Article

Women's Empowerment as an Outcome of NGO Projects: Is the Current Approach Sustainable?

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Abstract: The area of women's empowerment has attracted increasing attention among a wide range of interest groups, from authors to researchers to feminist scholars and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This paper aims to identify the diverse understandings of women's empowerment in the literature and to discuss empirical evidence from NGO projects in the field. A systematic literature review is employed that includes an analysis of relevant high-quality articles and research papers published in the Scopus database, as well as those produced by United Nations (UN) bodies and well-published authors. The findings highlighted four common understandings of women's empowerment including granting women a voice, challenging existing power structures, the radical transformation of lives and livelihoods, and gender mainstreaming. The findings of these empirical studies on the role of NGOs in this field revealed understandings limited to granting women a voice and gender mainstreaming, thus reflecting the fact that limited knowledge of women's empowerment hampers the ability of NGOs to serve women's advancement and sustainable development. Furthermore, and given that these approaches and understandings still fall short of achieving social inclusion for women, it is recommended that these NGOs discharge their efforts toward initiating systemic change to actually sustain female empowerment in the communities in which they are active.

Keywords: empowerment; NGO; sustainability; women; development

1. Introduction

Women, as a group, constitute around 50% of the world's population (Wallerstein 2006) but represent two-thirds of the world's illiterates (Jahan and Mumtaz 1996), estimated to be in excess of 500 million in developing countries (Oxfam 1998). In such contexts, it is important to note that the lives of women in developing countries are often difficult and made more complex due to certain practicalities in addition to the impact of religion, gender inequality, and other cultural and biological norms (Ghorayshi and Belanger 1996). In the last three decades, women were recognized as essential to sustainable development. In this respect, a significant commitment to strengthening the contribution and position of women has been made (Principle 20, Declaration 1992). In the scope of this discussion and as part of their written statements, many prominent Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), including the World Bank and the United Nations (UN), among others, committed to gender mainstreaming strategies and then initiated several women's development programs as part of their tailored interventions in developing countries. Despite the tremendous efforts made to empower women, the financial and efficiency approaches (allocating only tiny amounts) behind these interventions appeared to be obliterating their commitment to enhancing women's role(s) in the achievement of sustainable development.

Privileging a Western framework dominated by neo-liberal capitalist models and modalities and, therefore, driven by microcredit, self-help, and financial aid programs, the ability of these specific interventions to contribute to sustainable development and challenge the existing social and economic structures that undermine the role of women is questioned. Re-examining the fundamental precepts of the approaches and research designs being applied to contexts varying from the standard Western societal norms and pathways is, perhaps, necessary. These include societies further along the collective continuum, more shaped by the socialization of a related self-concept than a linear individualist one, groups motivated by the sustainable social benefits for the group rather than the self, and/or those operating on a significantly extended planning horizon of tens or even hundreds of years into the future.

As a result of these issues, the purpose of this paper is to present a systematic literature review of the understandings of women's empowerment and highlight empirical evidence from the work of the NGOs in this field. Through such an approach, we aim to highlight the gap in the NGOs' interventions in light of the available understandings of women's empowerment and also recommend potential areas of improvement accordingly.

This paper is divided into four main sections. In Section 1, we examine diverse definitions of the concept of women's empowerment, along with the elements of this concept and the role of power and the self in this notion. In the Section 2, we shed light on the various understandings of women's empowerment, addressing controversial perspectives in this field. In the Section 3, we present several research papers that tackle the role of NGOs administering women's empowerment programs in different countries around the world. Following the presentation of the results of various research papers, we develop a conceptual framework of the major elements and understandings of women's empowerment in relation to the NGOs' work in this field. In the Section 4, we provide a discussion on the limitations of the NGOs' work in the process of women's empowerment in light of the available understandings of this concept. As a conclusion, we summarize the major findings and provide recommendations for future research.

2. Current/Prevailing Conceptualizations of Empowerment

A review of the literature on the concept of women's empowerment has shown the existence of varied terminologies used to describe, measure, and assess it. Some authors stressed the individualistic process behind it (Kabeer 1999) or addressed collectivists' behavior and social norms that shaped this concept (Budgeon 2015). In a related discussion, the proponents of this concept argued that women are empowered when they have access to various resources (Kabeer 2010) and become an agent of change (Sen 1993; Mishra et al. 2020), until finally revealing this concept as a process where women become independent and challenge the existing norms and policies that undermine their role (Keller and Mbewe 1991; Kabeer 2010; Rowlands 1995). Most importantly, to date, recent research has addressed a combination of understandings, including self-confidence, autonomy, sensitivity to cultural factors, and access to power (Hansen 2015).

The following Table 1 depicts the various definitions of women's empowerment:

Table 1. Definitions of women's empowerment.

Author/s	Definition/Understandings of Women's Empowerment
(Maton 2008; Cattaneo and Chapman 2010)	Women's empowerment is viewed as a reinforcement for people to improve various issues that are significant for their individual and social lives.
(Kurtiş et al. 2016)	Women's empowerment is a perspective that calls for women to freely exercise personal choice and express individual capabilities.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Author/s	Definition/Understandings of Women's Empowerment
(Stromquist 2015)	Women's empowerment is categorized in the collectivist view or multifaceted concept that addresses factors such as women's participation in small groups and women's understanding of the causes of being unempowered, which are significant factors toward the development of their empowerment.
(Huis et al. 2017)	Women's empowerment is a multifaceted process that involves both individualistic and collectivist awareness, beliefs, and values embedded in social and cultural structures and contexts.
(Narayan-Parker 2005)	Women are the agents of change. The significance of agency emerges from a bottom-up approach, rather than top-down.
(Friedmann 1992)	Women's empowerment is about participation and social inclusion.
(McWhirter 1998)	Women's empowerment is a process where women become more self-reliant and increase their control over their selves and their resources to eliminate their subordination in the household.
(World Bank Poverty Analysis Handout 2003)	Empowerment is the process by which individuals and groups formulate their own choices and transform those choices into desired actions. Therefore, through various microcredit programs, the world bank enhances women's development and strengthens their decision-making abilities.
(Batliwala 2007)	Women's empowerment is a process, and the outcome of this process is where women gain more control over intellectual and material resources and challenge the existing discriminative society across all its structures.
(Kabeer 2011)	Increased access to education, health care, and employment substantially enhances women's empowerment.
(Santillan et al. 2004)	Women's empowerment is characterized as a process of the development of rules and policies that enable women and girls to challenge the current norms and conditions.
(Robertson and Mishra 1997)	Women's empowerment is the expansion of adequate choices for women and the enabling of them to exercise their choices.
(Kabeer 2010)	Women's empowerment is the process of expansion of women's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where they were previously denied.
(Mason 2005)	Women's empowerment is a process of changing the power structures and relations that hinder women's ability to formulate strategic life choices in a certain context.
(Malhotra and Schuler 2005)	Women's empowerment is the process of actively involving women and providing a subjective assessment of the status of their power.
(Alkire et al. 2013)	Women's empowerment is a segment of agency and an increase in empowerment will probably result in an increase in agency and not the opposite.
(Alsop et al. 2006)	Women's empowerment is the capacity of groups and the individual to foster effective choices and change these choices into actions.
(Chirkov et al. 2003)	Women's empowerment is an agency approach that is defined as freedom for someone to do and achieve things that have a direct and positive impact on their goals.
(Moser 1989)	Women's empowerment is the women's right to formulate their own choices and control their lives.
(Dyson and Moore 1983)	Women's empowerment is autonomy.
(Sharma 2007)	Women's empowerment is the process where women are involved in the decision making that enables them to increase their level of self-confidence.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Author/s	Definition/Understandings of Women's Empowerment
(Baden and Reeves 2000)	Women's empowerment is a strategy for the development of a country, since it involves women in decision making to achieve equality, which is one of the basis of development plans in addition to security.
(Diwakar et al. 2008)	Women's empowerment enables women to transform the socio-economic conditions and development of a country.
(World Bank Poverty Analysis Handout 2003)	Women's empowerment is a notion that can be measured from the perspective of gender equality.

