



Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Social Development: A Study of Women Empowerment Initiatives in India

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Abstract:

The present study examines the contributions of NGOs toward enhancing women's socioeconomic, educational, and political status in urban India. The research focuses on ten active NGOs operating across various districts of Delhi and their programs aimed at skill development, self-help group formation, health education, legal literacy, and livelihood promotion. Using a mixed-method approach, data were collected from 30 NGO officials and 200 women beneficiaries through structured questionnaires and interviews. The findings reveal that NGO interventions have significantly improved women's economic independence, decision-making capacity, and awareness of rights. Skill development initiatives led to increased self-employment and income generation, while legal literacy programs enhanced understanding of gender rights. However, challenges such as inadequate funding, limited government coordination, and social resistance remain major barriers to sustainable impact. The study concludes that NGOs act as vital agents of inclusive social transformation, complementing governmental efforts in achieving gender equality and community development goals in urban India.

Keywords: NGOs, Women Empowerment, Social Development, Delhi, Gender Equality, Skill Development, Legal Awareness, Economic Independence

1. Introduction

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as vital agents in the social development process of developing nations, especially in countries like India where the state alone cannot meet the multifaceted demands of inclusive growth. These organizations bridge the gap between government efforts and community needs, working toward improving education, healthcare, livelihood, and empowerment, particularly among marginalized groups. Among their many roles, NGOs' contribution to women's empowerment has gained significant scholarly and policy attention over the past two decades [1].

In India, the role of NGOs in advancing gender equality is deeply rooted in the postindependence development narrative. As government-led welfare programs often failed to penetrate local communities effectively, NGOs became essential vehicles for social transformation. Their grassroots orientation, flexibility, and participatory approach enable them to reach sections of the population that remain untouched by formal governance structures [2]. NGOs operating in urban regions like Delhi focus on capacity building, legal awareness, and vocational training to empower women economically, socially, and politically.



They also act as catalysts for behavioral change and as advocates for women's rights within patriarchal social systems [3].

Empowerment, as defined by Kabeer, involves expanding people's ability to make strategic life choices and transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes [4]. Within this framework, NGOs play a significant role in enhancing women's agency, resources, and achievements. In the Indian context, empowerment is not limited to economic independence but also includes access to education, self-confidence, and social recognition [5]. Numerous studies have established that NGOs promote this multidimensional empowerment by forming self-help groups (SHGs), providing entrepreneurship training, encouraging participation in community decision-making, and disseminating information about legal rights and healthcare [6].

Delhi, as the national capital, presents a diverse socio-economic landscape, where both opportunities and inequalities coexist. Urban poverty, slum settlements, gender-based violence, and lack of access to education continue to marginalize large sections of women. The city, however, also houses a robust ecosystem of NGOs addressing these challenges through community mobilization and participatory programs [7]. Organizations such as Jagori, Saheli, Pravah, and Action India have implemented programs focusing on gender sensitization, reproductive health, financial literacy, and leadership development [8]. The urban focus of these NGOs allows for integration with policy frameworks while maintaining community-level engagement.

The participation of NGOs in women's empowerment in Delhi reflects the broader evolution of India's civil society sector. Initially, NGOs concentrated on welfare and relief work; over time, they shifted toward rights-based approaches emphasizing empowerment, advocacy, and capacity building [9]. This paradigm shift aligns with global development goals such as the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality), which underscores the need to ensure women's full participation in all areas of life [10]. Through training, education, and microfinance programs, NGOs in Delhi have helped women transition from passive beneficiaries to active contributors in their families and communities.

However, despite these achievements, the effectiveness of NGOs faces several limitations. Financial constraints, bureaucratic hurdles, and dependence on donor funding often restrict long-term sustainability [11]. Additionally, overlapping jurisdictions between NGOs and government agencies sometimes lead to duplication of efforts and limited scalability of successful programs [12]. Socio-cultural barriers, including patriarchal attitudes and community resistance, further constrain the outreach of empowerment initiatives, particularly among women from conservative or economically weaker backgrounds [13].

