ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND TRENDS OF NGOs IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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The most severe social injustice which continues to exist in Indian society is gender inequality that subjects women to various forms of male domination and discrimination. Due to their mission alignments for the advancement of women, women empowerment NGOs are a natural fit in responding to the overall issue of gender injustice that threatens to undermine the society at large.

“To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man’s injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man’s superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her, man could not be. If nonviolence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. Who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than woman?”

—Mahatma Gandhi

INTRODUCTION

INDIA, AS a society, has made tremendous strides in various socio-economic and political fronts since Independence. The economic growth of the nation during the past two decades has been phenomenal. In spite of all these achievements, the nation is far behind in a few core areas of human dignity and social justice. Among them, gender injustice and oppressions through the caste system are the most serious. These two injustices have, often in combination, played unabated roles throughout the history of India with serious results in denial and outright restrain of the rights of women in various aspects of social life. Gender discrimination and women’s rights abuse have been systemic and deep-rooted problems with various dimensions (religious, cultural, economic, etc.) across the country. In the name of religion, tradition, and culture, social groups,
Caste groups and religious groups methodically subjugate women to multiple forms of oppressions. Manifestations of gender injustice include the patriarchal form of keeping women in subordinate positions, the evil system of dowry imposed for marriage, the economic structure that systematically discriminates against women, imposition of domestic chores, and sexual harassment.

The recent high profile cases of barbaric rapes and torture of women, including in the national capital region, clearly shows that injustice against women still exists at extreme levels. Contrary to all the claims of achievement in gender equality, these recent and other cases of rapes and abuse of women in both urban and rural India are extremely disturbing to core human conscience. When news of these brutal violence against women came out, it was not just national news but the news that seized world’s attention and opinion about the way women rights are blatantly abused in a nation which supposedly has a tradition of glorifying the role of women in its society. Unfortunately these are not just random incidents of atrocities against women but outcomes of male chauvinism that systematically oppresses women’s status in the society. In this day and age of women scaling the heights of human achievements on the global stage, the cavemen mentality of considering women at a lower stature than men still continues. While Indian women have shown highest professional accomplishments, subjugating to just the roles of procreation and household chores is truly against the spirit of modern India.

About 48.5 per cent of India’s population is female. India has seen a steady growth of women in its work force. Yet gender neutrality in pay, positions, promotional opportunities are non-existent. Serious salary gaps between men and women working on same or similar jobs, lack of career advancement opportunities of women workers, and the overall mentality of keeping women away from decision-making authority are all too common in both public and private sector organisations.

While the government has either failed to protect women’s rights or has been very slow in responding to the issues of violations against women’s rights, fortunately the non-governmental organisations (NGO) sector has made several inroads in promoting women’s rights and women empowerment through a variety of strategies and development platforms.

**History of Women Empowerment**

Women empowerment, in concept and practice, is complex due to various dimensions involved in it. There are myriad explanations and interpretations on what constitute the process of women empowerment. However, it is commonly accepted that women empowerment incorporates a few key elements including awareness, autonomy, self-reliance, rights,
engagement in decision-making process, capacity building, and certain level of power (Panda, 2000).

Governments’ failure to address gender inequalities and inequities in modern India gave the impetus for movements for the advancement of women. Pioneered by women leaders and NGOs, beginning in the 1960s and continuing in 1970s, women’s rights movement began to take shape. Women’s rights movement, in addition to condemning the social and economic structures that result in gender bias, also took the constitutional and other rights-based approaches to promote its reform agenda. Another stream, women’s welfare movement, focused on the welfare and rehabilitation of women who were victims of domestic and other violence against them. The push for economic independence became the key theme of another women’s movement. All these three movements (rights, welfare and economic independence) coalesced together and became the overall women empowerment movement to fight all injustices against women.

Women’s disenfranchisement mostly begins with the lack of access to wealth, income generation opportunities, and managing household finances. Since the mid-1970s several NGOs have emerged to address this and promote economic self-sufficiency for women through micro-loans and other schemes. Off shoots of these schemes are women self-help groups that take over the financing schemes and become NGOs themselves. They continue to impact the lives of millions of women, both in rural and urban areas by providing income generation opportunities.

