

Empowering Afghan Women in Rural Communities: The Impact of NGOs on Capacity Building and Gender Inclusion

By

Najeebullah

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Thesis Title: Empowering Afghan Women in Rural Communities: The Impact of NGOs on Capacity Building and Gender Inclusion

Submitted by: Najeebullah

Registration #: 08 MPhil/GPP/S22

Master of Philosophy
Degree name in full

Governance & Public Policy
Name of Discipline

Dr. Shahid Habib
Name of Research Supervisor

Signature of Research Supervisor

Prof. Dr. Muhammad Riaz Shad
Name of Dean (FSS)

Signature of Dean (FSS)

Brig Shahzad Munir
Name of Director General

Signature of Director General

Date

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I Najeebullah

Son of Abdul Malik

Registration # 08 MPhil/GPP/S22

Discipline Governance & Public Policy

Candidate of **Master of Philosophy** at the National University of Modern Languages do hereby declare that the thesis **Empowering Afghan Women in Rural Communities: The Impact of NGOs on Capacity Building and Gender Inclusion** submitted by me in partial fulfillment of MPhil degree, is my original work, and has not been submitted or published earlier. I also solemnly declare that it shall not, in future, be submitted by me for obtaining any other degree from this or any other university or institution.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the Impact of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) on women's empowerment in rural Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, with an emphasis on capacity building and gender inclusion activities. Using feminist theory, capability approach, and social capital theory as theoretical lenses, the research examines the impact of NGO interventions on socioeconomic opportunity, education, and social inclusion of women. Based on data from twenty women beneficiaries and NGO staff through individual interviews along with two focus group discussions of ten participants each, the study uses a qualitative case study approach, supported through document analysis and field observations. The results show that although NGOs are essential in supporting empowerment of women through vocational training, educational programs, and social inclusion efforts are constrained by short project life cycles, lack of follow up support, and cultural pushback. The study identifies some of the social economic problems faced by the rural women and they are identified to include unemployable and limited access to education leading to a cycle of poverty and dependence. These initiatives, however, are hobbled by high repayment rates leading to inadequate long-term market access, making skills training and economic empowerment programs important catalysts of change. The research confirms that development efforts are most effective when they respect and engage local culture and religion and recruit male allies and community leaders. The study highlights that the sustainability of women's empowerment is only possible by adopting integrative approaches targeting the combined interplay of structural and cultural barriers, especially the cultural sensitivity of program planning and implementation. Thus, these findings also have important implications for policy development, program design, and future research on women empowerment initiatives within conservative rural settings. The study suggests the need for longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of the program and stresses the importance of technology-enabled interventions that can help surmount geographical and cultural hurdles in rural Afghanistan.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, Rural development, NGO interventions, Capacity building, Gender inclusion, Rural communities

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

1.1.1 Overview of Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers

Historically, Afghan women have had to maneuver through a challenging environment of socio-cultural and economic impediments that have pronouncedly obstructed their progress and involvement in different aspects of society. Afghan society is deeply grounded in traditional patriarchal norms that enforce strict gender roles Wardak, M. H. (2025). thereby confining women to their roles in the domestic household and often preventing them from pursuing education, careers, and a larger role in public life. Societal stigma also reinforces these cultural expectations and discourages women from obtaining higher education or pursuing income-generating activities outside the home (Asadi, M. H., & Farzanegan, M. R. 2024).

Because of their economy, Afghan women are often disadvantaged in terms of employment opportunities compared to their male peers. Women, working in subsistence agriculture, traditional crafts and informal trade sectors as a group, earn low incomes and are highly susceptible to market forces and external economic shocks (Afshar et al 2025). Access to financial resources, property rights, and training in entrepreneurship, in particular, contributes to the economic vulnerabilities of rural women (Mazloun & Sail 2025).

Afghan women's education has been particularly troubling. Urban regions vary greatly, but rural areas are invariably under-analyzed, and underserved, despite significant geographical, security, and cultural impediments to learning, particularly for women (Barfield, 2010). With few schools and lack of trained women teachers, this further solidifies cycles of poverty and dependency with a low enrolment and a high drop-out rate (UN Women, 2020).

