



# 14

## Civil Society's Contribution to Women Empowerment: Bangladesh Perspective

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### Introduction

How can we empower others? Empowerment is a “bottom-up” process and cannot be imposed; it is only possible to provide the conditions in which it might occur. It requires sociocultural support and cannot be achieved individually. In the meantime, women in Bangladesh are still struggling in all phases of their life (Dialogue on Concepts of Women's Empowerment 2008). Women should be empowered so that they can free themselves from all kinds of violence and oppression and can contribute to a sustainable society based on equity and justice. Bangladesh is a small country of South Asia where there are thousands of non-government organisations (NGOs) contributing to the society as development partners with the government and the private sector. In a democratic country like Bangladesh, the constitution has guaranteed the rights of her citizens to join in association with freedom of speech. Articles

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38 and 39 of the Constitution have declared the freedom of association and freedom of thought. There are numerous civil society organisations (hereafter CSOs) in addition to NGOs, in such forms as voluntary organisations, professional bodies, religious institutions, sports, and cultural/recreational clubs. Additionally, there are media (print and digital) that are supposed to be working for the country's overall development and progress. The present study is a little endeavour to know the contribution of civil society organisations in case of women empowerment in Bangladesh. The civil societies are mainly social service-oriented in Bangladesh. Tasnim (2008) noted that civil society of Bangladesh mainly works towards the development and social welfare of the country and it has little contribution towards the country's democracy. It was observed by Tasnim (2007) that civil societies are highly participative in grass-roots social services and women empowerment is notable amongst them. Ahmed (2011) pointed out that civil societies of Bangladesh are depoliticised in working objectives and functions and in providing social services, while they are politicised in advocacy, lobbying, network-building, and influencing of policy. On the Civil Society in Bangladesh: An update of the Application of BD-JIGS data (2007) observed that the actions of civil societies are based on social service whereas advocacy is a new dimension and leads to democracy in Bangladesh. The reviewed literature for this study shows that CSOs are able to engage with communities and contribute to the development of effective and accessible services. Those organisations can take critical information to vulnerable groups who need it the most and help in fostering trust within communities to improve the functioning of the justice system of the country. Malhotra et al. (2002) noted that empowerment can take place if the methods of participatory development have been established; upon that, civil society at both macro and meso levels of society can contribute to empowerment as a political mechanism. The general objective of the chapter is to investigate the contribution of civil society in supporting the empowerment of women in Bangladesh. The specific objectives include (a) identifying the relationship of civil society and women empowerment and (b) identifying the strategy of civil society in contributing towards women empowerment in the country. The study used a qualitative approach (i.e., with subjective information) and explored new research areas that can serve as the basis

Components of Civil Society	Number of Respondents
NGOs	10
Professional Associations	05
Media (Print and electronics)	05
Women Organizations	03
Voluntary Organizations	02
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>

**Fig. 14.1** Sample size of the study

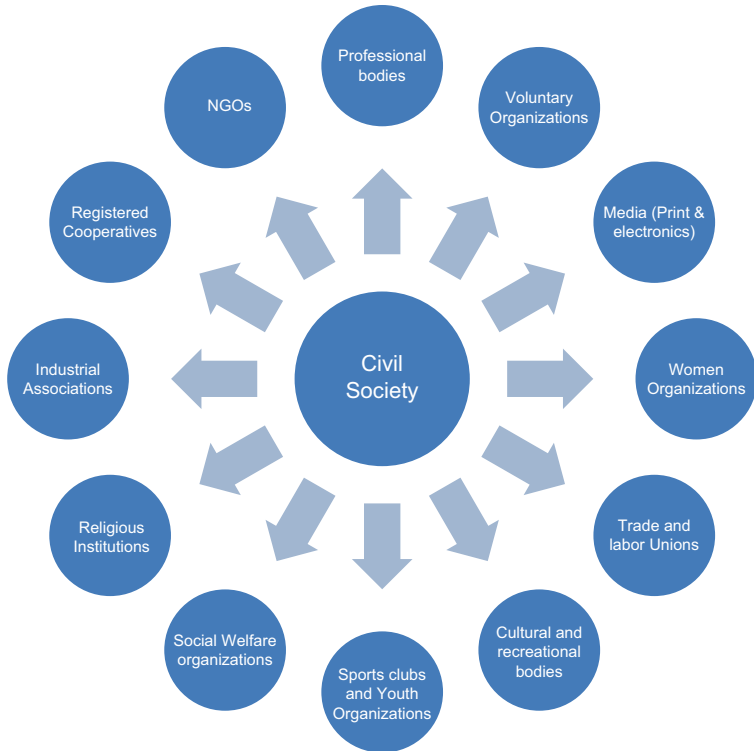
for crafting new theories. The study used both primary and secondary data; the collection tool for the primary data was in-depth interview (IDI). This approach offers an opportunity to capture descriptive data about people's behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions. Newspapers, journals, books, published reports, and the internet are used as secondary data sources for the present study. The study followed a purposive sampling technique due to the nature of the research design and objectives of the study. The sample size of the study is outlined in the figure (Fig. 14.1) A total of 25 respondents from the different components of civil society were interviewed. The components include NGOs, professional associations, media (print and electronics), women organizations, and voluntary organizations.