The second approach of women empowerment NGOs was through education. They increased awareness on the importance of knowledge as a way to achieve professional careers and participate in political process. Another form of women empowerment emerged from the feminist movement which began to shun all social, cultural or religious barriers to the advancement of women. Feminist leaders, through their writings generated a cadre of new generation of women who became followers of women’s liberation.

All the hard work by women’s group and NGOs have achieved considerable successes in various fronts. Currently, reports and information released by medium and large size women development NGOs through their websites and other printed material indicate the impacts of their projects on their overall women empowerment agendas. In addition to these self-reported measures and indicators on varying levels of advancements, studies done by researchers on local and regional level NGOs have proved that women achieve considerable level of knowledge, economic and political empowerment by being members or beneficiaries of them (Kilby 2011; Margaret & Kala, 2013; Brahmbhatt & Sheth, 2013)
Roles and Strategies of Women Empowerment NGOs

Because gender discrimination and women’s rights abuse are systemic, deep-rooted problems with various dimensions (religious, cultural, economic, etc.) across the country, solutions to address them also need to be multi-dimensional and holistic involving various sectors of the society. Women empowerment NGOs, due to their mission-focused nature, are in an unique position to play pivotal roles to link various players including the general public, communities, religious groups, governments, and businesses. They also highlight various issues of gender inequality and inequity in order to stimulate responses from them.

Although the typology and scopes of NGOs with overall missions of women empowerment vary, four types of them have high impacts and are more visible than the others. They are: grassroots women self-help NGOs, women’s rights advocacy NGOs, women’s economic development NGOs, and international women empowerment NGOs.

Grassroots Women’s Self-Help NGOs grow from within communities, initiated by women leaders or groups to promote the welfare and economic opportunities of women who are community residents. They focus on short-term income generation projects, such as cottage industries for women in communities, so that long term empowerment can be achieved. Grassroots women’s self-help group NGOs need little or no intervention from outsiders, although information and technical advice from other established women NGOs can help them greatly in their efforts and impacts. During the past few years, there is a tremendous growth of this type of grassroots NGOs around the country both in urban and rural areas.

Women Rights Advocacy NGOs are typically established by leaders with strong feminist ideology or group of people who desire to address one or more aspects of women’s rights abuse. Strategies of advocacy environmental NGOs focus on raising public awareness on women rights abuse, their impacts, and other issues in order to prevent them. They advocate for gender equality through various measures including activism. They support women activists and organise public protests that are often the most effective methods to mobilise the public and get the attention of law-makers. They link people with the political processes, so that they can demand responses from governments based on their constitutional and other rights. They partner with local media to get the word out in order to increase awareness among the public about women’s rights issues and the needs to address them. They act as watch dog groups to protect the rights of women from abuse by social groups, caste groups and religious groups that methodically subjugate women to multiple forms of oppressions in the name of tradition, culture and religion.
Women Economic Development NGOs strive to promote financial self-sufficiency of women through economic development. They provide direct social service, with missions to address specific needs of women such as education, health care, and income generation within the broad development framework. Based on the needs, they design and implement projects that benefit women from underserved or unserved communities. Access to micro loans and other opportunities offered by development NGOs have truly transformed the status of women in communities across the nation, especially in rural areas where women have long been excluded in income generation and family financial management. They have also been instrumental in the impressive growth of women in the national workforce.

International Women Empowerment NGOs operate in a variety of areas that address various global-level gender injustice issues, especially such issues faced by women in developing nations. They often develop collaborative partnerships with local and national NGOs to address specific issues that affect women in societies. The also bring technical and financial resources to address issues of gender inequality and inequity.

The Landscape of Women’s Rights NGOs

Women empowerment NGOs range widely in their size, scope, and impacts. The good news is that there is a growing number of women advancement related NGO initiatives at local, state-level, regional, national and transnational levels that provide educational, economic and other resources needed to address various aspects of women empowerment. Brief profiles of a few such NGOs that are in the forefront of actions for women empowerment are given in the next section. These organisations, in addition to their specific missions to promote the status of women through awareness, education, and economic development, have embarked on major initiatives to push their agenda for overall women empowerment.

