



# IMPACT OF NGOs ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND VOICE IN BANGLADESH

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## Introduction

Bangladesh continues to experience persistent gender inequalities shaped by cultural, religious, and social norms. Within its patriarchal social structure, women's roles are commonly limited to reproductive work or household-based productive activities. These tasks are essential to family well-being but unpaid, undervalued, and routinely overlooked compared to men's work (Efroymson et al., 2007). These norms have historically constrained women's visibility, mobility, and participation in the public sphere.

The expansion of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) marked an important shift in this landscape. Bangladesh's NGO sector is heterogeneous, with diverse organizational structures, management styles, and ideological orientations that span both service-delivery and movement-based models (Kabeer, 2002). The rapid growth of NGOs starting in the 1980s is driven largely by increases in donor funding, which signaled a move away from earlier approaches focused on promoting political mobilization and accountability of government toward more service-oriented delivery systems (Rahman, 2006). Over the last decades, many of these service-delivery organizations have incorporated advocacy and rights-based strategies into their work (Nazneen, 2008). Through these evolving programmes, NGOs highlighted and strengthened the contributions of underprivileged women as economic actors and active participants in development and political process. However, despite this progress, there is still no clear empirical evidence from Bangladesh that directly links the presence of NGOs to improvements in women's agency, voice, and empowerment.

Currently, there are around 2700 NGOs operating in Bangladesh. The NGO structure operates independently from government systems, which gives NGOs more flexibility to reach underserved communities and design programs that respond directly to local needs. Women's groups also benefited from rising donor interest in gender-focused development and were able to build capacity, secure project funding, and partner with larger organizations. Institutes like BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), Grameen, and PKSF (Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation), and Government of Bangladesh have funded and supported many NGOs to operate non-formal schools, capacity-building and entrepreneurship training programs, computer and IT training, and a range of social service initiatives. Through these partnerships, NGOs created opportunities for both women and men to learn new skills, establish small and medium enterprises, and participate in service-oriented sectors across Bangladesh. Together, these developments indicated a potential increase in women's mobility and participation in education, work, community events, and voting, while strengthening their overall social and economic empowerment.

This study examines how NGOs establishment and presence influence women's voice in community governance and empowerment in rural Bangladesh, focusing on their ability to speak in public settings, their participation in groups, and the balance between work and family responsibilities for both women and men. It first explores how NGOs have been distributed across upazilas (sub-districts) over time<sup>1</sup>. It then analyzes trends in key gender-disaggregated indicators related to voice and empowerment. Finally, the study uses difference-in-differences and fixed-effects models to examine the causal relationship between NGO presence and gender-disaggregated outcomes related to empowerment and voice.

Studies on the impact of microcredit and microfinance institutions on women's lives and empowerment in Bangladesh have received substantial attention and generated considerable debate (Amin and Becker, 1998; Newaz, 2003; Khan and Rahman, 2016). A few localized studies, particularly in coastal

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<sup>1</sup> An upazila is an administrative division in Bangladesh, functioning as a sub-unit of a district.

and *char* areas, have also documented how NGOs contribute to raising awareness among women (Ebdon, 1995; Jahan, 2008).<sup>2</sup> To the best of our knowledge, this study is among the first to examine, at the national level, the impact of NGO on women’s voice on socioeconomic issues, their group membership, and their working hours.

## Data and Methodology

We compiled administrative data containing information on both local and foreign NGOs from the NGO Affairs Bureau of Bangladesh. The dataset provides each organization’s name, headquarters address, and registration year. We treat the registration year as the point at which an NGO begins operating in a given area. Bangladesh has an unusually large number of NGOs in operation, going back to its independence in 1971. The national emergency following independence as well as the disastrous Bhola Cyclone catalyzed international relief efforts and the foundation of the NGO sector in the country. The dataset we are using records establishment of NGOs in Bangladesh starting from 1981.

Using the address information, we extracted village, upazila (sub-district), district, and division identifiers and classified each observation as urban or rural. NGOs in Bangladesh operate with a wide range of goals, including poverty reduction, awareness and rights promotion for women, and microcredit or financial services for low-income households. The table below presents a random sample of 20 NGOs from our dataset to illustrate this diversity of activities.

**Table 1: Randomly selected NGOs and their area of work<sup>3</sup>**

Name of NGOs	Area of work
<b>Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC)</b>	Social development, including eliminating extreme poverty, microfinance programs, humanitarian crisis management, climate change programs, reduced gender inequality, urban development, education etc.
<b>Association for Social Advancement (ASA)</b>	Microfinance programs and multifaceted services like primary healthcare, education etc.
<b>Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF)</b>	Poverty reduction, microfinance, and assistance to socio-economically disadvantaged people
<b>PROSHIKA</b>	Support for income generating activities among men and women; literacy programs, free primary medical services
<b>Action for Social Development (ASD)</b>	Facilitation of the poor creating solidarity among themselves, building their capacity and bargaining power for realizing their rights and needs to improve the quality of life
<b>Adivashi Samaj Unnayan Sangstha</b>	Raising voice and protecting rights of marginalized aboriginal people of Bangladesh
<b>Nari Unnayan Sangstha</b>	Women-led organization working for communities, including distributing blankets and winter clothing, creating HIV awareness in the society etc.
<b>TMSS (Thengamara Mahila Sabuj Shongho)</b>	Women-led organization working for microfinance, health, human rights and social justice, climate change, disaster preparedness and environment, health, social enterprise etc.
<b>BURO Bangladesh</b>	Microfinance programs and improving water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and health
<b>Jagorani Chakra Foundation</b>	Free health support for poor women, shelter home for children born in brothel, microfinance program to reduce poverty etc.

<sup>2</sup> Bangladesh is a riverine country. *Chars* are shallow lands or shoals in the river that become visible when the water level decreases.