The need to evaluate the impact and challenges of NGO-led empowerment programs in Delhi thus becomes vital for understanding how such initiatives can be made more inclusive and sustainable. Empirical research indicates that participation in NGO programs leads to improved income generation, decision-making autonomy, and legal awareness among women



[14]. However, there remains a gap in assessing whether these benefits translate into lasting structural change. Measuring empowerment outcomes—such as shifts in gender roles, mobility, and leadership—requires nuanced, data-driven inquiry [15].

This study seeks to fill this gap by conducting an in-depth analysis of NGOs functioning in Delhi and their role in promoting women's empowerment. The research examines how these organizations design, implement, and evaluate their programs, and how participation influences beneficiaries' socio-economic status and self-perception. By collecting primary data from NGO officials and women beneficiaries, the study aims to identify patterns of success and the systemic challenges that constrain these interventions.

The significance of this research lies in its urban focus—where the dynamics of empowerment differ from those in rural areas due to factors such as education levels, employment opportunities, and exposure to modern institutions. While rural empowerment has received extensive academic coverage, urban contexts like Delhi are underexplored despite their unique socio-political fabric [16]. Moreover, given the rising role of digital platforms and social media in contemporary activism, urban NGOs also represent a shift toward technologically enabled empowerment models, where awareness and mobilization occur beyond physical boundaries [17].

In Delhi's socio-political environment, NGOs not only function as service providers but also as advocates for gender justice and policy reform. They collaborate with governmental departments, corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, and international agencies to expand their reach. Their initiatives—ranging from self-help groups and microcredit systems to digital literacy campaigns—have fostered confidence and collective identity among women. This empowerment has ripple effects: empowered women often contribute to education, healthcare, and community well-being, thereby reinforcing the broader goals of social development [18].

Furthermore, studies show that when women gain access to economic resources and decisionmaking power, they invest more in family health, education, and community welfare [19]. NGOs facilitate this transformation by providing the necessary training, financial literacy, and institutional support. Yet, long-term sustainability depends on government collaboration, community ownership, and effective monitoring mechanisms. Therefore, this study also examines how policy convergence between NGOs and governmental frameworks can strengthen the overall impact of empowerment initiatives in Delhi.

2. Review of Literature

The role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in women's empowerment has been extensively explored by scholars, development practitioners, and policymakers. The literature collectively emphasizes NGOs as essential agents in promoting gender equality, social inclusion, and sustainable development, particularly in contexts where state interventions fall short. This review synthesizes findings from major studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving role of NGOs in India, with specific focus on empowerment dimensions relevant to the urban context of Delhi.



2.1 Conceptual Understanding of NGOs and Social Development

Non-Governmental Organizations emerged as significant actors in the development landscape post-1970s, particularly in countries like India, where socio-economic disparities required community-based solutions beyond governmental reach. Choudhury [1] notes that NGOs act as facilitators of participatory development by mobilizing communities, disseminating information, and creating platforms for marginalized groups to voice their concerns. The flexibility of NGOs allows them to adapt to local needs and contexts, enabling social innovations that directly contribute to the empowerment of vulnerable populations, especially women.

Krishna [7] extends this argument, highlighting how NGOs bridge the structural gap between government policies and community-level implementation. Their interventions in education, livelihood, and health enhance the overall quality of life while promoting inclusive social growth. NGOs' ability to engage local stakeholders ensures that development becomes a process *with* the people rather than *for* the people.

2.2 NGOs and Women Empowerment: Conceptual and Practical Dimensions

Empowerment has been defined as the process of enabling individuals, especially women, to gain control over their lives and claim equal rights and opportunities. Kabeer's empowerment framework—comprising *resources*, *agency*, and *achievements*—remains foundational for understanding how NGOs operationalize empowerment [4]. NGOs employ diverse strategies such as forming self-help groups (SHGs), providing microcredit, and organizing awareness campaigns to expand women's access to resources and enhance decision-making power. Ramesh and Pandey [3] empirically examined the impact of NGO-led programs on women's empowerment, showing that participation in skill development and microfinance initiatives significantly improves economic independence and social status. Similarly, Sharma [5] employed multi-criteria decision-making (MCDM) techniques to assess empowerment indicators, concluding that educational attainment, financial inclusion, and leadership participation are critical determinants influenced by NGO interventions.