Not only are women in Afghanistan excluded from many aspects of life, with lack of mobility, limited presence in political and community decisions, and lack of access to health care and legal services, but socially they deal with many barriers as well. Not only do these barriers hinder individual potential, but they also stifle wider social progress by limiting half of society (UN Women, 2024). These socio-cultural and economic challenges are intertwined and cumulate to form a systemic environment of inequality within which Afghan women struggle to attain lasting empowerment and social inclusion.

1.1.2 Impact of the Taliban Regime and Its Resurgence on Women's Rights

In term of women's rights in Afghanistan, the Taliban's rule has had a major and often harmful impact, both when the militants first held power from 1996 to 2001 and since their return in 2021. Women were subject to restrictions under the Taliban regime that limited their freedoms and access to important services. Girls' schools closed down, women were forbidden to work in just about every field, and women's economic and social lives were effectively extinguished (UN Women, 2024). Since August 2021, when the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, several of these policies have been reinstated, undoing two decades of progress. These trends consist of the shutting down of girls' secondary schools and universities, the banning of female teachers in educational institutions, and the imposition of strict dress diversity that seriously restricts women's freedom of movement and presence in out in the open locations (Amnesty International, 2022). These actions have not only restricted educational and career pathways, but they have perpetuated the perception of women as dependent upon, and obedient to, their male peers.

The Taliban's policies have severely curtailed women's ability to work. International NGOs (INGOs) and local NGOs, which once offered jobs and vocational training for all women, are now struggling to operate, causing programs to spike (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This has contributed to a growing economic dependency on women that renders them increasingly susceptible to poverty and exploitation.

The spike has further intensified sexual violence and coercion against women, who have little in terms of legal recourse or protective institutions to turn to. Forced marriages, domestic violence, and harassment have also increased, exacerbating gender inequalities and compromising the safety and wellbeing of women (Kaul et al., 2024). The measures imposing strict gender segregation in public venues and obligatory compliance with stringent Islamic behavioral codes have limited women's autonomy and mobility, creating an atmosphere of fear and oppression (UN Women, 2023). The impact of the Taliban's resurgence is especially acute in rural areas like Nangarhar province. Support from local NGOs provides women in these areas with education, healthcare, and economic empowerment programs. However, the Taliban's policies such as the December 2022 ban on women working in NGOs have drastically curtailed these services, cutting off access to vital support systems (Human Rights Watch, 2024). This marginalization threatens to roll back the progress made in women's empowerment and capacity building, leaving rural women more vulnerable than before.

In general, the resurgence of the Taliban has not only reversed decades of gains in women's rights and empowerment; it has also created and exacerbated new barriers that hinder

the socio-economic and cultural development of Afghan women. Tackling these problems will need continued hold by regional and global actors to push women's rights and deal with strategies that can undermine the suffocating policies of the Taliban regime.

1.1.3 Role of NGOs in Afghanistan

NGOs have also played a key role throughout Afghanistan's socio-economic landscape in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality. These Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can be divided generally into two types: International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and Local Non-Governmental Organizations (LNGOs).

International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs): INGOs work globally and have high capacity in terms of resources, expertise, and best practices from various countries to Afghanistan. INGOs like CARE International, Save the Children and UN Women have played key roles in running large-scale initiatives with a focus on education, healthcare, economic empowerment as well as advocacy around women's rights (UN Women 2024, February). These organizations are cognizant to work with local partners to ensure that the initiatives tie into the Afghan context (UN Women 2023, September).

Local Non-Governmental Organizations (LNGOs) like the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) and the Afghan Women's Artisanal and Rural Support Association (AWARSA), are stalwarts within Afghan communities and understand local dynamics, cultural nuances, and context appropriate intervention strategies. And work mobilizing at the local level, offering support that is specific to the challenges facing women in a given area, as is the case in Nangarhar province (UN Women 2023). LNGOs are actively involved in capacity building, by organizing training programs aimed at improving the skills of women to help them engage in economic activities (UN Women 2024).