<b>Khalifa foundation</b>	Women's / human rights and empowerment, rural water supply and sanitation, disability and development, climate change and adaptation etc.
<b>Labour Resource Center</b>	Support, information and assistance to workers on labour related matters.
<b>Manab Kalyan Parishad (MKP)</b>	Women's and children's rights, human rights and good governance, sustainable agriculture, environmental conservation, and alternative legal practices
<b>Mary Somaj Kallyan Sangstha</b>	Women's empowerment, providing access to quality education, enhancing healthcare services, and promoting sustainable development
<b>Action for Rural Poor (ARP)</b>	Education and entrepreneurship to improve the quality of life of rural people
<b>Faith &amp; Hope Welfare Association</b>	Education, empowerment, and uplift of underprivileged communities, environmental stewardship, and sustainable development through community-driven initiatives and compassionate support systems.
<b>Family Planning Association of Bangladesh</b>	Campaigns for sexual health and reproductive rights through advocacy and services, especially for poor and vulnerable people, to improve individuals' quality of life.
<b>Gana Unnayan Kendra (GUK)</b>	Bringing positive and sustainable changes in disadvantaged and destitute people's lives by preventing early marriage and reducing physical and psychological violence.
<b>Mukti Foundation</b>	Justice and equity for women and poor people
<b>Rural Advancement Council (RAC)</b>	Education, health, WASH, rights and governance, humanitarian response and microfinance programs

Note: NGOs listed in the table were selected randomly from the NGO Affairs Bureau database; some of these NGOs have branches in many upazilas of Bangladesh.

The analysis is conducted at the upazila level, which is the second-lowest administrative unit in Bangladesh. The number of upazilas has increased over time, totaling 483 in 2010, 486 in 2015, and 492 in 2018. We generated maps showing NGO establishment and concentration in five-year intervals. Using the BBS 2014 upazila shapefile, we matched upazila names with those in the NGO dataset. Because some upazilas share the same name, we created a combined district–upazila key to ensure accurate matching. Dhaka City Corporation was excluded since our analysis focuses on rural areas.

Although the dataset includes only NGO headquarters addresses and does not capture branch offices, the headquarters location serves as a reliable indicator of NGO presence in an area. For the empirical analysis, we kept only rural upazilas to align with the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS), IFPRI's flagship panel dataset, described below. Matching was carried out using the list of upazilas from the 2018–19 BIHS. We also created three categories based on NGO registration year. Since the earliest registration year in the administrative data is 1981, we assume that NGOs formed in 1981 began then even though some may have been in operation a few years earlier.

The Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS) is the most comprehensive, nationally representative rural household panel survey in the country. The first round was conducted in 2011–12, the second in 2015, and the third in 2018–19. BIHS collects detailed data on four domains of the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) (Alkire et al. 2013). The WEAI comprises five domains: decisions about agricultural production, access to and decision-making power over productive resources, control over the use of income, leadership in the community, and time allocation. The primary adult man and woman were the respondents of the WEAI module.

The NGO dataset was then merged with BIHS dataset <sup>3</sup> to generate unique household identifiers. We analyzed selected modules from the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)—specifically WE4 (Community Leadership and Group Membership), WE5 (Decision-Making Power), and WE6 (Time Allocation)—for both male and female respondents in the 2018–19 round. The same steps were applied to the 2011–12 BIHS, after which the two rounds were appended to create a final dataset for examining the relationship between NGO establishment and group membership.

For the difference-in-differences analysis, we constructed a treatment variable at the upazila level based on the intensity of NGO presence. First, we calculated the total number of NGOs established in each upazila up to 2017, since BIHS 2018 is the last survey round from which we draw outcome variables. Using the total number of NGOs in upazila, we identified treatment upazilas as those above the 75th-percentile cutoff in the number of NGOs established during 1981–2017; all other upazilas were assigned to the control group. We repeated the analysis using 50th- and 90th-percentile cutoffs and found that the 90th-percentile classification shows a more pronounced effect. In this project note, we present the results based on the 75th-percentile cutoff.

A limitation of this approach is that some upazilas may have already had substantial NGO presence before 2010, as we use BIHS 2011 for our baseline outcomes, which could bias our estimates. To address this potential selection issue, we created an alternative treatment measure that captures cumulative NGO intensity, defined both by the number of NGOs and by the number of years they have been active in each upazila. Using this cumulative measure, we estimated fixed-effects models with BIHS 2011 outcomes to capture earlier impacts of NGO presence. All regressions control for women’s age, education, work location, and household expenditure quintile, the latter serving as a proxy for household wealth.

Difference-in-Differences (DiD) equation for the analysis:

$$Y_{itz} = \alpha + \lambda_t + \delta(Treatment_i \times Post_t) + \gamma_1 X_i + \gamma_2 Z_{it} + \mu_z + \varepsilon_{it}$$

where:

- $Y_{itz}$  = Outcome variable for individual  $i$  at time  $t$  in upazila  $z$
- $\lambda_t$  = Time fixed effects
- $\delta$  = Coefficient on the interaction term capturing the DiD effect
- $X_i$  = Vector of individual and household characteristics
- $\mu_z$  = Area (upazila) fixed effects
- $\varepsilon_{it}$  = Error term

### **Outcome variables:**

1. **Speak up in community meetings:** This outcome variable is a composite of any of the three variables that capture whether the respondent feels being comfortable about speaking up in public on: (1) infrastructure; (2) proper wages; and (3) misbehaviour of public officials. Speaking