Rao and Devi [6] observed that NGOs in rural India play a transformative role by building women's confidence and self-reliance. Although their study focused on rural contexts, the underlying mechanisms—training, awareness, and collective mobilization—are equally relevant in urban areas like Delhi. NGOs serve as both service providers and social advocates, combining welfare approaches with rights-based strategies to foster long-term gender equality.

2.3 Economic Empowerment through NGO Interventions

Economic independence is a central dimension of women's empowerment. NGOs enable this through vocational training, entrepreneurship promotion, and microcredit programs. Joshi [8] argues that financial inclusion through NGO-led SHGs enhances women's decision-making power within households and communities. These initiatives not only provide income but also increase women's confidence, mobility, and participation in local governance.

Das [15] links women's economic empowerment with sustainable development, emphasizing that when women gain financial autonomy, they invest in family education and health, leading to intergenerational benefits. Similarly, Patel [13] found that NGOs' focus on small business



training, tailoring, handicraft production, and digital literacy has improved women's employability and adaptability in urban centers. The study revealed that in areas like Delhi, skill-based NGO programs significantly reduce dependency and elevate living standards.

However, Sharma et al. [12] caution that while short-term gains are evident, the sustainability of NGO-led income programs depends on long-term funding, mentorship, and market linkages. Without continuous institutional support, many women revert to informal or low-paying jobs, highlighting the need for structural integration of NGO programs with state and corporate initiatives.

2.4 Educational and Legal Awareness Initiatives

Educational empowerment is another critical area where NGOs have shown considerable impact. According to Choudhury [1], adult literacy programs and non-formal education centers run by NGOs in urban slums have enhanced awareness about hygiene, health, and rights among women. Such education-based empowerment often serves as the foundation for broader socio-economic progress.

Sinha [9] analyzed NGO-led awareness campaigns in various states, demonstrating that legal literacy programs—especially those related to the Domestic Violence Act (2005) and dowry prohibition—improve women's capacity to seek justice and resist exploitation. These initiatives, often complemented by counseling and community mobilization, contribute to shifting traditional gender norms.

Radhakrishnan [2] underscores that NGOs integrate self-help groups, farmer-producer organizations (FPOs), and microenterprises to empower women collectively. By combining economic and educational interventions, NGOs foster multidimensional empowerment—financial, cognitive, and psychological.

2.5 Role of NGOs in Policy Advocacy and Community Mobilization

Modern NGOs no longer restrict themselves to welfare delivery; they engage actively in policy advocacy, governance participation, and human rights activism. According to Vishwakarma [16], NGOs in states like West Bengal and Delhi have effectively collaborated with government institutions to implement gender-sensitive policies. Through continuous engagement, they act as watchdogs ensuring transparency and inclusiveness in development schemes.

Kumar [11] also stresses that NGOs' involvement in rural and urban development programs enhances community participation and ownership. This participatory model encourages beneficiaries to become change agents, multiplying the social impact. Similarly, Raksha and Gupta [14] highlight the emerging digital dimension of NGO operations—mobile applications, digital literacy drives, and online networking—that expand the accessibility and visibility of empowerment programs in metropolitan regions.

Moreover, Kumar et al. [17] in their IEEE study discuss how NGOs' collaboration with corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks enhances funding, technological access, and strategic partnerships, thereby amplifying their impact. These CSR-linked interventions, while often directed toward rural development, provide a replicable model for urban NGOs striving for sustainability and innovation.