## Civil Society

In the late seventeenth century, the concept of civil society entered into the discourse of intellect with the writings of Locke and Harrington. The notion was developed as an umbrella concept that was taken up by Smith, Rousseau, Hegel, and later de Tocqueville, which incorporated some institutions from the outside of the state. It accumulated "voluntary regions" which was denoted by de Tocqueville, covered by both the private and public organisations, social interactions, and relationships is

based on cooperation and can create trust among people and may form public opinion, institutions and even political parties. In the 1820s and 1830s, the British political economist Hodgkins pointed out that, inhumanity, dominating tendency, and exploitation leads to capitalism. In 1840, Karl Marx criticised this view. Between 1842 and 1845, Marx's writings influenced the concept of civil society and its transformation. Marx believed that cooperative ties would provide the basis for collective bindings and social organisations (Rahman 1999). The concept of civil society was an important phenomenon of capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century. Though civil society and capitalism have been seen as different terms. It was considered as a solitary sphere in which various kinds of community comes into being gradually. The industrialised market economy puts many blocks in the road to civil society. Class divisions in society, differential housing, dual labour market, unemployment, and poverty can be considered as constraint factors to the development of civil society; when a society is free from bureaucratic control and encourages civil engagement supremacy, then social capital can flourish. Additionally, civil society can play an important role with social capital to promote democratisation and participation. The NGOs are a major component of civil society; as such, they can play a positive role in enhancing the social and economic empowerment of poor people (Rahman 1999). Civil society has many other components, as displayed in the figure (Fig. 14.2). The figure shows the several components of civil society includes NGOs, professional bodies, voluntary organizations, Media (print and electronics), women organizations, trade and labor unions, cultural and recreational bodies, sports clubs and youth organizations, social welfare organizations, religious institutions, industrial associations and registered cooperatives.

Generally, civil society is composed of some groups and organisations, works for the general interest of the citizens and operates into the outside of the commercial and governmental sectors. Ibrahim and Hulme (2010) noted that civil society is the combination of individuals, organisations, and institutions situated among the family, state, and market for advancing the common interest wherein people work and cooperate voluntarily (Anheier 2004). According to Lester Salamon (1994), there are some specific causes for the rapid growth of civil society: the limitations of the



**Fig. 14.2** Components of civil society. (Source: Researcher's own compilation)

modern state to deliver services by NGOs, environmental issues, limitations of socialism, advancement of communication, development of education, and growth of the global economy. Tasnim (2008) pointed out the different types of grass-roots programs in which civil society organisations are involved in Bangladesh. Those are rural developments by government-organized non-government organization (GONGO) cooperation, group network development, grievances ventilation and local representation, women empowerment, increasing literacy rate and educational development, human rights and health services, and social/political awareness and participation. Finally, Guerrero (2003, p. 212) stated that “CSOs and NGOs are voluntary, non-profit, value-driven formations committed to

bringing about social change.” Ahmed (2008) found that foreign-funded NGOs have a relation with their target group population that is similar to clients. A large amount of the population is treated as clients and beneficiaries, as opposed to being treated as “members” by the foreign-funded NGOs. In influencing public policies, these are very powerful, whereas religious institutions like mosques are powerful enough to generate capital for social development and for the advocacy and those institutions are less powerful to influence in public policies. Rahman (1999) pointed out that the Bangladeshi civil society plays a role in strengthening democratisation of the country. For instance, in 1952, students and activists protested the rule of the then Pakistani government and shed blood for establishing their mother tongue “Bangla” as the national language of Pakistan which was considered as the seed for the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Later, the struggle against the rule of the military government and then the growth of civic engagement of citizens led to broadening the concept of civil society in Bangladesh in which NGOs played the most significant role. Women are now significantly participating in the different programs of NGOs in the history of rural development of Bangladesh, which is a landmark. The concept of women participation is related to the participation of women in several NGOs and to improving their social and economic conditions for a better livelihood. Participation sometimes leads to empowerment.