The delivery of programs between INGOs and LNGOs is essential in the same aspect. INGOs bring funding and technical expertise, but LNGOs help ensure that the interventions are contextually appropriate and resonate with the population (UN Women 2023). This interdependent connection amplifies the overall effect of NGO efforts on women's empowerment in Afghanistan.

1.1.4 Overview of NGO Initiatives Aimed at Women's Empowerment

Afghan NGO initiatives have included a wide range of programs to address the multifaceted barriers faced by women. These initiatives generally fall into the category of education, economic empowerment, healthcare, advocacy, and policy reform.

Education: education is a basic need in empowering women, and many NGOs depend on programs for it. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as Save the

Children and UNICEF have initiated projects to help girls gain access to primary and secondary schools, especially in underserved rural areas with limited schools (UNICEF Afghanistan, 2024). These initiatives, which involve the building of schools, the distribution of scholarships, and the training of female teachers, are creating an environment conducive to female education (UNICEF 2024, February 23).

Economics and Income Empowerment: The programs target women to improve their financial independence and economic participation. CARE International and AWARSA provide women with skills in areas such as handcraft and tailoring, as well as small scale entrepreneurship, through vocational training programs (Husain & Suwannarat, 2024). Microfinance programs also create avenues for women to obtain credit and basic income through lending products (World Bank, 2024 EMERGE microfinance program). These initiatives not only enhance women's economic standing but also play a role in the broader economic progress of their communities.

Healthcare: Access to healthcare is a third critical area addressed by NGOs. Some organizations, e.g., Médecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) and International Rescue Committee (IRC) are providing basic health services, maternal and childcare, mental health, nutritional services, etc. (Human Rights Watch, 2023) This support improves access to healthcare and reduces health-related barriers that disproportionately affect women, allowing them to be healthy and participate in other empowerment initiatives.

Advocacy and Policy Reform: indicates that advocacy by NGOs is to change policy and to accommodate favorable policy and legal environment conducive to women's rights. Gender-based violence campaign work, legal discrimination advocacy, and promotion of gender equality awareness work done by LINGOs like AWN (UN Women 2023). They cooperate with government institutions to lobby for policy changes that uphold women's rights and their legal protection (Women for Afghan Women. (n.d.)). Moreover, NGOs also play a crucial role in providing legal aid and support services to women who are victims of discrimination or abuse, enabling them to claim their rights and seek justice.

Capacity Building and Leadership Development: Many NGOs, beyond providing immediate assistance, work towards long-term capacity-building and leadership development among women. Leadership skills development programs, which promote political participation and women's involvement in decision-making processes, are necessary for long-term empowerment (UN Women 2024, May). As they invest in women leaders, NGOs play a part in building a more just and equitable world. One in which women's voices shape policies and women serve as agents of change for their communities.

In conclusion, the work done by NGOs in Afghanistan has been wide-ranging, from establishing educational institutions to social and economic programs targeted specifically at women. They are essential to overcoming the structural barriers women face and creating a culture where gender diversity is a priority. Together, the long-term partnership between INGOs and LNGOs and their culturally appropriate community based interventions have played a major role in the rising status of women in Afghan society.

1.1.5 Focus on Rural Communities

Unique Challenges Faced by Rural Women specifically in the Eastern Region Because of the conservative nature of the society, Women in rural parts of Afghanistan, such as Nangarhar province, face a unique set of sociocultural, economic, and infrastructural challenges that not only hinder their empowerment and even participation in the development of society. The eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar is largely agrarian, with deeply entrenched traditionalism and few basic services contributing to the extreme vulnerability of its women (Salam Watandar 2024).

Socio-Cultural Barriers: Women's roles are limited to the domestic sphere in the deeply patriarchal and conservative province of Nangarhar, restricting their mobility and decision making power both within the household and within the community at large (Ahmad, 2015). Such cultural norms discourage women from pursuing education and participating in economic activities beyond their homes, which impedes gender equality (Mohammadi, 2018). Moreover, women's autonomy and education are limited with early and forced marriages being a common phenomenon (UNICEF, 2020).