2.6 Challenges and Limitations in NGO Functioning

Despite notable achievements, several scholars emphasize persistent challenges faced by NGOs. Patel [13] identifies funding limitations, lack of professional training, and bureaucratic hurdles as critical constraints affecting performance. Financial instability often leads to dependence on short-term donor cycles, restricting the continuity of empowerment initiatives. Krishna [7] and Sharma et al. [12] further note coordination gaps between NGOs and government agencies, resulting in duplication of efforts and inefficient resource utilization. Social barriers, including patriarchal attitudes and community resistance, remain major obstacles, particularly in conservative sections of urban settlements.

Choudhury [1] and Rao and Devi [6] agree that overcoming these constraints requires policy convergence, improved accountability mechanisms, and capacity-building programs for NGO personnel. Additionally, digital empowerment and transparent evaluation systems can strengthen trust among beneficiaries and stakeholders.

2.7 Emerging Trends and Research Gaps

Recent scholarship points toward a digital transformation in NGO operations. Raksha and Gupta [14] emphasize the growing role of technology-enabled empowerment, where mobile-based monitoring and e-learning platforms expand outreach and data transparency. Vishwakarma [16] notes that integrating technology has made women's empowerment initiatives more scalable and measurable.

Nevertheless, research gaps remain in understanding how urban NGOs—particularly in Delhi—balance traditional fieldwork with digital and policy-driven approaches. Most existing literature focuses either on rural case studies or thematic areas like microfinance, neglecting the complex interplay of socio-cultural and economic factors in metropolitan contexts.

This study, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by empirically examining how NGOs in Delhi contribute to women's empowerment, the extent of their success, and the systemic challenges they face. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, it aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of NGO interventions in an urban, policy-driven environment.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to evaluate the role, impact, and challenges of NGOs engaged in women's empowerment programs within Delhi.

3.1 Research Design

The study follows a quantitative method. Quantitative data help measure the impact of NGO interventions, while qualitative insights provide an understanding of beneficiaries' experiences and NGO strategies.

3.2 Study Area

The research was conducted in the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi, covering selected urban and semi-urban regions across South, East, and North-West Delhi, where several active NGOs operate in women empowerment domains.



3.3 Population and Sampling

- **Target Population:** NGO officials, social workers, and women beneficiaries participating in empowerment programs.
- **Sampling Technique:** *Purposive sampling* was used to select organizations and respondents.
- **Sample Size:** 10 NGOs and 200 women beneficiaries were included, along with 30 NGO officials.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

- **Primary Data:** Collected through structured questionnaires, personal interviews, and focus group discussions with NGO representatives and women beneficiaries.
- **Secondary Data:** Gathered from annual NGO reports, government documents, journal articles, and previous research studies.

4. Results and Discussion

This results presents and interprets the data collected from both NGO officials and women beneficiaries across various areas of Delhi—South, East, and North-West districts. The study surveyed 10 NGOs and 200 women beneficiaries involved in empowerment initiatives such as vocational training, microfinance, literacy, and legal awareness programs.

Quantitative data has been analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, and mean values), and qualitative responses have been thematically summarized. Tables and figures are presented in a sequential manner to illustrate the findings clearly.

4.1 Profile of Respondents

Table 1 and Table 2 present the **demographic characteristics** of the NGO respondents (officials) and women beneficiaries respectively.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of NGO Officials (n = 30)

Parameter	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	8	26.7
	Female	22	73.3
Age Group	25–35 years	6	20.0
	36–45 years	14	46.7
	Above 45 years	10	33.3
Educational Qualification	Graduation	7	23.3
	Post-Graduation	18	60.0
	Above post-graduation	5	16.7
Years of NGO Experience	< 5 years	5	16.7
	5–10 years	12	40.0
	Above 10 years	13	43.3



The majority of NGO officials were female (73.3%), reflecting women-led leadership in empowerment-focused NGOs. Most respondents were highly qualified, with 60% being postgraduates. A considerable portion (43.3%) had over a decade of experience, signifying mature organizational expertise in handling women-oriented programs.