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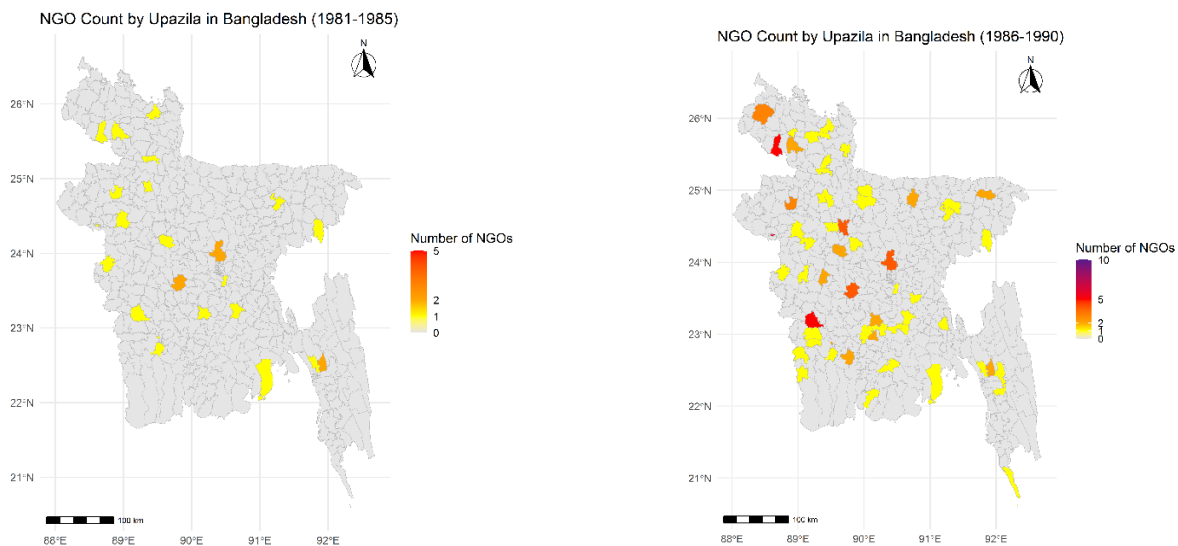
<sup>3</sup> In future work, we intend to categorize NGOs by sector based on their names and stated activities.

up on infrastructure indicates whether an individual actively participates in discussions or decisions regarding the construction or development of community infrastructure, such as small wells, roads, or water supplies. Speaking up on proper wages ascertains whether an individual actively voices concerns or takes action to ensure fair and timely payment of wages for public work or other similar programs. Speaking up to protest misbehaviour measures whether an individual actively speaks out or takes action to challenge or protest the misbehavior of authorities or elected officials.

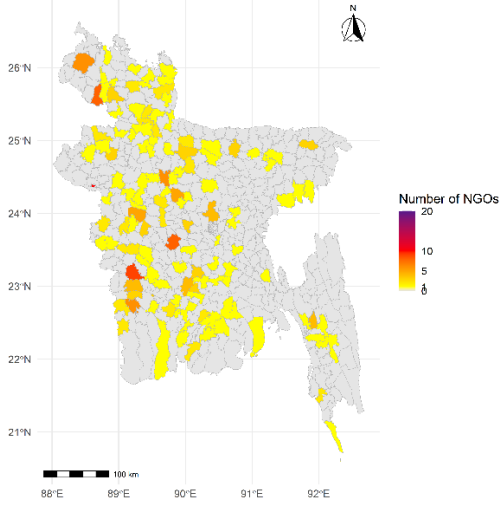
2. **Any group membership:** Measures whether an individual is a member of at least one type of group, including agricultural/livestock/fisheries groups, water users' groups, forest users' groups, credit or microfinance groups, mutual help or insurance groups, trade and business groups, civic or charitable groups, local government bodies, or religious groups.
3. **Satisfaction with decisions taken on personal and family issues:** "Personal issues" refers to health problems and measures an individual's satisfaction with the decisions made regarding the management or treatment of serious health problems, reflecting their perceived involvement or contentment with the process and outcomes. On the other hand, satisfaction with decisions taken on family planning measures the individual's satisfaction with decisions made regarding the use of family planning methods to space or limit births, reflecting their perceived involvement or contentment with the choices and outcomes.
4. **Work balance:** Measures whether an individual spends less than 10.5 hours per day on work-related activities, defined to include both productive and reproductive (caregiving) work.

### **Map of NGO Establishment in Upazilas Over Time**

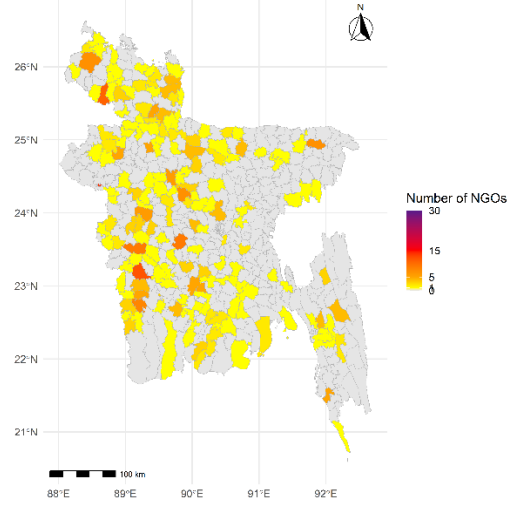
Figure 1 presents nine maps showing the distribution of NGOs across upazilas in five-year intervals from 1981 to 2025. A significant increase in the number of NGOs in upazilas is evident over time. The color-coded maps indicate the number of NGOs, with lighter colors representing fewer NGOs and darker colors representing a higher number of NGOs in an upazila. The counts are cumulative; for example, the number of NGOs in 1981–1985 is added to those in the 1986–1990 period.