Based on the above definitions and many others, the authors agreed that the concept of women's empowerment can be distinguished from other notions encompassing three main elements: resources (Kabeer 2010); processes (Keller and Mbewe 1991; also see Kabeer 2010; Rowlands 1995;); and agency (Sen 1993; Mishra et al. 2020).

2.1. Empowerment Elements

The significance of these three perspectives and their interrelationships can be seen in the discussion that follows.

2.1.1. The Resource Element

Kabeer (2011) argued that increased access to education, health care, and employment substantially enhanced women's empowerment. Kabeer (2010) accentuated that there is a plethora of evidence that proves that access to education supported women in gaining more understanding of their rights and gaining critical awareness of their ability to positively impact their own lives. Sen (1993) added to Kabeer's argument by showing that a comparison between educated women and their less-educated peers resulted in the finding that educated women are more likely to formulate effective decisions at both household and personal levels. Furthermore, empirical studies on microcredit programs showed that loans enabled women to participate in income-generating activities, and membership in microfinance organizations resulted in them gaining access to other resources and livelihood activities (Schuler et al. 1996). Additionally, access to the labor market and land ownership proved to have a significant influence on women's autonomy and decision-making authority (Quisumbing and Maluccio 2003). Cooper and Bird (2012) agreed with the latter notion and added that women's ability to inherit assets increases women's access to property.

2.1.2. The Process Element

The definition of women's empowerment as a process stemmed from the understanding that once women become capable of organizing themselves in a manner to be more self-reliant, formulate their own choices, and control resources, they can effectively challenge the pressure to be subordinate emanating from the socio-political structure (Keller and Mbewe 1991; also see Kabeer 2010; Chen 1992; Rowlands 1995;). This concept is influential for its ability to illustrate a transformation from gender inequality to gender equality and it has been the subject of many empirical studies; for example, in studies where empowerment is considered to be a change over time (Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001) and/or to have a specific focus on women's development, especially in developing countries (McWhirter 1998).

2.1.3. The Agency Element

The subject of women's empowerment as agency emerged from positioning women as agents of change rather than as the recipients of change in order to be considered truly empowered. The importance of this definition has been highlighted in the bottom-up approach (rather than the top-down approach) to development (Rowlands 1995) and it has also been well-recognized in the fields of social inclusion and participation (Friedmann

1992). The agency element views women as significant actors of change (Robertson and Mishra 1997). Narayan-Parker (2005) stated that a lack of agency causes a sense of ill-being. For example, as part of one research study, a woman from the Borborian Community in Brazil said that a rich person is someone who says something and does it (Alsop and Heinsohn 2005), and another woman from Ecuador argued that her participation in the decisions formulated at the household level made her feel empowered (Appleyard 2002).

Before delving into the understandings of empowerment, it is necessary to discuss the concept of power, which lies at the core of empowerment according to leading authors, such as Rowlands (1995), Kabeer (1999), and Mayoux (2006), as well as the concept of the self, which are both root concepts of empowerment.

2.2. Power and Self as Root Notions of Empowerment

According to Foucault's Model of power, power is defined as a combined set of actions that impact other actions. Given the existence of multiple power structures, power should be exercised rather than processed (Foucault 1982). Luke (1992), however, described power as an effective tool for shaping the perceptions of people about their role within the existing power structure, where they either accept their role because they do not see an alternative to it or simply because they perceive it as beneficial and unchangeable. In their study, Colwill and Townsend (1999) argued that power is the ability to make decisions that affect someone else and that whoever assumes this role forces actions, exercises control, and dominates in every circumstance. Smith (1992) emphasize how the process and understanding of power became a form of control, especially in patriarchal societies where women are denied their basic rights. In such forms of society, there is a lesser need to exercise power overtly because of the existing forms of obedience shaped and maintained by the notion of fear, which is the basis of such societies. Rowlands (1995) argued that power is the ability to force others to do something against their will and thus increase one's own power while reducing someone else's power. Page and Czuba (1999) contradict this perception and argue that increases in one person's power do not necessarily lead to the disempowerment of someone else. Rowlands (1995), Kabeer (1999), and Mayoux (2006) describe power from the perspective of the "power over" concept, which relates to the domination and control of resources, whereas "power to" relates to enhancing the decision-making and problem-solving abilities of individuals. Another power category, "power within", refers to self-confidence, respect, and the acceptance of others, and "power with" enables women to achieve, collaborate, and link their interests to others (Ng et al. 2022). Kabeer (1999) further emphasized the concept of power beyond the control of resources to express that empowerment strategies for women should be based on "power within" as a means to improve their access to resources, enhancing their role as agents of change and achievers.

2.3. Diverse Understandings of Women's Empowerment

The literature offers four main understandings of women's empowerment, which vary both in their emphasis and approach.