Table 2: Socio-Demographic Profile of Women Beneficiaries (n = 200)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18–25 years	48	24.0
	26–35 years	86	43.0
	36–45 years	44	22.0
	Above 45 years	22	11.0
Educational Status	Illiterate	28	14.0
	Primary	46	23.0
	Secondary	82	41.0
	Higher Secondary & Above	44	22.0
Marital Status	Married	132	66.0
	Unmarried	46	23.0
	Widow/Separated	22	11.0
Monthly Household Income	< ₹10,000	78	39.0
	₹10,001–₹20,000	92	46.0
	> ₹20,000	30	15.0

Most beneficiaries were in the 26–35 age group (43%) and married (66%), indicating that NGOs mainly work with adult women responsible for household management. Over 60% had secondary or higher education, and 85% reported a monthly household income below ₹20,000—highlighting the low-income urban target segment of NGO programs.

4.2 Nature of NGO Activities

Table 3 shows the range of activities carried out by selected NGOs in Delhi to promote women’s empowerment.

Table 3: Major NGO Activities for Women Empowerment

Type of Activity	Frequency (NGOs involved)	Percentage (%)
Vocational & Skill Training	10	100.0
Microfinance / SHG Formation	8	80.0
Health Awareness & Sanitation	7	70.0



Legal Literacy & Domestic Violence Support	6	60.0
Adult Literacy / Education	5	50.0
Political / Leadership Training	4	40.0
Digital Literacy & Entrepreneurship	3	30.0

All NGOs (100%) offered skill development programs, while 80% supported microfinance and SHG formation. Health, legal, and education initiatives also formed substantial parts of their intervention models. However, digital literacy and entrepreneurship support (30%) remain emerging areas needing more attention in Delhi.

4.3 Women’s Participation in NGO Programs

Table 4: Extent of Women’s Participation in NGO Activities

Level of Participation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Regularly active	98	49.0
Occasionally active	64	32.0
Passive participants	38	19.0

Nearly half (49%) of respondents participated regularly in NGO programs, reflecting effective engagement strategies. However, the 19% passive participation rate indicates that socio-cultural restrictions and household responsibilities still limit some women’s involvement.

4.4 Perceived Impact of NGO Interventions

Table 5: Impact of NGO Activities on Women’s Empowerment (n = 200)

Domain	High Impact (%)	Moderate Impact (%)	Low/No Impact (%)
Economic Independence	68.0	24.5	7.5
Decision-Making Power	62.5	28.0	9.5
Educational Awareness	70.5	22.0	7.5
Legal Awareness	61.0	30.5	8.5
Health & Hygiene Practices	73.0	20.0	7.0
Political Participation	36.0	44.0	20.0

Empowerment outcomes were strongest in economic (68%) and health (73%) domains. Women reported significant gains in confidence, awareness, and self-dependence. Political empowerment, however, showed weaker results (only 36% high impact), suggesting the need for more civic engagement programs.

4.5. Economic Empowerment and Skill Development

Table 6: Improvement in Economic Status After NGO Participation

Indicator	Before Joining NGO (%)	After Joining NGO (%)	Change (%)
Unemployed	58.0	22.0	-36.0
Self-employed / Microenterprise	12.0	38.0	+26.0
Salaried / Wage Employment	30.0	40.0	+10.0
Monthly Income Below ₹10,000	70.0	38.0	-32.0

The proportion of self-employed women rose sharply from 12% to 38%, reflecting successful skill utilization through NGO training programs. The share of women earning above ₹10,000 monthly almost doubled, confirming tangible economic gains and improved livelihood security.

4.6 Changes in Decision-Making and Social Status

Table 7: Decision-Making Role within Household (n = 200)

Decision Area	Before NGO (%)	After NGO (%)	Increase (%)
Children’s Education	48.5	78.0	+29.5
Family Financial Planning	36.0	70.5	+34.5
Healthcare Decisions	54.5	82.0	+27.5
Mobility (visiting banks/markets)	41.0	76.5	+35.5

Women’s autonomy in key household decisions improved substantially. Particularly, participation in financial and mobility decisions saw over 30% increase, suggesting that empowerment extended beyond economics to gender relations and self-confidence.