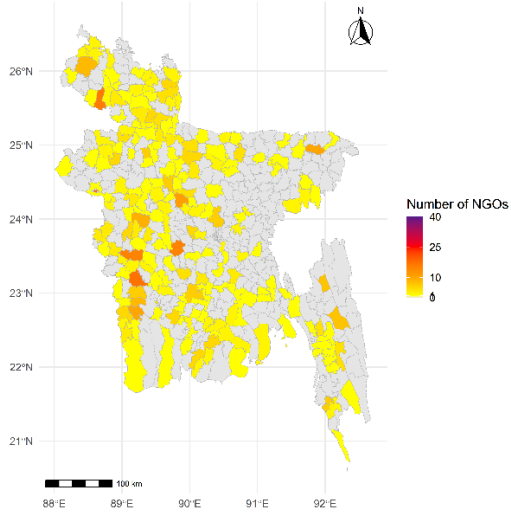
NGO Count by Upazila in Bangladesh (1991-1995)



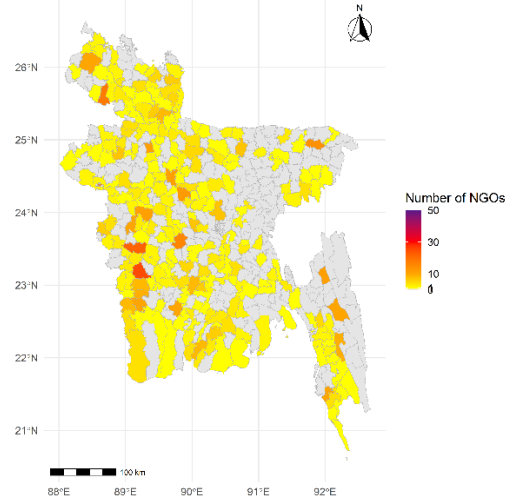
NGO Count by Upazila in Bangladesh (1996-2000)



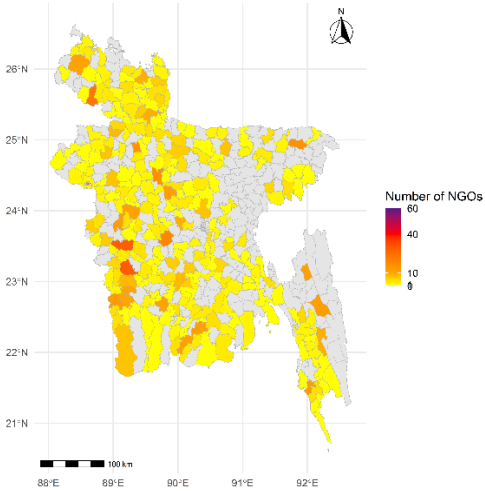
NGO Count by Upazila in Bangladesh (2001-2005)



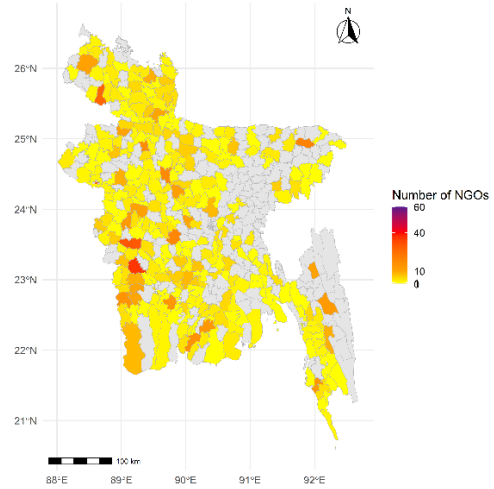
NGO Count by Upazila in Bangladesh (2006-2010)

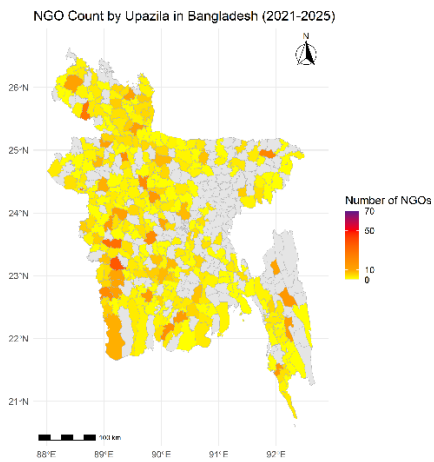


NGO Count by Upazila in Bangladesh (2011-2015)



NGO Count by Upazila in Bangladesh (2016-2020)



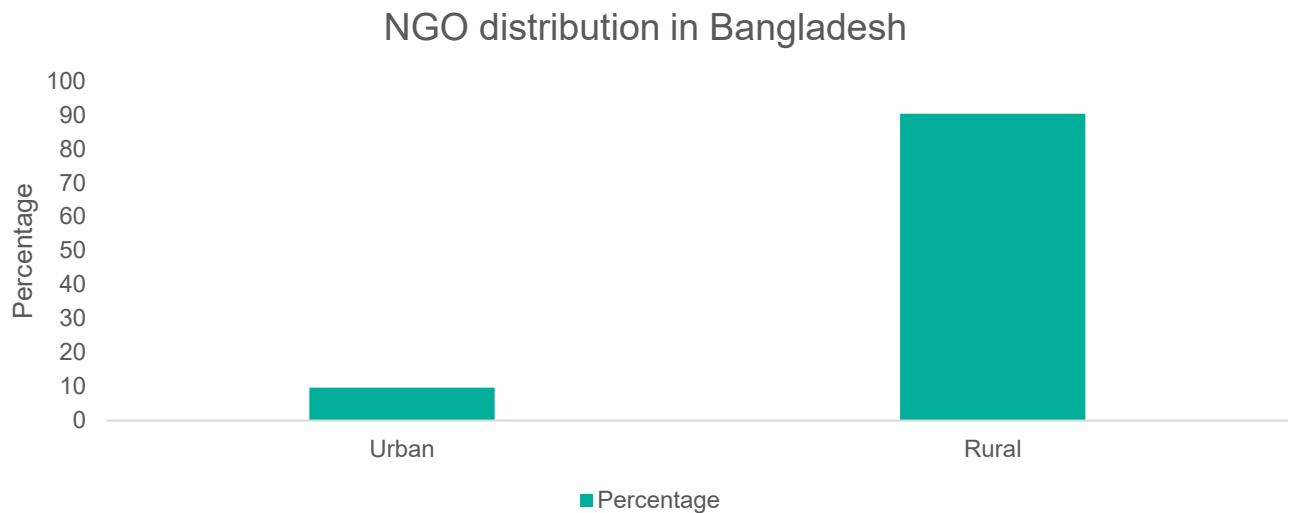


**Figure 1:** NGO presence by Upazila in Bangladesh

**Notes:** Number of NGOs in Dhaka city corporation were not included in the map because our analysis is on NGOs in rural areas of Bangladesh