## Empowerment

Empowerment as a process tries to obtain some opportunities for the marginalised group of people, directly or through the help of others who are not marginalised and want to share their access to the different opportunities. Mayoux (2000) stated that empowerment is a process of power within, power to, power with, and power over, where “power within” is an integral change process, “power to” is capacity augmentation, “power with” is men’s and women’s collective mobilisations and “power over” is questioning the pattern of subordination connected to gender. Generally, to achieve one’s goals, to exercise power, and to control own circumstances by any individual, community, or group is called empowerment.

It is a process and a capacity by which, an individual or a group can achieve their interests and help others for maximising the quality of their living. Batliwala (1994) said that the overall welfare of the population depends on their influences over the external actions whether it is much or less. Kabeer (2001) has given a definition of empowerment as follows, in a given context, when peoples are able to make their strategy for their life choice which was denied previously is considered as an expansion of empowerment.

## Women Empowerment

Women empowerment and gender equality are the agenda of global development which is one of the remarkable points for the sustainable development goals (SDG) of the United Nations. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls is identified as the goal number 5 of the SDG. United Nations (UN) viewed that, women empowerment has five components: self worth sense of women, having rights and the determination of choices, right to access of opportunities and resources, right to control over their own lives both at home and outside, and finally, the ability to influence the society for making its changes and establishing justice nationally and internationally as cited in Islam and Dogra (2011). It has been observed that, the role of NGOs in women empowerment is significant. NGOs are plying a substitute as well as a harmonising role along with the government and market in the women empowerment process of Bangladesh. Women empowerment as an issue of NGOs has emerged recently. It is nothing but a process by which women can be more powerful in their life and they may be able to manage any challenges in their life. Basically, women empowerment means having the power to take any decisions in life and women should have an access to information and resources as well. Ahamad et al. (2015) noted that, women empowerment contributes to the sustainable development by uplifting the socioeconomic and political conditions of women in India, whereas empowerment leads to control over material resources, intellectual properties, and ideology and which also facilitates the life of women at multiple levels, such as, family and community level, market and state

level. It plays an important role to convert an idle society into a self-sustainable society where women must be empowered in sociopolitical, economic as well as from legal aspects. The study also argued that, a radical change has been found in the living standard and the life style of women after joining NGOs. Women were found to start their own earnings and they were becoming more independent and also were self-motivated. They were also found to take their own decisions and also it has been seen that they were giving suggestions and opinions to their families. A small number of women living countryside were found to participate actively in the village meeting or *gram sabha* and those were involved in the decisions of their family in India. Awan (2012) stated that, women empowerment process is not only limited to control over the financial matter or reproductive roles; it is a compilation of three interrelated dimensions: literacy, health, and employment. Women empowerment represents women as active agents and not the passive recipients only in the development of a community as a whole. The study noted that the notion of women empowerment leads to the overall changes in the dominating patriarchal structure of a society like India (Awan 2012). It is also equally true for Bangladesh. The study found that, in Pakistan, gender discrimination is a dominating factor which is hampering the overall process of women empowerment and established a linkage between the contribution of civil society and women empowerment in Pakistan. The study also noted that the patriarchal mind-set, out-dated traditions and cultural norms confined civil society organisations like NGOs, whereas NGOs bringing awareness among women and played a significant role in Pakistan. The study found that the hard work of civil society can only be successful in Pakistan if the root of patriarchy is minimised. Much research has showed that, in Bangladesh, the growth of NGOs and civil societies has failed due to the lack of better politics and the dysfunction of its market system like many other developing countries of the world. The failure of the traditional market system has created a vacuum which has been filled by the civil societies in Bangladesh (Ahmed 2011). The study pointed that, in the last 50 years, agricultural, industrial, and accommodating civil societies of Bangladesh have been raised significantly and individuals were becoming involved in civil societies because of economic issues where social and political issues were not