2.3.1. Granting Women a Voice

According to Pillai, Vijayamohanan et al. (2009), Western feminists uphold the assumption that women can be empowered through giving them a voice. This is rooted in the belief that this contributes to enhancing women's participation and creativity and leading to an improvement in their livelihoods. The idea entails encouraging marginalized women to engage in a dialogue to address the various issues that disempower them. In their book, Marchand and Parpart (1995) called for a positive way for women to express their opinions about development through the creation of witness accounts. The aim is to raise women's awareness of their interests and how they could be related to others so all parties can participate with greater strength in the decision-making process and thus influence this process. This position has been criticized for drawing a desire for power under the fiction of polyphony to assist local women to voice their concerns through song.

Furthermore, this approach was questioned for changing women's lives and stories into discourse, despite the fact that discourse analysis is subject to women's subjectivity which is socially constructed. Although this approach might attract some advice and counseling, it is still too far from contributing to women's empowerment and enhancing their struggle to survive, especially since it depicts women as mute or silent, whereas women were always speaking and calling for attention to be paid to their existence (Lazreg 2018). Parpart (2002) agreed with Lazreg and clearly supported the position that granting a voice does not always lead to empowerment, especially for poor or marginalized women. In this way, the implication that a voice means power can be dismissed as associated with gossip and a pre-determined use of information.

2.3.2. Challenging Existing Power Structures

Another group of feminists argued that women's empowerment cannot be achieved without challenging the existing power structure that subordinates them (Sen 1993). Thus, this approach calls for a challenge to all forms of oppression that deny women their substantial rights and bar them from playing their role in society (Eade and Williams 1995). However, according to the perspective of Kabeer (1999), Lazreg (2018), and Izugbara (2004), encouraging women to liberate themselves from their cultural, male-dominated, and social structures to look like someone else has positioned feminists as liberators and turned the women themselves into symptoms of resistance to several exploitative and oppressive processes, especially in developing countries. Furthermore, the discussion has been carried further to discuss the situation when feminists in a particular cultural context engage in the cause of women in a completely different context by suggesting they are oppressed by elements in their culture, thus suggesting solutions that are unhelpful or useless, and which do not actually contribute to their empowerment process (Lazreg 2018).

2.3.3. Radical Transformation of Lives and Livelihoods

According to the DAWN (Development Alternative for Women) Group, women would be empowered once radical economic and social change is achieved. This entails a radical change in the lives of marginalized and poor women (Kabeer 2010). Batliwala (2007) agreed with this concept and stressed that women are empowered when they gain control over intellectual and material resources and challenge the existing patriarchal system. Through her empirical work on rural development in India, Batliwala introduced the spiral concept of empowerment, which contradicts the pervasive and accepted understanding of empowerment as a top-down or one-way process. Unlike Oxfam, which calls for challenging existing power structures and depicts empowerment as a linear or one-way cycle (Eade and Williams 1995), the spiral notion encompasses the transforming of individuals, groups, and the environment, which allows women to make informed decisions within a framework that includes an analysis of the available options, as well as their knowledge and previous experience.

2.3.4. Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is a strategy that has been embraced internationally to help realize the objective of gender equality. It entails incorporating a gender perspective into the regulations, processes, and measures aimed at combating discrimination and enhancing equality between men and women (European Institute for Gender Equality 2016). As a concept, gender mainstreaming was mooted for the first time as part of the United Nations First Conference on Women's Status, revealing a debate on the role of women in the context of development (Nairobi 1985). This debate developed into calls for the adoption of visible policies addressing gender mainstreaming perspectives at the United Nations Fourth Conference on Women (Platiner 1995). The World Bank and UN, in addition to many NGOs, committed to gender mainstreaming for development as part of their official written statements. However, evidence from developing countries showed that this commitment is only a part of policy implementation and not actual development

(box-checking). For instance, the development programs run by the World Bank have been linked to only microcredit programs, especially in developing countries (Peet and Hartwick 1999). Furthermore, evidence from the work of the World Bank in developing countries shows that part of the development programs carried out by feminist organizations mainly support the interests of men. The World Bank has also been criticized for paying small amounts to women and obliterating the difference between the commitment to gender mainstreaming in policy and development in practice (Lazreg 2018).

2.3.5. Summary

This section has shown that there are three prevailing approaches to women's empowerment in the literature that look at the issues with different emphases and goals. Similarly, there are different understandings of women's empowerment and what should be given priority in each approach. From this point, we examine the understanding(s), roles, and activities of NGOs in these varying contexts and take a critical look at their role and its effectiveness.

3. NGOs' Role and Understanding of Women's Empowerment

NGOs were shown to be indispensable when it comes to supporting women's empowerment, given the prevailing weaknesses of civil society in many developing countries (Ja'afar-Furo 2007). The present section provides research studies that analyze the role of NGOs in women's empowerment. We focused on articles published between 2004 and 2021 that were listed in the Scopus database. The Scopus database was chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, it has a very wide scope and, as our target articles could potentially be published in a range of different fields, we felt that Scopus was both wide-ranging and also represented an accepted benchmark of journal quality. Scopus has over 20,000 titles from over 5000 publishers, containing articles peer-reviewed by experts in various scientific fields. We then utilized both a 'Wildcard operator' and a 'Boolean operator' as search methods for primary concepts, which included combinations of NGO, development, women, empowerment, and related terms. Our initial search resulted in over 50 articles published across more than 30 journals and included research papers and literature review articles. In order to narrow the search, we focused on articles with an impact factor of at least 0.3 and an H-index of at least 10. Additionally, it is important to note that we also considered articles published by UN bodies and authors that have a significant number of publications and are recognized in the field. Out of the initial search, 25 articles were found to be generally addressing the issue of women's empowerment and NGOs' interventions. Out of these 25, just 15 were found to be empirically and concretely addressing the issue of women's empowerment through NGOs' interventions and highlighting major gaps in this respect. We analyzed these papers using a coding approach that identified repetitive themes through close reading (Braun and Clarke 2006) following the recommendations of Henry et al. (2016) and Bastian et al. (2018). Based on this, we were able to derive key themes that were the subject of our analysis such as understandings of women's empowerment, strategies for women's empowerment, and the role of NGOs in enhancing women's empowerment. This analysis allowed us to identify NGO practices with regard to women's empowerment, and the underlying understanding of empowerment that influenced NGO strategies. The following sections discuss the two main approaches.