## RESULTS

### *Descriptives of NGO dataset:*



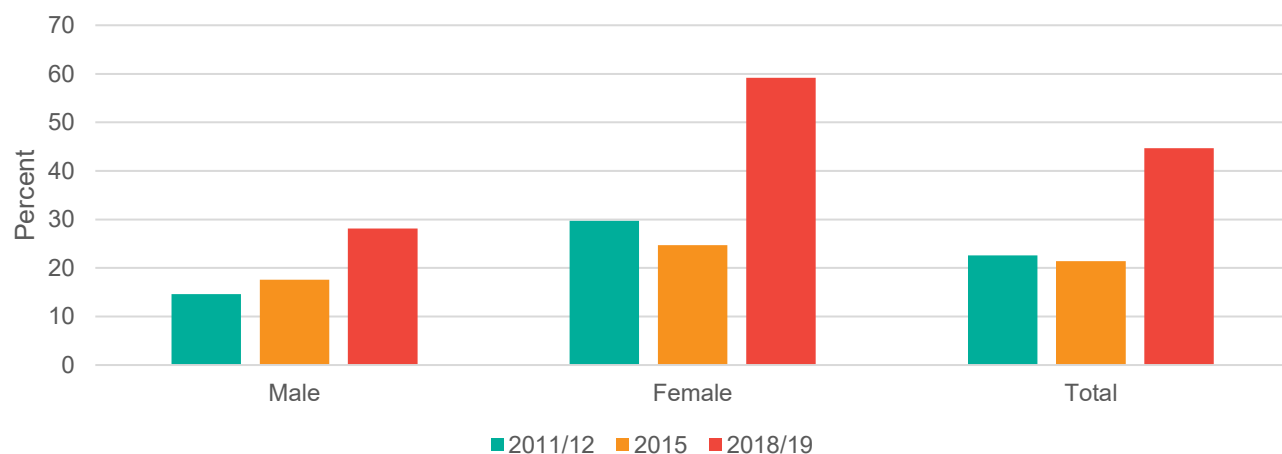
**Figure 2:** NGO presence by upazila in Bangladesh

Figure 2 depicts the distribution of NGOs in urban and rural areas in Bangladesh. The total number of NGOs established as of July 2025 was significantly higher in rural areas (90.31%) than urban areas (9.69%), reflecting the distribution of the Bangladeshi population.

### *Descriptive Statistics from BIHS*

We used selected indicators from three of the WEAI domains in the BIHS, including access to and decision-making power over productive resources, leadership in the community, and time allocation, as we expect that NGO's presence and their activities could affect these outcomes.

## Percent of men and women belonging to groups



**Figure 3:** Group membership in rural areas of Bangladesh

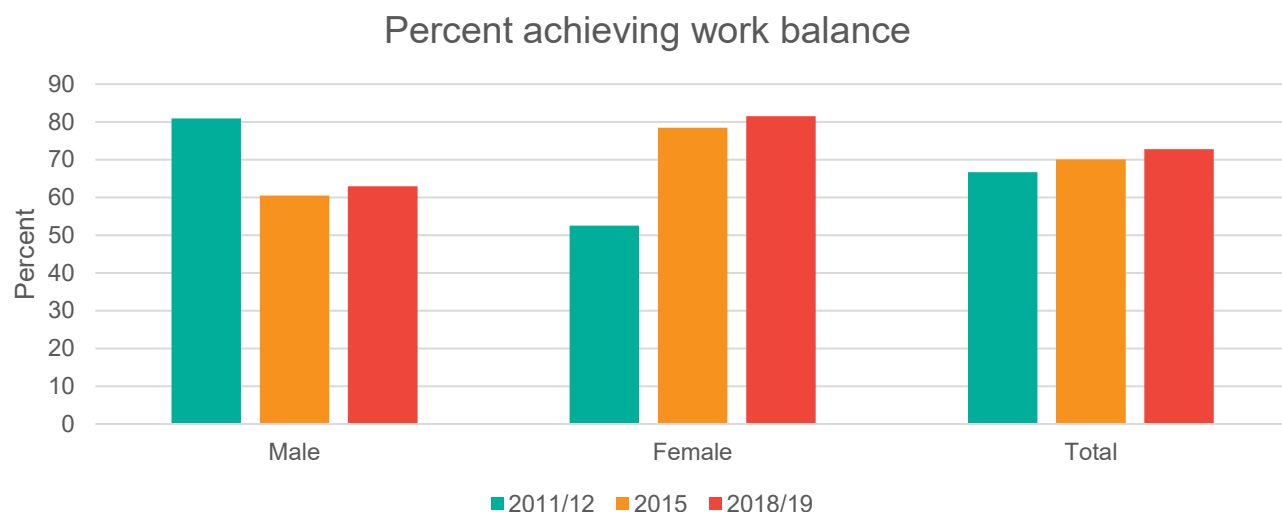
Figure 3 depicts group membership among men and women in rural areas of Bangladesh, defined as belonging to and being an active participant in at least one group. Men's group membership increased over the years, while women's group membership slightly decreased in 2015. The highest proportion of women belonging to at least one group was observed in 2018, reaching 59.2%.

