group or collective basis. Four organisations, despite their focus on improved individual empowerment outcomes, particularly economic empowerment, tie women's role to household welfare. This reveals the influence of the instrumentalist focus of development discourse on these organisations. PROSHIKA (n.d.) points to women's economic self-sufficiency helping 'reach the family'. BRAC (2007) also highlights how the family benefits through

women's participation in economic activities. There are two points to be made about this instrumentalism around women's power: firstly, the evidence strongly supports the idea that women's improved access to services and income generation activities have a positive impact on household welfare. But secondly, despite their practical focus on attitudinal change through training, organisational texts also include language about patriarchal structures (Rao and Kelleher 1997; BRAC 1997). However awareness of more complex patriarchal structures does not translate into the more linear organisational strategy for empowering individual women (Nazneen 2008).

In Bangladesh, women still trail behind males in terms of household decision-making and empowerment. Women's participation in many activities both within and outside the house is increasingly improving the situation with the intervention above of four NGOs. Women may participate in making family decisions alongside male individuals via involvement with various IGAs under different credit programs given by the abovementioned four NGOs, even though most women are controlled by the male member of the home. Women are becoming more involved in crop production, family budgeting, family planning, child education, social development activities, marketing, homestead gardening, livestock keeping, poultry and goat rearing, and other activities. As the above shows, women's empowerment in Bangladesh is linked in particular, with women's economic advancement and self-dependency. In this research, women's empowerment refers to self-earning capacity, for if a woman can earn money by herself, she should be granted the following abilities:

- The ability to spend money by herself

- The ability to train by herself

- The ability to help family members

- Freedom of choice

- A sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy

- The ability to create a happy and prosperous life

- The ability to get involved politically

- The ability to educate her children Involvement in self-earning activities can empower rural women to enjoy their ability to reshape their lives.

Conclusions and suggestions

Based on a content analysis, this paper attempts to provide four NGOs' profiles which highlighted women empowerment issue. The main limitation of this paper was the lack of

studies which sometimes do not capture the stories of women empowerment rather to discuss the issue of socioeconomic aspects such as poverty alleviation, protect human rights or provide relief and rehabilitation that may out of the range of the elements and aspects of women empowerment. Four NGOs under study are considered as the leading organizations which primarily focus on women empowerment related programmes and services. These programs act in a variety of ways to fulfil local needs. The selected four NGOs have the capacity to meet the Bangladesh government's criteria for poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, and long-term social development. Furthermore, the chosen NGOs are motivated by a desire to improve women's ability to engage in national, social, and democratic processes. This is accomplished through strengthening women's organizational capacity via group creation and growth, as well as encouraging women to use government services and engage in national and local commercial activities. BRAC, Garmeen Bank, PROSHIKA, and ASA are in the process of continual growth by implementing and innovating new programs for the benefit of women's development, which has left an influence on these NGOs in the community and throughout the nation. Because they cover more than 65 percent of the population and all of Bangladesh's districts, the women-related programs of the chosen four are more feasible than those of other NGOs operating in Bangladesh. As a result, they were able to reach the greatest number of women who were undeveloped, impoverished, and illiterate. As a result of their efforts, women are now receiving education, entrepreneurship training, awareness of new business ideas, awareness of social obstacles, awareness of laws and regulations, and other benefits as a result of their efforts. This is the way they are learning day by day and contributing to the development of themselves, their communities, and Bangladesh. The major limitation of these NGOs is the lack of comprehensiveness. One of their big criticisms is that these NGOs are monolithic and in many cases service based, not development based or they did not consider women empowerment as a holistic approach. They have taken microcredit as a serious and main programme which establishes them as a rent seeking organizations and profit led organizations. Some suggestions might be useful:

These NGOs should take some package programme which is comprehensive and sustainable towards women empowerment;

NGOs should be service oriented as well as developmental in nature;

Many NGOs should be women headed which promote women leadership and they can contribute more towards women empowerment;

NGOs' should come out from the traditional mindset and they should engage in new development and women empowerment approaches;

Finally, NGOs should take some more innovative programmes which will help to bring the women from traditional forms of norms and practices.

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