3.1. Women's Empowerment: Self-Sustainability, Efficacy, and Addressing the Resource Element

A research study, carried out by Oyelude and Bamigbola (2013) on the strategic roles of NGOs in empowering women in Nigeria through access to information, examined how women could access the information provided by the NGOs and how this information affected their socio-economic status. The study highlighted that most of the poorest Africans are women and that women's empowerment poses a significant challenge (The African Development Forum 2008; cited in Oyelude and Bamigbola 2013). It highlighted that African women faced marginalization due to illiteracy and socio-economic conditions

resulting from poor access to information and a lesser commitment to the implementation of declarations calling for equal rights as outlined by the Department of Trade and Industry 2011, p. 25; cited in Oyelude and Bamigbola 2013. The governments of African countries are not able to perform this task alone and the efforts of the NGOs were required to assist them as it has been recommended that empowerment can be achieved with the proper acquisition of information and education. This research involved both questionnaires and interviews to collect data from a sample of NGO chief officers and information officers. It was found that most women accessed information through a variety of media including television, radio, word of mouth, telephones, or direct communication. In this respect, it was revealed that NGOs played a vital role in educating women and raising their awareness about how to utilize their capabilities and potential and how to pursue their goals and stand up for their rights. Accordingly, NGOs in Nigeria inspired and empowered marginalized women by granting them access to information and educating them in the different fields of economy, politics, and sociology. Despite the funding constraints the NGOs faced, it was highlighted that a pivotal role was the services of libraries and professionals in the effective dissemination of information. The radio is the most widely used medium to empower women, especially in rural communities.

In India, and with the intention of clarifying the role of NGOs in empowering rural women, Narumugai and Kumar (2017) wrote a paper tackling the importance of the empowerment of rural women in transforming Indian society into a self-sustainable society. The paper covered the main areas in which NGOs were active including training and skills development, legal awareness and aid, self-help, and capacity building. However, it was suggested that NGOs should specialize in a particular area so that they could better tailor overtures towards women's empowerment. NGOs should educate young girls and not only adult women with the intention to prepare for an empowered future generation. Furthermore, the NGOs should have transparent and accountable internal governance to encourage people to join them, in addition to strategic approaches to yield successful results.

3.2. Women's Empowerment: Gender Mainstreaming, Raising Education and Awareness, and Addressing Agency and the Process Element

In an Indian context, Hiremath (2021) carried out a research study entitled the "Role of NGOs in promoting Women's Empowerment" and found a significant role of NGOs in this respect. Due to both illiteracy and oppressive traditions, most of the women in India are unaware of their rights. The study tackled the case of the NGO "The Women's Welfare Society" in India and intended to establish the relationship between globalization and NGOs in enhancing women's empowerment. This NGO is active in the provision of training and advocacy and serves abused women and children. Globalization according to women means that women know about economic, political, and societal empowerment according to their status and that they are empowered across the globe. This includes the exchange of experiences, ideas, technology, and networks. The NGO provided comprehensive protection to uphold women's rights and thus their role is prominent and should be encouraged.

Also in an Indian context, specifically in the city of Mumbai, Desai (2005) conducted a research study to identify the link between gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment in the NGOs operating there—67 NGOs in 1994 and 40 NGOs in 2003, respectively. These NGOs ensure the adoption of a gender-oriented approach through the provision of legal aid, microfinance services, awareness-raising sessions on women's capabilities and rights, and also counseling, advocacy, and support services. Despite the fact that NGOs in Mumbai achieved important progress in addressing gender equality issues as part of the policies implemented, the success of these approaches was measured in the number of women beneficiaries assisted and not the impact and/or the positive change they introduced to the lives of women. The results of the study showed that the NGOs were committed to gender mainstreaming, but that their response was a reactive one based

on emerging gender equality problems. It was understood that the NGOs in Mumbai have little understanding of how their work can facilitate the process of women's empowerment. Therefore, it is recommended that NGOs should evaluate their interventions in light of an effective understanding of the societal, cultural, and economic changes in the role of women so they can tailor their interventions to deliver effective (and sustainable) results.

Another study was conducted by Nyataya (2018) in Rwanda, where communities are still facing serious challenges in understanding the significance of women's empowerment. Through case study research incorporating both focus group discussion and interviews with 72 women beneficiaries, 15 NGO employees, and another 13 officials and employees, NGOs in Rwanda were found to be contributing significantly to women's empowerment through the provision of both formal and informal training both to specific beneficiaries as well as to the general community. The study found that 34% of the interviewed respondents articulated that NGOs helped them to understand the rights of women as stipulated in Rwanda's constitution and thus had been motivated to undertake leadership roles in a country where 66% of the parliamentary seats are filled by women. This approach provided a strong foundation to enhance the socio-economic development and empowerment of women and girls in Rwanda. For instance, women are now more economically independent, have their own jobs and income, occupy national and international positions, and are represented in the community. Furthermore, the gender equality gaps were diminished, and women were provided with the means and knowledge to pursue their rights.

In Malawi, a study undertaken by Tiessen (2004) examined the extent to which NGOs operating there adopted the gender mainstreaming approach to empower women in the country. This study was part of an internship program that utilized observation, semi-structured interviews, a questionnaire, and a document review. The research included NGO staff comprising 20 members who were interviewed, and the questionnaire was administered, completed, and returned by 32 NGOs including those staff who were involved in gender issues. The results showed that societal and cultural norms affect the attitude of men towards women. In Malawi, men view women as subordinate to them. Following the results of the study, NGOs in Malawi tended to adopt some strategies to implement gender mainstreaming practices including policies to hire more women and training staff on gender mainstreaming approaches. However, it was recommended that NGOs should strive to influence the attitudes of men towards women inside the organization and to introduce behavioral changes since challenging societal norms is the essence of the gender mainstreaming approach. Furthermore, the behavioral changes should be associated with gender mainstreaming training and awareness-raising sessions to ensure effective implementation.

In the scope of the discussion about the role of women's NGOs in enhancing women's empowerment, a study conducted by Daou (2015) at the social development division of the UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA) in Lebanon elucidated the impact of the interventions of women's NGOs on the lives of Lebanese women. Given that the majority of Lebanese women continue to suffer from domestic violence, social injustice, and gender inequality, the impact of the intervention of women's NGOs has been studied from the perspective of women beneficiaries in conjunction with other socio-economic and demographic factors. Based on data collected from 330 women from 6 Lebanese governorates, it was shown that the interventions of women NGOs have been perceived by the women beneficiaries but with low effect. In contrast with the results of the study that showed the significance of women's NGOs in Lebanon, other socio-economic factors including education, ICT usage, and access to household-related income appeared to be more important predictors of the empowerment of women in Lebanon. Furthermore, it was recommended that women's empowerment could be achieved through the creation of reforms that challenge the norms and patriarchal thinking that undermine the role of women.