**Table 2:** Type of group membership over the years in rural areas of Bangladesh

Type of group	2011/12		2015		2018/19	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Agriculture/ livestock/fisheries group	0.2	0	1.3	0.7	1.8	0.5
Water users group	0.2	0	2.3	2.6	3.6	3.7
Forest users group	0	0	0.1	0	0.2	0.3
Credit/ microfinance group	4.7	27.7	5.3	12	13.7	45
Mutual help or insurance group	0.4	0.1	0.5	0.2	0.7	0.3
Trade and business association group	2.7	0	2.8	0.1	1.9	0.3
Civic group	0.3	0	0.3	0	0.1	0.1
Local Government group	0.6	0.1	1.1	0.2	1.5	0.9
Religious group	5.6	2	6.6	12.7	11.4	24.1
Other women's group	0	0.2	0	0.7	0	0.6
Other (specify)	2	0.2	0.5	0.2	0.2	0

Source: Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (2011/12, 2015 and 2018/19)

Table 2 shows the types of groups to which rural Bangladeshi men and women belong over the three periods. Among the ten different groups, the highest proportion reports membership in credit/micro-finance groups, particularly among women members. Additionally, the percentages of men and women belonging to religious groups increase significantly over time.



**Source:** Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (2011/12, 2015 and 2018/19)

**Figure 4:** Work balance in rural areas of Bangladesh

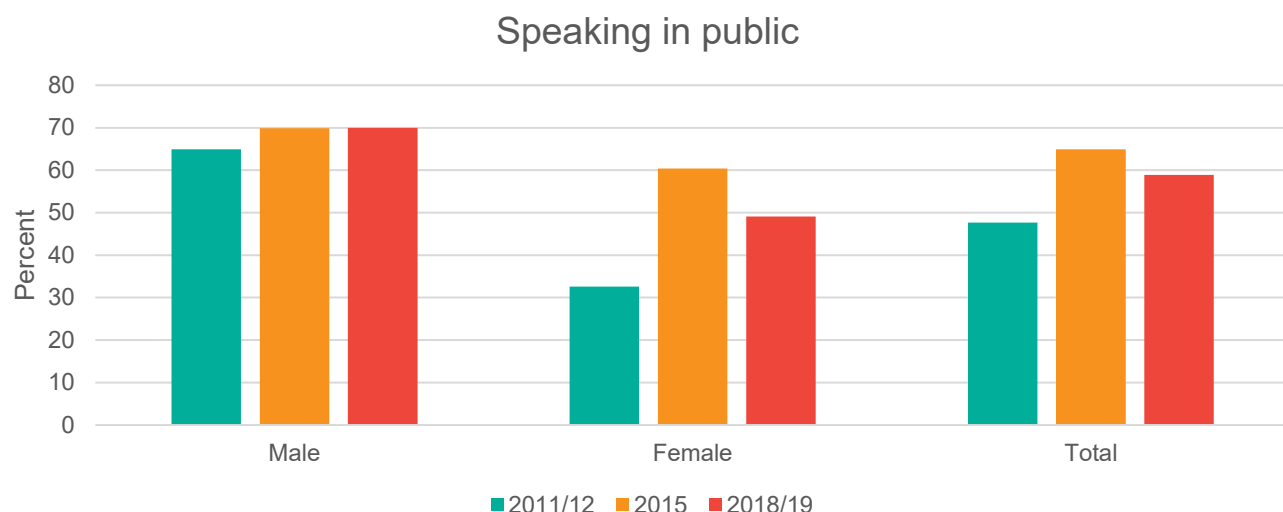
The work balance indicator of the WEAI defines a person as achieving work balance if he or she spends less than 10.5 hours per day on work related activities, including productive and reproductive (care) work. Figure 4 shows that the percentage of men achieving work balance decreased over the years, from 80.9% in 2011/12 to 63.0% in 2018/19, whereas the percentage of women achieving work balanced increased, from 52.5% in 2011/12 to 81.5% in 2018/19.

**Table 3:** Speaking up in public in rural areas of Bangladesh

	2011/12		2015		2018/19	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
<b>Speak up on infrastructure</b>	44.2	16.2	66.6	51.9	66.1	44.9
<b>Speak up to ensure proper wages</b>	58.1	26.3	64.2	51.2	59.5	44.2
<b>Speak up to protest misbehaviour of public officials</b>	47.8	25.6	62.6	54.5	62.5	46.0

**Source:** Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (2011/12, 2015 and 2018/19)

Table 3 shows that a higher proportion of men felt comfortable speaking up in public than women, whether regarding infrastructure, ensuring proper wages, or misbehavior of public officials.



**Source:** Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (2011/12, 2015 and 2018/19)

**Figure 4:** Speaking up in community meetings in rural areas, all topics

Figure 4 presents a composite measure combining three issues on which the individual feels comfortable speaking up in public: infrastructure, wages, and misbehavior of public officials. Men consistently felt more comfortable speaking up in public, with an increase observed over the years. In contrast, women’s degree of comfort about speaking in public declined sharply in 2019.

**Table 4:** Satisfaction with decision making in rural areas of Bangladesh

	2011/12		2015		2018/19	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
<b>Satisfied with decisions made on serious health problems</b>	54.3	65.9	78.3	81.9	85.3	88.4
<b>Satisfied with decisions made on whether to use family planning</b>	61.8	78.1	88	91.5	94	93.8

**Source:** Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (2011/12, 2015 and 2018/19)

Table 4 shows that women reported higher satisfaction with decisions made regarding serious health problems compared to men.

***Means of outcome variables: Treatment and control communities***

**Table 5: Control vs. Treatment Means in 2011**

Outcome Variables	Control Mean	Treatment Mean	Difference	Standard Error
Speak up on infrastructure	0.295	0.259	-0.036	0.015
Speak up to protest misbehavior of public officials	0.361	0.330	-0.030	0.016
Any group membership	0.218	0.260	0.043	0.014
Satisfaction on decision taken on health problems	0.615	0.675	0.060	0.017
Work balance	0.681	0.646	-0.035	0.017
Number of upazilas	138	27		
Number of individuals	5,347	1,057		

**Note:** Control and treatment means are calculated at the 75th percentile of the total NGO count. Reported control means are without upazila fixed effects. Control variables are age, education, work location (urban/rural) and expenditure quintile.