Annapurna Pariwar

Based in Mumbai, Annapurna Pariwar is a coalition of six different NGOs that grew from the original NGO Annapurna Mahila Mandal. This membership based organisation’s mission is “to make its members sustainable and happy in their professional and personal lives by giving small repetitive loans to poor enterprising women and men along with business guidance and skill trainings to improve their business.” Although economic empowerment of women continues to be the core theme of its projects, the NGO and its coalition provide a variety of support services including day care, catering, and hostel facilities for its beneficiaries. Since its inception in 1975, the organisation has afforded economic self-sufficiency to countless women in Mumbai and surrounding areas, who
otherwise would have lived in abject poverty. The NGO continues to grow and expand its scope and impacts.

**Self -Employed Women’s Association (SEWA)**

From its humble beginning in 1972 as a trade union of poor, self-employed women workers, SEWA has achieved international attention as a best practice model in women economic self-sufficiency. Its goal is “to organise women workers for full employment whereby workers obtain work security, income security, food security, and social security including health care, child care and housing.”

Proudly declaring itself as an NGO and a movement, SEWA relies on the strengths of labourers, its cooperative platform, and women power. With its current 19 “sister organisations,” SEWA has grown to be a major player in various sectors including banking, insurance, housing, trade facilitation, research and eco-tourism. SEWA has proved beyond any doubt that women, with no external help, can transform the society.

**Centre for Community Economics and Development Consultant Society (CECOEDECON)**

CECOEDECON is a Jaipur based multi-sector NGO with the mission “to build the capacities of its partner communities of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, small and marginal farmers, the landless and deprived women and children, in order to ensure that they are able to take action independently and effectively to secure their long term well-being, thereby promoting their empowerment and self-reliance.”

Women and child empowerment is the first of the NGO’s six priority areas of operation. Working in strong patriarchal communities of Rajasthan with high prevalence of evil traditions such as child marriage and female foeticide, CECOEDECON partners with a host of other NGOs and provides projects and schemes to improve women’s roles in natural resource management, Panchayati Raj, micro enterprise development, and promotion of adequate health care facilities.

**Soka Ikeda College of Arts and Science for Women**

Located in the outskirts of Chennai and run by the NGO SethuValliammal Educational Trust, Soka Ikeda College provides higher education opportunities for first generation women students from poor households. While there is a rapid growth of self-funded colleges across the country that are primarily functioning as business enterprises, Soka Ikeda College serves young women from the poor peri-urban areas of Chennai who cannot afford to go to other colleges. With the mission of “empowering women by imparting value-creating education and enabling them to realise their hidden potential,” the college has been in operation
since 2000. In spite of minimal tuition fees and other costs, the college has
grown tremendously and offers various under-graduate and graduate level
degrees, and excelled in several of them.

Responsibilities of Women Empowerment NGOs

In order to make gender equality and equity a reality, women
empowerment NGOs must continue their constant and unwavering fights
to secure women’s rights in all walks of life (social, educational, economic,
household, etc.). Gender equality and equity need to come from various
fronts such as the religious, communal, political, economic and household
fronts. Unless positive changes in all these fronts are achieved in a balanced
manner, holistic women empowerment will be elusive. NGOs have the
capacity to be the conduit for changes in all these fronts.

Women empowerment can only be achieved through a continuous
process that promotes women’s knowledge base through education,
economic self-sufficiency through income generating opportunities,
engagement in the policy-making process through political participation
and leadership, and ability to take the reins of household decision-making.
NGOs need to work on these and other areas of advancement. They need
to network in order to pool resources and for higher impacts.

Non-government Organisations’ responses to the recent violence against
women are for the most part reactive. They need to be proactive in
galvanising the tides of emotional outpours in Indian psyche after such
incidents and push for stronger reforms so that such incidents will never
happen again.

Indian cinema industry, under the guise of artistic expressions,
continues to portray women in demeaning way as sexual objects. This has
resulted in serious negative consequences among male adolescents and
young adults by poisoning their perceptions and behaviours towards their
female counterparts. NGOs need to protest and ban the production of such
vile movies.