Building on Kabeer's (2010) description of empowerment as the conceptualization of agency, resources, and achievement, a study was conducted on two innovative grassroots

NGOs in Northern Tanzania aimed at measuring the outcomes of empowerment while holding on to the understanding that empowerment is an iterative process, occurring on various pathways and scales (Goldman and Little 2015). Utilizing a mixed-method approach including quantitative and qualitative methods such as surveys and interviews, the research was conducted over a period of 4 years. Quantitative data were collected from the survey that aimed at understanding women's well-being, and qualitative data were collected through interviews with both women and men. The results of the study reflect on the power dynamics and how the intervention of the NGOs affected the power granted to women, showing that young women were gaining power through the resources provided by the NGOs. This power is exercised through women gaining enough knowledge that their husbands don't have the right to beat them, challenging societal norms and standing up for their rights. As a result, empowerment was viewed as an iterative and relational process among all social actors that challenged traditional social norms, reinforced new positions and understandings of the role of women, and introduced positive changes.

Through the analysis of five case studies focusing on women in India, including women trained by the NGOs to be successful entrepreneurs and create new ventures, Gupta (2021) revealed that motivation, effective leadership, and information sharing on the existing policies provided women with self-confidence and empowered them. However, recommendations were made to improve existing policies in a manner that addressed gender equality and introduced sustainable empowerment interventions. Furthermore, it was recommended that women be trained in developing networks with partners to sustain their ventures.

In Bangladesh, where women were recognized as half the population but with limited participation in national development activities, a research study was carried out by Mustahidul Mahamud et al. (2021) to uncover the role of grassroots NGOs in enhancing women's empowerment. Data were collected through a survey of 50 women members of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee. The results highlighted the impact of the activities of the NGOs on the awareness of women and women's empowerment. In this respect, it was accentuated that the NGOs had exhibited strenuous efforts to speed up women's empowerment despite all the challenges they faced in terms of gender barriers and fundamentalist attitudes. However, it was recommended that the NGOs could further accelerate the process of women's empowerment by establishing equal rights between men and women in political, economic, and national spheres. Specifically, NGOs could serve an imminent role in directing awareness, education, and training efforts toward encouraging women to undertake more leadership and power positions in ministries and governments. Integrating women's rights into the education curriculum ensures the safety of women through enhancing the role of law enforcement agencies and resisting the fundamentalist ideas that tend to understate the role of women. Additionally, they could play a significant role in fighting discrimination at all levels.

Another paper by Arum (2010) reviewed the literature on the significant role of women's NGOs in the process of women's empowerment in Nigeria. Following the UN declaration entitled 'Decade for Women', where four conferences on women were held addressing issues such as women's rights and violence against women, women in Nigeria spurred their efforts to create women's NGOs to speed up empowerment. For instance, some women's NGOs empower rural women to be self-sufficient through basic assistance, technical and managerial advice, education, and job training. Other NGOs focused their efforts on raising awareness and consciousness about the subordinate role of women in Nigeria, challenging the current social system, and working toward its transformation. Furthermore, efforts were also directed toward the documentation of women's issues and helping women to understand themselves and their roles as well as their influence on society. However, the study recommended urgently challenging to change existing customs that hinder women from gaining an education.

A study in Pakistan that tackled the case of three NGOs implementing economic empowerment programs, accentuated the effective role of NGOs in women's empower-

ment and added the significance of women's understanding of their situation and self-determination (Zafar 2016). Through the utilization of surveys and in-depth interviews with 60 women participants, the results of Zafar's study showed that the NGOs' interventions were quite effective in enhancing women's participation. In contrast with the results of the previous studies that focused merely on the significant role of the NGOs in enhancing women's empowerment, this study accentuated that women's empowerment is a factor in women's own understanding of the situation and self-determination. This entails allowing women to recognize their weaknesses and turn them into opportunities to strengthen their roles and empower themselves.

In an attempt to understand the role of NGOs in the empowerment of rural women in Pakistan, Kakakhel et al. (2016) collected data from 100 respondents from the city of Karak. The NGOs there appeared to be contributing significantly to enhancing women's participation in decision making; however, it was recommended that combining all media platforms such as governmental platforms and electronic and print media, in addition to others, can better contribute to the issues of women's empowerment.

In Zimbabwe, Mafa and Kang'ethe (2019) aim to examine the challenges associated with the financial sustainability of women NGOs, highlighting the drastic effects of the extensive dependence on donor funding as a means to survive the NGOs' mission. Given that these NGOs are expected to perform an effective role in terms of women's empowerment, their sustainability matters a lot. Drawing on a sample of women NGOs in Zimbabwe, the study recommended the endorsement of sensitive gender mainstreaming policies that could better address gender equality considering the effective challenging of the existing political and economic structures.

Through a research study aimed at identifying the role of NGOs in women's empowerment in Rangpur, Hossain et al. (2017) collected data from a sample of rural women. The study found that NGOs supported women through microcredit programs and encouraged them to become entrepreneurs and financially independent. Furthermore, the NGOs empower women through training sessions, a matter that provides them with self-esteem and self-confidence. However, it was recommended that NGOs play a significant role in changing laws and policies in favor of women and encouraging social trends that make men more cooperative with women.

The following Table 2 summarizes the various understandings of the concepts of women's empowerment and the strategies utilized by the NGOs to empower women. Furthermore, we summarize the key results, as well as make recommendations for future research.

The following figure (Figure 1) depicts a model of the common understandings of women's empowerment as per the literature review in comparison with those adopted by the NGOs in the study. As clarified in the previous section, the authors called on NGOs to undertake more sustainable interventions by integrating additional prominent understandings of women's empowerment into their projects in developing countries. This entails highlighting the major gaps in the NGOs' interventions and recommending areas for improvement. Out of the available understandings of women's empowerment, the below model presents the understandings of women's empowerment adopted by the NGOs that contributed to the unsustainable interventions in this regard. Additionally, it shows the missing understandings that were regarded as limitations in their interventions. In a nutshell, this model calls on NGOs to recognize the major limitations in their women's empowerment approaches and integrate understandings that enhance the sustainability (and value) of their interventions.

Table 2. Results of research studies on women's empowerment.