Before presenting the difference-in-differences (DID) results, we first report the difference in means for the key outcome variables in 2011. The results indicate that some variables were not balanced at baseline. For example, treatment upazilas show a 4.3-percentage-point higher level of group membership, while work–life balance indicators are 3.5 percentage points lower in treatment areas. These baseline differences must be kept in mind when interpreting the DID estimates. Ideally, DID analysis requires evidence of parallel trends in the outcome variables prior to treatment. However, due to data limitations—specifically the absence of BIHS rounds before 2011—we cannot empirically verify pre-2011 parallel trends.

### **Regression results:**

**Table 6: Impact of NGO presence on speaking up on Infrastructure**

Variable	Total	Men	Women
Post × Treat	0.054	0.069	0.124*
Standard Error	0.057	0.074	0.074
Control Mean	0.295	0.463	0.154
Upazila FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Household Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.254	0.273	0.330
N	7,914	5,504	2,400

Note: Cluster-robust standard errors (clustered at the upazila level) are reported in parentheses. Reported control means are without upazila fixed effects. Control variables are age, education, work location (urban/rural) and expenditure quintile.  
 \* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01

Table 6 shows that presence of NGOs has increased the likelihood that women speak up in public about infrastructure, although this coefficient is imprecisely estimated. Compared to a control mean of 15.4%, in the treatment areas the likelihood of speaking up in public about infrastructure has increased by 12.4 percentage points.

**Table 7: Impact of NGO presence on speaking up on proper wages**

Variable	Total	Men	Women
Post × Treat	-0.003	0.018	-0.015
Standard Error	0.066	0.074	0.109
Control Mean	0.401	0.595	0.240
Upazila FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Household Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.185	0.213	0.337
N	7825	5416	2400

Note: Cluster-robust standard errors (clustered at the upazila level) are reported in parentheses. Reported control means are without upazila fixed effects. Control variables are age, education, work location (urban/rural) and expenditure quintile.  
 \* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01

Table 7 shows that the presence of NGOs does not have any impact on speaking up in public to ensure proper wages.

**Table 8: Impact of NGO presence on speaking up to protest misbehavior**

Variable	Total	Men	Women
Post × Treat	0.056	0.049	0.187**
Standard Error	0.054	0.067	0.080
Control Mean	0.361	0.495	0.249
Upazila FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Household Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.193	0.204	0.327
N	7,826	5,416	2,400

Note: Cluster-robust standard errors (clustered at the upazila level) are reported in parentheses. Reported control means are without upazila fixed effects. Control variables are age, education, work location (urban/rural) and expenditure quintile.  
 \* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01.

Similarly, we see in table 8 that the likelihood of a woman speaking up to protest misbehavior of public officials has increased by 18.7 percentage points compared to the control mean of 24.9%

**Table 9:** Impact of NGO presence on membership in any group

Variable	Total	Men	Women
<b>Post × Treat</b>	-0.029	-0.012	-0.062
<b>Standard Error</b>	0.053	0.055	0.085
<b>Control Mean</b>	0.218	0.150	0.274
<b>Upazila FE</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Household Controls</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.112	0.134	0.275
<b>N</b>	7,918	5,505	2,403

Note: Cluster-robust standard errors (clustered at the upazila level) are reported in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . Reported control means are without upazila fixed effects. Control variables are age, education, work location (urban/rural) and expenditure quintile.

We do not observe any significant impact on group membership. One possible explanation is that treatment areas already had high levels of group membership in 2011, before the intervention period. Additionally, women's group membership declined nationally between 2015 and 2018, which may have further limited the potential for detectable changes.

**Table 10:** Impact of NGO presence on satisfaction with decisions taken on serious health problems

Variable	Total	Men	Women
<b>Post × Treat</b>	-0.079	-0.118*	-0.064
<b>Standard Error</b>	0.051	0.064	0.092
<b>Control Mean</b>	0.615	0.545	0.673
<b>Upazila FE</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Household Controls</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.207	0.244	0.345
<b>N</b>	7,301	5,150	2,138

Note: Cluster-robust standard errors (clustered at the upazila level) are reported in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

NGO presence was associated with a decrease in men's satisfaction with decisions regarding health problems. One possible explanation is that greater exposure to NGOs raises individuals' awareness of their rights, available services, and standards of care. As people become more informed, their expectations for the quality of health services increase. Therefore, even when NGOs continue to expand in an area, satisfaction levels may appear lower or show little improvement because the benchmark for what constitutes "adequate" care has shifted upward.

**Table 11: Impact of NGO presence on work balance**

Variable	Total	Men	Women
Post × Treat	0.098**	0.140***	0.033
Standard Error	0.042	0.048	0.071
Control Mean	0.681	0.834	0.528
Upazila FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Household Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.082	0.138	0.189
N	7,630	5,508	2,109

Note: Cluster-robust standard errors (clustered at the upazila level) are reported in parentheses.

\* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01. Control variables are age, education, work location (urban/rural) and expenditure quintile.

NGO presence was associated with an improvement in work-life balance for the overall population, which is driven by the significant and positive impact for men.

To address the issue of potential selection bias of treatment, as mentioned in the earlier section, we run the following fixed effects regression on the treatment variable of cumulative intensity of NGO presence. Cumulative intensity of NGOs is defined as the total of number of NGOs weighted by the number of years since 2010, calculated as the sum of (NGO count × (year – 2010)). We then merged with BIHS 2011 dataset and investigate the impact of NGOs on the outcome. We run the following fixed effect regression on 2011 outcome:

$$Y_{\{iud\}} = \beta Z_{\{ud\}} + \gamma X'_{\{iud\}} + \alpha_d + \varepsilon_{\{iud\}}$$

$Y_{\{iud\}}$ : Outcome variable for individual/household i in upazila u and district d.