so important. The study identified that the mid-1940s was the first phase of growth of civil societies in Bangladesh; the second phase began in the 1970s. The study noted that women are not comprehensively included at all levels and civil societies of Bangladesh; predominantly, however, NGOs are taking affirmative action to reduce the gender gap. The study found that civil societies have perceived their members as clients rather than citizens. Parveen and Leonhauser (2004) identified three important dimensions of empowerment: socioeconomic, familial, and psychological. The socioeconomic aspect includes economic contributions of both firms and non-firms to household wellbeing, as well as access to socioeconomic resources and possession of productive and non-productive assets. The familial dimension includes participation in household decision-making, that is, increasing the role of women in house-level decision making must lead to their wellbeing and for their children. The psychological aspect includes the perception of gender awareness and basic women's rights as well as the capacity to cope with diverse domestic works (Parveen and Leonhauser 2004). The study also found that women empowerment is merely satisfactory at the household level, with traditional beliefs, attitudes, and practices intensely entrenched in females' lives, thus hampering the overall empowerment process.

## **Civil Society's Contribution to Women Empowerment in Bangladesh**

Kabeer (2001) identified the three interrelated components of women empowerment process: resources, agencies, and achievements. Chen (1992) identified four components of women empowerment: resources, perceptions, relationships, and power. Yount (2017) has conceptualised women empowerment, based on Kabeer (1999), as a dynamic process. By this process, women acquire resources that enable them to develop their own voices, articulate preferences, and gain the capacity to make their own decisions in terms of fulfilling their life aspirations. By reviewing the literature and analysing the primary data, the present study has found that civil society of Bangladesh is contributing towards women

empowerment in three aspects; firstly, raising awareness among women; secondly, ensuring participation of women in decision making process; and finally, taking action in the true sense as depicted in the figure (Fig. 14.3). The figure (Fig. 14.3) shows the relationship of civil society and women empowerment in Bangladesh and illustrates the contribution of civil society to women empowerment through the three interrelated aspects: awareness, participation and action.

It has been found that the civil society organisations, basically, are contributing by a three-stage process of women empowerment. Firstly, CSOs are engaged for increasing “awareness” regarding women’s rights (which includes socioeconomic and political rights of women); secondly, encouraging women to “participate” in a true sense (which includes affiliation and engagement with development activities for their own betterment as well as for the society as a whole); and finally, these are leading towards the “action” (which includes positive changes in sociocultural behaviours and attitudes and the mind-sets of men and women). The overall process includes women making their own choices and decisions, promoting freedom of speech with improving social networks, and reducing the level of marginalisation of women in Bangladesh. The study also found that CSOs are citizen-led organisations in a state system that aims to correct the state actions or mechanisms in favour of the most marginalised citizens and people living in the state. Therefore, it is a corrective force to