NGO Engagements with Governments to Address Women’s Rights

Women’s rights groups have been instrumental in various Parliamentary
Acts that protect and promote women’s constitutional and legal rights.
Major Acts that protect women’s rights are: The Dowry Prohibition Act of
Labour System Abolition Act of 1976, The Family Courts Act of 1984,
The Indecent Representation of Women Prohibition Act of 1986, and The
Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005. NGOs continue
to play vital roles in increasing awareness about these Acts and their
provisions. They also initiate legal proceedings based on these and other
Acts to address women victims.
Among the most significant policy development that women rights NGOs were able to achieve include: (i) the establishment of National Commission on Women as the central government agency to: safeguard constitutional and legal rights of women, initiate remedial legislative measures to promote women’s rights, and facilitate grievance processes, (ii) The 1994 Constitutional Amendment Act that increased women representation in the political (and thus policy) decision-making process through the introduction of 33 per cent reservation for women in local and village-level elections,

All policy, legal and enforcement frameworks regarding women’s rights are not of any use if they are not implemented properly. Often time, rules and regulations to protect women are not followed or ignored all together. NGOs play a vital role in making sure they are implemented.

**Partnership with the Mass Media**

Non-government Organisations that have initiatives to address a variety of women’s rights issues should develop active collaborative partnerships with the traditional mass media. Mass media is very effective to reach out to the public for awareness-building and action regarding women rights. Media outlets such as local, regional, national and international newspapers, television networks, magazines and periodicals have shown tremendous support for women empowerment NGOs to highlight their causes, especially regarding protecting women from violence. Media coverage on recent rape cases are good examples of how they can bring immediate public attention to such issues. Through investigative journalism and collaboration with women’s welfare NGOs, the media has also exposed rampant violation of women’s rights in various urban and rural communities around the country in the name of traditions and religions. They also assist NGOs in refuting common myths regarding women’s roles in society.

Another fast-growing information mechanism that can be effective for women empowerment NGOs to promote public awareness and demand government actions is the social media. The rapid growth of information technology and utilisation of cellular phones by the mass, especially the youth, make social media an excellent tool for NGOs to reach out to the public. Social media outlets such as facebook, twitter and youtube have proved how information can spread inexpensively and very quickly to a wide domestic and global audience in order to gain support for NGO causes. Social media can also help NGOs to recruit new generations of women activists and supporters of women empowerment from the millennial and next generations.
Conclusion and Future Directions

Development of a nation lies not just on its GDP growth, but through a series of progressive reforms that resolve and eradicate social injustices faced by various sub-population of the nation. The growing list of government initiated reformative acts, legal framework, regulatory mechanisms, and judicial actions are not solutions to the major issues of gender injustice by themselves. Unless they change the mindsets, attitudes and behaviours of people in Indian society, especially among men, none of them is worth anything. NGOs have paved the way for awareness, advocacy, and outright demands for gender justice. They need to continue to push the boundaries of social justice, laws, and judiciary in pursuit of women’s rights, equality and equity.

In addition to their programmes and projects, in order to stay true to their missions, women empowerment NGOs need to have organisational capacity to operate effectively and efficiently. They need to have good governance that promotes transparency and accountability. They should have active strategic planning processes that will expand their scope on empowering women. They also need to mobilise steady revenues from diversified sources in order to continue their work. NGOs operating on all aspects of the advancement of women should constantly explore opportunities to network with other NGOs with similar missions for collaborative partnership. Given the extent of gender inequality and inequity in the society, networking among women welfare NGOs is the key to increase awareness on issues, address various causes and consequences of women’s rights abuse, and promote overall women empowerment throughout the nation.

Anguishing about Indian society’s inability to rid itself of several social evils, a poet once surmised that “we got freedom at midnight...and it has not dawned yet.” This is certainly true with regard to gender injustice and casteism. India is at crossroads in so many ways. Its youth population is nearly 50 per cent of the total population, the highest such proportion the nation ever had. The younger generation has the opportunity to propel the society into a higher stature by breaking down the barriers that cause these social injustices. Spearheaded by the NGO sector and supported by all other sectors, it can and should be done.

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*Woman must not accept; she must challenge. She must not be awed by that which has been built up around her; she must reverence that woman in her which struggles for expression*

— Margaret Sanger