$Z_{\{ud\}}$ : Cumulative NGO intensity variable.

$X_{\{iud\}}$ : Vector of control variables.

$\alpha_d$ : District fixed effect.

$\varepsilon_{\{iud\}}$ : Error term, clustered at the upazila level.

**Table 12: Impact of cumulative intensity of NGOs on outcome variables**

Variable	Speak-infrastructure			Speak-wage			Speak-Misbehavior		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Cumulative intensity	0.0005*	0.0008*	0.0004	0.0005*	0.0007	0.0007*	0.0004*	0.0008*	0.0001
Standard Error	0.0002	0.0004	0.0003	0.0002	0.0003	0.0003	0.0002	0.0003	0.0003

<b>Control Mean</b>	0.2883	0.4636	0.1422	0.3993	0.5962	0.2351	0.3543	0.4943	0.2377
<b>Upazila FE</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Household Controls</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.2183	0.3519	0.2274	0.2364	0.3228	0.3235	0.1921	0.2652	0.2901
<b>N</b>	4228	2416	1767	4228	2461	1767	4228	2461	1767

Note: Cluster-robust standard errors (clustered at the upazila level) are reported in parentheses.  
 \* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01. Control variables are age, education, work location (urban/rural) and expenditure quintile.

**Table 23: Impact of cumulative intensity of NGOs on outcome variables**

Variable	Group membership			Satisfaction with decision of health problems			Work balance		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
<b>Cumulative intensity</b>	0.0004***	0.0001	0.0005	0.0004***	0.0004	0.0004	-0.0005	-0.0001	-0.0008
<b>Standard Error</b>	0.0001	0.0002	0.0004	0.0001	0.0003	0.0003	0.0003	0.0003	0.0005
<b>Control Mean</b>	0.2231	0.1490	0.2850	0.2231	0.5519	0.6692	0.6756	0.8137	0.5369
<b>Upazila FE</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Household Controls</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.0841	0.1199	0.1834	0.0841	0.2943	0.3894	0.0863	0.1702	0.1101
<b>N</b>	4228	2461	1767	4228	2155	1529	3969	2464	1505

Note: Cluster-robust standard errors (clustered at the upazila level) are reported in parentheses.  
 \* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01. Control variables are age, education, work location (urban/rural) and expenditure quintile.

In this specification, the explanatory variable captures the cumulative intensity of NGO presence. The coefficient can be interpreted as follows: in a given upazila, an increase of one additional NGO for one year is associated with a 0.05-percentage-point increase in speaking up about infrastructure issues as well as speaking up in public to ensure proper wage and a 0.04-percentage-point increase in protesting misbehavior. Likewise, group membership rises by 0.04 percentage points from a control mean of 22.3 percent when one more NGO operates in the area for an additional year. An increase of one additional NGO for one year is also associated with a 0.08 percentage-point increase in men's speaking power for infrastructure as well as speaking up in public to protest misbehavior. We did not find any effect on women in terms of speaking up in public, group membership, satisfaction with decision on health problems or work balance except speaking up in public to ensure proper wages.

## Discussion

This research brings together a unique national administrative dataset on NGO establishment with three rounds of the BIHS panel survey to examine whether NGO presence shapes women's empowerment and voice in rural Bangladesh. By digitizing and geo-referencing nearly 2,700 NGO registrations since 1981, this study provides one of the first upazila-level mappings of NGO expansion over four decades. The descriptive analysis shows a steep rise in NGO formation, particularly in rural areas, where more than 90% of NGOs are headquartered. This expansion coincides with the growth of microfinance, rights-based programming, and service delivery initiatives, suggesting substantial opportunities for NGOs to influence gender norms, community engagement, and local leadership.

The econometric findings indicate that NGO presence, especially in areas with high growth in NGO activity, is associated with increases in women's voice. Women in treatment upazilas were significantly more likely to speak up on infrastructure and protest misbehavior, with effect sizes of 12 to 19 percentage points relative to pre-intervention means. These results are consistent with the notion that NGO programs—through awareness campaigns, community meetings, and local training—may create safer and more socially acceptable spaces for women to express concerns in public settings.

However, the study finds no significant impact on group membership, likely because treatment areas already had higher membership rates in 2011 and because national female group membership fell between 2015 and 2018. Some outcomes, such as satisfaction with decisions on health problems, show a decline among men, possibly reflecting increased expectations and awareness linked to NGO activity. Work-life balance improves significantly overall, particularly for men, and becomes significant for women at higher treatment intensity thresholds.

The fixed-effects analysis using the cumulative intensity of NGOs reinforces these findings. Even a single additional NGO active for one year is associated with small but meaningful improvements in speaking up and group membership, suggesting that long-term presence matters, not only the count of NGOs. Nevertheless, the current dataset captures only headquarters locations, not branch offices, which likely underestimates the true reach of NGO operations. Expanding the dataset to include branch-level coverage and program-specific footprints would substantially strengthen identification.

Looking ahead, refining the treatment measure by incorporating NGO sector classification (e.g., microfinance, health, rights advocacy), budget sizes, and program intensity will help isolate which types of NGOs drive improvements in women's empowerment. We also intend to further refine the results by including the location of the NGO branches and their year of establishment.

From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the importance of NGOs as complementary institutions that can expand women's voice and agency in rural communities. Government actors and development partners may benefit from deeper collaborations with NGOs—particularly in local governance, community participation, and rights awareness to leverage the organizational flexibility and local presence of NGOs. Strengthening reporting requirements on NGO activities, expanding the NGO Affairs Bureau's digital registry, and integrating NGO footprint data with household surveys would enable more systematic monitoring of gender impacts over time.

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## ENDNOTES

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