Study	Context	Sample	Understandings	Strategies	Key Results	Recommendations
Oyelude and Bamigbola (2013)	Nigeria-Africa	NGOs' chief executive and information officers	Women are empowered when they have access to information.	Radio-Television—person-to-person communication, word of mouth, and telephone.	Slow but steadily working towards educating women about their rights.	Collaboration with libraries and information centres, radio and television stations.
Nyataya (2018)	Rwanda-Gasabo District	Women Beneficiaries-NGO employees—employees of women's departments and other officials	Women are empowered through the provision of formal and informal training.	- Loans with low interest supported by business training. - Morality building, encouragement, and motivation. - Vocational training and provision of grants. - Direct and indirect financial support.	- Enhancing women's educational, economic, and social status in Rwanda. - Changing the living conditions of women. - Educating women and girls about their rights.	NGOs should continue their endeavours toward educating women on their rights and a clear policy for women who were abandoned by work partners should be set.
Hiremath (2021)	India	NGO "The Women's Welfare Society"	Women are empowered when they are empowered across the globe.	- Helpline and institutional services for women. - Counselling centres and self-help for women.	- Helpline and institutional services provide immediate assistance to needy women. - Employment opportunities for women.	NGOs' work should be encouraged by government departments, other NGOs and the local community.
Tiessen (2004)	Malawi	NGO staff members including men and women	Women are empowered through gender mainstreaming.	- Hiring more women staff. - Commitment to gender equality policies. - Awareness raising and gender equality training sessions.	NGOs committed to gender mainstreaming as part of policy requirements.	Commitment to gender equality as part of policy implementation is not sufficient, NGOs shall challenge societal norms about the perspective of men towards women and introduce awareness-raising and training sessions.

Table 2. *Cont*.

Study	Context	Sample	Understandings	Strategies	Key Results	Recommendations
Desai (2005)	Mumbai	67 NGOs in 1994 and 40 NGOs in 2003	Women are empowered through gender mainstreaming.	- Commitment to gender equality policies. - Awareness-raising and counselling. - Legal aid and microfinance support.	NGOs are committed to gender mainstreaming as part of policy requirements.	Commitment to gender equality as part of policy implementation is not sufficient. NGOs shall tailor their interventions in light of effective understandings of the societal, cultural, and economic changes in the role of women
Narumugai and Kumar (2017)	India	NGOs in India	Women are empowered through a self-sustainable society.	Training and skills development, legal awareness and aid, self-help, and capacity building	NGOs are active in training and skills development, legal awareness and aid, self-help, and capacity building.	- NGOs shall specialize in specific areas. - NGOs shall educate young girls and not only adult women. - Transparent and accountable internal governance and strategic approaches.
Goldman and Little (2015)	Maasai villages-Northern Tanzania	Two grassroots NGOs	Women are empowered through understanding local power dynamics and the introduction of resources by NGOs.	- Educational programs. - NGO meetings. - Provision of space for women to engage and interact with men.	Women gaining the ability to exercise new forms of power.	Connections across societal, political, and economic pathways is necessary for empowerment to happen.
Abi Zeid Daou (2015)	Lebanon	330 women from 6 Lebanese governorates	Women are empowered through self-efficacy, microcredit, and vocational training.	Education, ICT usage, access to household-related income.	Interventions of women's NGOs have been perceived by the women beneficiaries but at a low effect size	Empowerment can be achieved through reforms that challenge the patriarchal thinking and cultural norms that undermine the role of women.

Table 2. *Cont*.

Study	Context	Sample	Understandings	Strategies	Key Results	Recommendations
Gupta (2021)	India	5 case studies of trained women	Women are empowered through venture creation and entrepreneurship.	Training and information sharing.	Motivation, effective leadership, and information sharing empower women.	Empowerment can be achieved through improving existing policies to address gender equality.
Mustahidul Mahamud et al. (2021)	Bangladesh	50 women members under the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee	Women are empowered through provision of training and awareness-raising.	Training and awareness-raising.	Women were empowered through having access to information.	Empowerment can be achieved through reforms that challenge the patriarchal thinking and cultural norms that undermine the role of women.
Arum (2010)	Nigeria	Women's NGOs	Women's NGOs empower women.	Training and awareness-raising.	Women's NGOs empower women through reducing trafficking, enhancing reproductive health, and others.	Empowerment can be achieved through challenging and changing the existing customs that hinder women's education.
Zafar (2016)	Pakistan	Three NGOs implementing economic empowerment programs	Women's understanding of their situation and self-determination.	Training and awareness-raising.	NGOs contributed, to some extent, to enhancing women's self-confidence.	Allowing women to recognize their weaknesses and turn them into opportunities to strengthen their role and empower themselves.
Kakakhel et al. (2016)	Pakistan	100 respondents from city Karak, KPK	Engaging of women entrepreneurs in the mainstream economy.	Engaging women in decision making.	NGOs contributed, to a good extent, to engaging women in decision making	NGOs shall work to combine all local and government media platforms to empower women.

Table 2. *Cont*.