4.7. Awareness of Rights and Legal Protection

Table 8: Awareness Levels About Women’s Rights (n = 200)

Legal Domain	Fully Aware (%)	Partially Aware (%)	Unaware (%)
Domestic Violence Act, 2005	56.0	30.5	13.5
Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961	48.0	37.0	15.0
Property Rights for Women	39.0	41.5	19.5
Right to Education / Equal Pay	61.5	28.0	10.5

NGO-led legal literacy sessions significantly improved awareness of women’s rights, especially concerning domestic violence and equal pay. However, awareness about property and inheritance rights (only 39% fully aware) remains low, pointing toward the need for targeted legal advocacy.

4.8. Perceived Challenges Faced by NGOs

Table 9: Major Challenges Identified by NGO Officials

Challenge	Frequency (NGOs reporting)	Percentage (%)
Inadequate Funding / Financial Constraints	9	90.0
Lack of Government Coordination	7	70.0
Community Resistance / Patriarchal Mindset	6	60.0
Shortage of Skilled Staff	5	50.0
Monitoring and Evaluation Difficulties	4	40.0

Funding constraints (90%) were the most cited barrier, followed by weak coordination with government agencies (70%). Social resistance and staff shortages also hindered consistent program implementation, affecting sustainability.

4.9. Beneficiaries' Satisfaction Level

Table 10: Overall Satisfaction of Beneficiaries (n = 200)

Satisfaction Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Highly Satisfied	112	56.0
Moderately Satisfied	62	31.0
Dissatisfied	26	13.0

A majority (56%) expressed high satisfaction, particularly appreciating vocational and microfinance programs. Those moderately satisfied often cited insufficient follow-up or lack of permanent employment support, while 13% dissatisfaction stemmed from program discontinuity or limited duration.

4.10. Correlation Analysis: NGO Involvement and Empowerment Level

A simple Pearson correlation test was conducted between the duration of participation in NGO activities (in years) and the composite empowerment score (covering education, income, and decision-making). The correlation coefficient was $r = 0.72$ ($p < 0.01$), indicating a strong positive relationship.

Thus, women associated longer with NGOs exhibited higher levels of empowerment, validating the first hypothesis of the study.

4.11. Discussion of Findings

NGOs in Delhi have made significant contributions toward social development and gender equality. Their initiatives in skill training and self-help group (SHG) formation have substantially improved women's employment opportunities and income levels, reflecting notable progress in economic empowerment. Socially, women exhibited increased confidence,



decision-making ability, and mobility, marking a shift in traditional gender dynamics. Educational and legal awareness programs conducted by NGOs have played a vital role in consciousness-raising, though awareness regarding property and inheritance rights remains relatively limited. Despite these achievements, institutional barriers such as inadequate funding, bureaucratic hurdles, and prevailing patriarchal attitudes continue to restrict the scalability and sustainability of NGO programs. These findings are consistent with earlier studies by Kabeer (1999) and Gupta and Singh (2020), which emphasized that empowerment is a multidimensional process that demands both capacity building and broader social transformation. In this context, NGOs act as vital intermediaries between the state's development agenda and the grassroots aspirations of women, translating policy objectives into tangible empowerment outcomes within local communities.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Delhi play a pivotal role in advancing social development and women's empowerment by bridging the gap between government initiatives and community needs. Through programs focused on skill development, education, microfinance, and legal literacy, NGOs have significantly enhanced women's economic independence, self-confidence, and participation in decision-making.

Their efforts have contributed to transforming traditional gender roles and promoting social inclusion. However, challenges such as limited financial resources, inadequate government coordination, and persistent patriarchal norms hinder the long-term sustainability and scalability of these initiatives. Overall, the findings affirm that NGOs are crucial agents of change, fostering gender equality and inclusive development by empowering women to become active contributors to their families, communities, and the nation's progress.

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