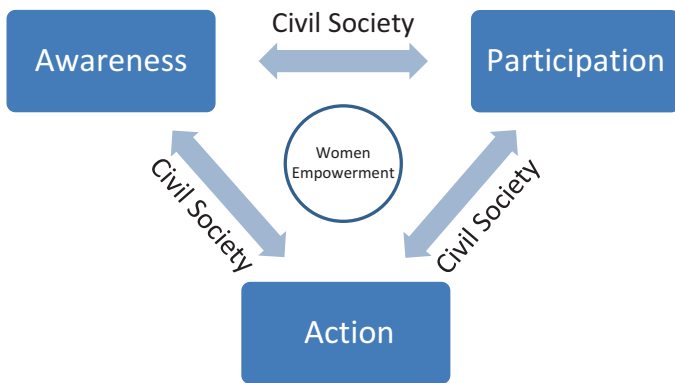


Fig. 14.3 Civil society’s contribution to women empowerment process

support the state and to improve its functions. All the citizens not serving as duty bearers in any public institutions or forces like bureaucrats, armies, and judges (and who are not direct members of any political party) is called civil society member. A CSO must be based on some principles that include freedom from any bias, race, sex, ethnicity, religion, class, and so on. These organisations are not against the state but rather endeavour to ensure that the state works equally for all its citizens, irrespective of their identity. It stands for the demand side and can be united for issue-based movements. The key function of CSOs is to put pressure on the state machineries to ensure justice for all. This pressure can take many forms; however, not violating the rules or distorting law or state orders. Giving intellectual advice is one of the key means of contributing to the state. Other functions of CSOs include articulating demands, criticising policies and laws, proposing alternatives, negotiating for people's demands, and so on. It has been found that civil society is contributing considerably towards women empowerment in Bangladesh, especially fighting against gender-based violence and breaking the gender stereotypes and demanding affirmative action for gender equality (e.g., quotas for women in government machinery). Since women are a deprived category in Bangladesh and a civil society organisation has something to say or do for women regarding their deprivation, there must be a connection. The study found that the CSOs of Bangladesh are contributing positively towards women empowerment, whereas making women equal to men is a key focus of CSOs. Basically, the advanced urban group of civil society has articulated the movement for equal rights of women in post-liberation regime in Bangladesh. The roles of CSOs in empowering women have been remarkable to this point. There are many instances in Bangladesh, for example, forming national women advancement policy is a result of continuous movements of the CSOs in Bangladesh. Achievements in the movement thus far in the area of women empowerment, largely came from the different movements of CSOs. They lead in forming women's rights-focused NGOs, developing networks of like-minded organisations, movement for affirmative action like, reserved seats in Parliament and local government institutions and in public services, movements against gender discriminations, building capacities of women in different areas of socioeconomic and political context of Bangladesh. The CSOs in

Bangladesh have a multiple role to play in empowering women in the country. On the one hand, it works as a “think tank” to deliver intellectual support to the policy-makers; mobilise masses of people; and, on the other hand, work to make them aware as well as put pressure on the state machinery. Thus, it plays a three-tiered role, micro-meso-macro contributions to ensure voices and participations of all segments of society especially for women in Bangladesh. The women’s movements, over the years, reflect such roles of civil society actions. All the strategies mentioned above have more or less effects on the progress of women’s rights in Bangladesh—and every aspect is equally important. The NGO, like Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), has changed its focus over decades but keeps the same principles in mind: to make women equal to men and make them free from all forms of discriminations existing in the society. It has a vision and mission which guide the organisation what to do and how to make a gender-responsive society and to empower women in Bangladesh. The initiatives range from economic to political empowerment to reflect a sense of “inclusiveness” in changing women’s lives. The reviewed literature has widely discussed such roles of the NGOs too. CSOs are enhancing capacities in different areas, including economic, social, and political, research, and advocacy (enhancing capacities and doing effective advocacy) and public movements for political empowerment of women. However, women empowerment refers not to economic empowerment only, but also to a dignified life to be necessarily supported by the cultural landscape. In general, all the past efforts of CSOs made a good sense although “learning by doing” has always been a focus of the civil society organisations. The past endeavour of civil society in Bangladesh is appreciated too. The present study has found that, for the contribution of CSOs, women are getting preferences for the recruitment process of government institutions and in the NGOs. In most cases, at least 30% of staffs are women in Bangladeshi NGOs like Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), the world largest and the number one NGO of the world. This organisation’s female staffs have enough flexibility to do field visits and official work. The Bangladeshi government and NGOs are now providing six months of

maternal leave with pay for the women employees. The CSOs are working for gender-sensitive workplaces also. For improving gender sensitivity within organisations (intra) and partner and stakeholders as well (inter). The CSOs can talk, initiate dialogue, or raise their voice regarding women empowerment; they are able to identify barriers to women empowerment. Thus, CSOs are very significant and make a major contribution to women empowerment of Bangladesh.

## Conclusion

Women empowerment is an agenda for making the society better based on social justice. Therefore, along with government, CSOs should continue their efforts in favour of a common interest of the society. A comprehensive strategy of CSOs is needed to make changes in gender roles (depending on global and national contexts). These organisations should adopt a holistic approach considering both the economic and cultural complexities in societies of Bangladesh. CSOs should work for increasing the awareness among the mass of people, especially those who are more vulnerable to creating a social movement towards women empowerment and CSOs should work as a pressure group. CSOs should have a strong advocacy tool to cope with governmental bodies such as the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) and develop proper strategies in this regard. CSOs should engage more men supporting women empowerment as patriarchy is prevailing all over Bangladesh. A proactive role of policy-makers and the positive roles of some different actors like think tanks, government agencies, political parties, and professional bodies are important. As well, all the CSOs need to cooperate with each other, and all should be united so that women empowerment can easily be established in Bangladesh. Last but not least, the government and CSOs should keep their concentration on issues creating obstacles to the path of women empowerment. Further, a comprehensive plan should be outlined immediately for ensuring women empowerment practically in Bangladesh.

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