| Study	Context	Sample	Understandings	Strategies	Key Results	Recommendations
Mafa and Kang'ethe (2019)	Zimbabwe	Sample of Women's NGOs	Women are empowered through women's NGOs.	Engaging women in decision making.	Women's NGOs are encountering financial sustainability due to dependency on donors.	The study recommended the endorsement of sensitive gender mainstreaming policies that could better address gender equality in light of the effective challenging of the existing political and economic structures.
Hossain et al. (2017)	Rangpur	Sample of Rural Women	Economic and political empowerment of women.	Microcredit and training programs.	NGOs empower women financially to become entrepreneurs. Through training, women become aware of their self-esteem and self-respect.	NGOs can play a significant role in changing laws and policies in favor of women and encouraging social trends that make males more cooperative with women.
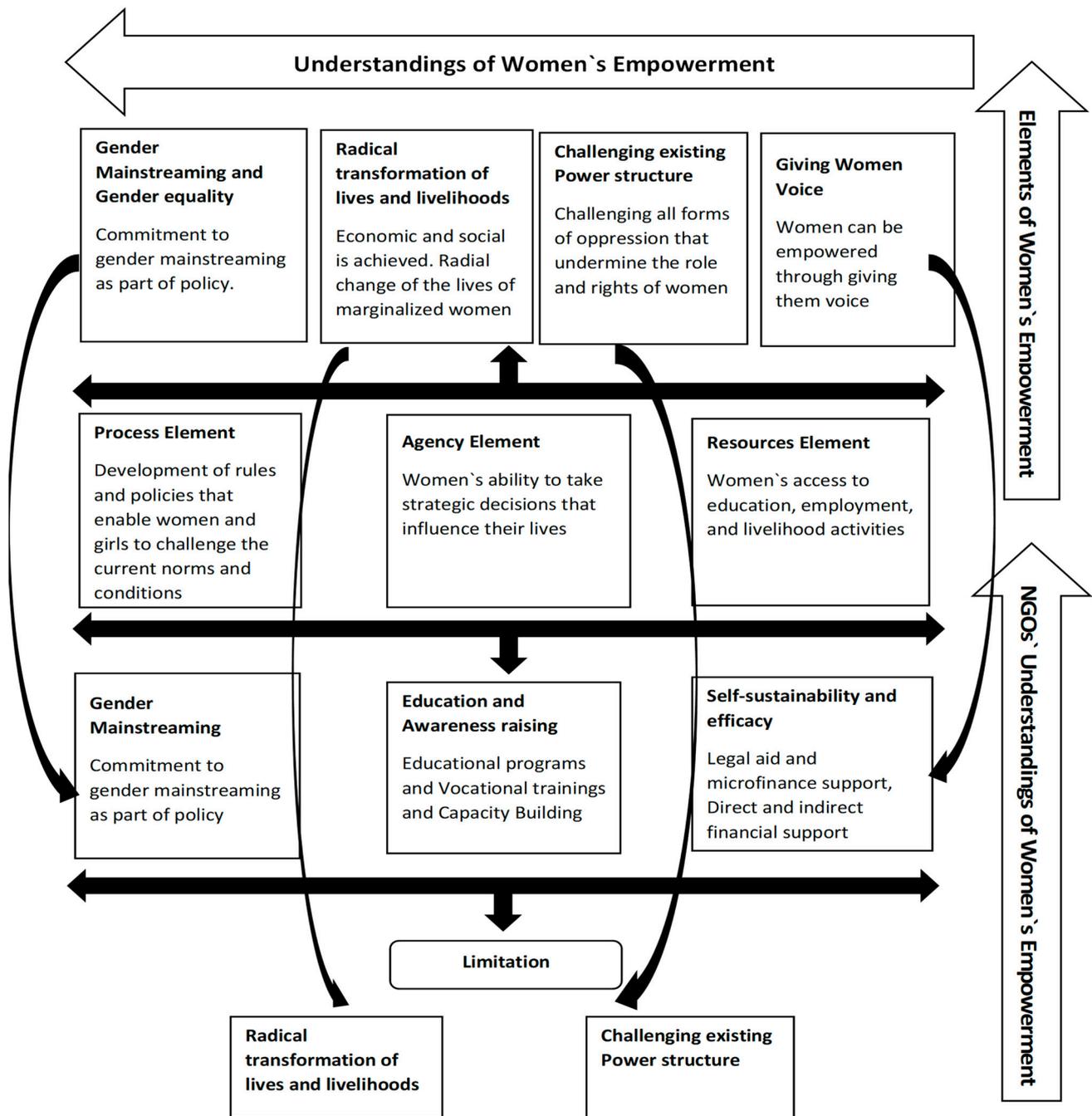
Figure 1. Conceptual framework of understandings for women's empowerment: insights and limitations from NGOs' work.

4. Discussion

The present paper has addressed the evolution of the empowerment concept and its prevailing understandings by NGOs worldwide. Despite being indispensable partners in addressing women's empowerment issues, our research reveals rather selective and limited notions of empowerment on behalf of NGOs, as displayed in many developing countries (Ja'afar-Furo 2007). The present text argues that limited understandings of empowerment hamper the ability of NGOs to serve women's advancement and sustainable development. NGO programs tend to focus on giving women a voice, endowing them with financial power, and applying gender mainstreaming, as well as education and awareness. In fact, the prevailing NGO approaches to empowerment are focused on strengthening women's

individual agency capacities (for example, through education, financial support, increases in self-efficacy, and others) to extend individual freedoms and to endow women with personal strategic choices. Yet NGO approaches still fall short of what Bennett (2002) relates to as the necessary social inclusion of women, which would emphasize providing access to diverse assets and creating lasting opportunities for female advancement. Systemic changes are required to actually sustain female empowerment. Only systemic approaches to empowerment engender profound changes that modify the rules of the game (North 1995) at societal and policy levels. Such changes require a top-down approach and buy-in from the top (leadership). NGOs need to consider enabling or strengthening governments and the political leadership so as to engage them in transformational institutional change that includes the removal of institutional barriers and the provision of equal access to resources and opportunities. Interestingly, articles in our sample emphasize NGO activities concerned with predominantly marginalized and poor women. Currently, approaches tend to treat women, however, more as a disenfranchised subset of the economy rather than 'being female' as a category that spans societal stratification layers. Being financially well off as a woman may not be an indicator of being empowered. For example, Gray and Finley-Hervey's (2005) research on Moroccan women entrepreneurs revealed how women from poor and modest societal backgrounds benefitted substantially from empowerment efforts because their ventures provided them with more autonomy from male family members compared with women entrepreneurs from the upper classes. This again shows that women's submission is rooted in a patriarchal cultural prescription that informs family relations and socio-political institutions that represent the status quo.

Systemic transformation and social inclusion are necessary for sustained women's empowerment. Yet, they require NGOs to engage deeply with socio-political, economic, and structural processes to be able to support socially inclusive development alternatives. However, NGOs are heavily constrained by accountability demands aligned with donor needs as donors most often originate from the global North in the form of other NGOs, philanthropists, and nontraditional donors (Banks and Hulme 2012). These processes come at the detriment of NGOs fully connecting with a broader network of stakeholders in the governmental, political, and cultural realms (Sabatini 2002) in order to deepen their roots in communities. Instead, more emphasis has been given to organizational professionalism, often standardized as well as performance-oriented and with little politicization of NGOs, leading to moderate change positions on their behalf (Hayes et al. 2018). In this context, NGOs need to connect more with local and context-specific decision makers, cultural institutions, and women's associations that would help to shape broader visions of empowerment. The assumption that empowering women with more access to different forms of resources is key, has a scant impact on deeply ingrained structures and practices at the heart of gender inequalities. A concrete example of promoting lasting change is a foundation in Lebanon named Arc en Ciel (AeC), which is active in different fields supporting marginalized groups as well as engaging in sustainable development. AeC applies a three-step process that first involves developing hands-on projects on the ground with concerned stakeholders to find viable solutions; AeC, thereafter, has become a reference organization for a particular topic—they have become the focal organization for donors to work with in the country regarding specific issues; finally, AeC engages in civil society discourse and public debate in order to press and push for laws that will sustainably change the situation (Salamoun and Bastian 2017).

Understandings of empowerment are strongly shaped by cultural norms. Many NGOs originate from developed countries in the global North. Their programs of women's empowerment tend to emphasize an individual's personal, financial, and economic capacities as the most relevant levers. The idea of self-oriented, financially independent, and self-reliant women, however, goes back to a more Western understanding of empowerment that originates from individualist cultural norms and understandings, where empowerment is primarily a consequence of economic advancement and development, as predominantly present in the global North (Wood et al. 2021). Prevailing NGO practices and understand-

ings would require questioning of these underlying assumptions of empowerment and adapting them to the context in which they are active. In fact, most development programs focusing on women's empowerment are in a developmental context in the global South, where nearly all societies are collectivist and not individualist. Very obvious differences along the individualist-collectivist 'continuum' (Kagitcibasi 1996) relate to such fundamentals as business priorities, the format of decision-making, the length of time horizons, the scope of suitable products/service offerings, and the location(s) where these offerings can (should) be made. NGO practices need to embrace more contextualized, collectivist notions of empowerment that understand the root concepts of empowerment from a different perspective: the individual self is always a related one that comprises the empowerment of families and tribes. Power is grounded in collective values, which are reflected in collaboration, sharing, and mutuality (Wood et al. 2021). The 'formula' of empowerment in these contexts may not be the same, but they share more elements of commonality than Western contexts and mind frames, which tend more toward the individualistic-socialized-self model. As such, empowerment itself not only leverages different elements, but it also weighs different elements more heavily than a Western perspective would/might and, therefore, the process both 'looks' different and seeks different outcomes to define 'success'.

Our paper can be considered an extension of the analysis already provided by existing empirical studies in this field. For instance, research papers written by authors such as Oyelude and Bamigbola (2013); Nyataya (2018); Hiremath (2021); Tiessen (2004); Desai (2005); Narumugai and Kumar (2017); Goldman and Little (2015); Abi Zeid Daou (2015); Gupta (2021); Mustahidul Mahamud et al. (2021); Arum (2010); Kakakhel et al. (2016); Zafar (2016); Kakakhel et al. (2016); Mafa and Kang'ethe (2019) and Hossain et al. (2017) provide recommendations for the better performance of NGOs in the field of women's empowerment. Our paper has extended this discussion by analyzing the root causes for the approaches undertaken and proposed areas for future research. Therefore, this paper offers an in-depth analysis of the work of NGOs in the scope of women's empowerment and combines several perspectives and opinions in this field.

5. Conclusions

The present paper reveals the profound limitations of NGOs' understandings of empowerment that fall short of proper female inclusion in society and that would need to develop a long-term orientation to tackle systemic change. We show that this relates to various factors, for example, empowerment understandings of NGOs being influenced by a more individualist cultural approach to empowerment, which relates to the fact that organizations operate to donor requirements and many donors are based in the global North. Moreover, projects for women's empowerment appear to garner more attention internationally than locally (Pupavac 2010), which will influence perspectives on what are sustainable interventions to advance women. NGOs and international development aid agencies often adopt a 'top-down welfare approach' in their support for women, which ignores establishing strong support networks with local institutions that aim to support the local and national capacities of governments and civil society agents to strengthen women's advancement and empowerment organically. Instead of strengthening female agency, women remain passive beneficiaries with limited voices on developmental issues concerning themselves. Overall, this undermines the empowerment efforts of developmental agencies. NGOs need to fully embrace localized knowledge that can help them reframe their empowerment definitions and contextualize them and, through this, properly target their programs and policy interventions (Barca et al. 2012). This includes the development of local talent that could spearhead women's empowerment initiatives in the host countries, particularly by raising women leaders to continue to advocate the notion. By engaging local agencies more systemically, NGOs would enable communities and societies to take ownership of elevating women's positions in society, which would ultimately be a more sustainable development approach. Concretely, we suggest more collaborations between the local government and agencies and the concerned NGOs with regard to activities and

programs that challenge societal norms and work on behavioral changes in gender relations. Besides education and vocational programs targeting women, NGOs could work with governments to offer courses or redesign curricula offered in schools that teach issues around gender and equality. Consistent and active government intervention is required to support NGOs in establishing connections across societal, political, and economic pathways for empowerment to happen.

To date, NGOs are more concerned with the development priorities of their international stakeholders, which are based on Western cultural norms and economic understandings, than focusing on the target groups. Most of the women's empowerment measurement tools are based on national aggregate data, which fail to detect context specificities on a community level, also with regard to gender relationships. Since notions of empowerment are context-specific (Wood et al. 2021), the performance indicators of empowerment differ from one context to another. NGOs and international development agencies need to recognize the heterogeneous diversity of women's experiences and consider empowerment from the bottom up. They must avoid looking at the metric and visible measures in evaluating the project's impact but give a more proactive voice and action roles to the local women in these initiatives with strong cultural context embeddedness (Wood 2022). NGOs should provide programs and support that bring about long-lasting, significant impacts by talking to local women about what they need and want, instead of offering support from a Western lens (Boulanouar and Wood 2018; Alserhan et al. 2015; Boulanouar and Boulanouar 2013).

This paper opens several avenues for future research. The research reviewed a handful of relevant papers that examined the NGOs' role in advancing the women's empowerment agenda. Future research could examine the interaction process and dynamics between NGOs and local agencies in implementing their initiatives. It is important to demonstrate how NGOs could produce a radical transformation of women's lives and living. The paper highlighted the limited outcomes in challenging existing power structures in the sphere of women's empowerment. Future studies could conduct more investigations to explain the unique power structures in different contexts and how they could be challenged to advance women's empowerment.

Similar to other papers, this work has some limitations that have to be addressed. Although we attempted a comprehensive review of all available studies in this field, we cannot guarantee that we included all relevant work. However, considering the transparent approach we adopted in selecting highly relevant and quality papers addressing NGOs' interventions in the field of women's empowerment, we think that the sample we selected represents, to the greatest extent possible, a complete systematic literature review depicting the main themes, perspectives, arguments, and debates in this area of work.

Furthermore, the discussion that our paper presented might raise concerns regarding the objectivity of the data analysis. In this respect, regarding the data collection, analysis, and interpretation, a subjective approach was adopted. Given that the findings of this study may be analyzed or interpreted differently by another group of authors, we applied the multiple assessor method to reduce this limitation. In this respect, the individual assessment of each of the selected research papers was discussed with all involved researchers until a consensus was reached. Additionally, some scholars in the field may identify additional areas for future research. In the scope of this discussion, we believe that we included a sufficiently comprehensive framework addressing several linkages and interrelationships among the individual components. Furthermore, we present a discussion that provides the building blocks to boost our understanding of the main foundations of women's empowerment and NGOs' interventions in developing countries.

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