Economic Challenges: Women's financial independence is heavily constrained by the economic situation in Nangarhar. Women mainly engage in subsistence farming, traditional crafts, and informal labor, which provide low income and no job security (UNDP/Reuters 2024). Lack of access to financial services (such as credit and banking) limits women's entrepreneurial investment or expansion of activities (World Bank (2024) Additionally, with a limited number of vocational training programs available, there is a chronic under-development of marketable skills needed for economic empowerment (Arif et al. 2023).

Access to education: In rural Nangarhar, poor infrastructure, a lack of qualified female teachers and insecurity that limits safe access to schools significantly restrict the educational opportunities for women (IWPR (2023). These symptoms reflect structural hurdles to sustained interaction with or access to education, which contribute to recursive loops of illiteracy and dependency (UNESCO 2024). No education meant that fewer and fewer women emerged into

socio-economic activities, with gender inequalities becoming intergenerational entrenched (Human Rights Watch 2022).

Healthcare services: Healthcare services in rural Nangarhar are scarce, with women facing additional barriers in accessing maternal and child health services, reproductive services, and general health education. The lack of health facilities and cultural stigmas surrounding female health care providers impede women from seeking necessary medical attention, which in turn limits their health and ability to participate in empowerment programs (AAN 2025, March 26)

Threats of violence: Nangarhar is a restive province, which only exacerbates the vulnerabilities of rural women. As has been shown by the persistent threats of violence, including gender based violence, that lead women to avoid participating in public life or engaging with NGOs and other organizations in fear of violence (Amnesty International, 2022). Development NGOs struggle to maintain presence and support in these areas, due to the operational challenges imposed by such insecurity, this hampers the implementation and sustainability of development programs focused on women's empowerment (AAN 2025).

1.1.6 Importance of Capacity Building and Gender Inclusion in these Settings

Enhancing the capacity of women and ensuring their inclusion in various aspects of life are particularly important to empower women in Nangarhar. Additionally, such approaches not only tackle the immediate challenges faced by women but also play an essential role in the broader socio-economic development and gender equity of the community (UN News 2024).

Strengthening the skills, knowledge, and abilities of rural women is a key element to allow for their economic and social empowerment. Examples of capacity building interventions include vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, and leadership development to provide women with the skills needed for active participation within both the economy and community decision-making processes (Hemat, M. W., & Rahman, S. 2023) Capacity building reduces their economic dependency and promotes a more equal distribution of resources within the households and communities by improving women's employability and financial independence (Ahmad, 2015).

Gender inclusion is essential because it guarantees that women do not merely become beneficiaries of development programs but also their active and equal counterparts; actively involved with plans, execution, and reviews of the initiatives. While there is no single definition of 'feminist', most agree on the importance of diversity in the movement; as ecofeminist Karen Warren puts it, 'Any account of justice must acknowledge difference and respect it as a legitimate ground for political action' (UN Women, 2020). Gender inclusiveness also requires

breaking down the structural socio-cultural norms that promote gender discrimination, enabling a more conducive social environment for empowering women (Mohammadi, 2018).

Since this method gradually encourages aware and supportive men, it enhances social cohesion and community development. Empowered women are more likely to assume leadership roles within communities and advocate for gender-sensitive policies, and in both cases contribute to the general welfare of the community. This underlying principle advances individual women but, in the broader sense also uplift collective advancement and resilience for rural settings such as Nangarhar (Wani, N. U. H., Majidi, B. S., Sidana, N., & Goel, R. 2024).

Empowerment is sustainable if women are not only supported over time but also given the resources they need to maintain and expand their socio-economic activities. The concept of continuous empowerment through education and training resonates with the idea of capacity building, which focuses on providing ongoing opportunities for skill acquisition and personal growth. This approach enables women to adapt to evolving economic landscapes and take advantage of new opportunities (Qureshi et al 2025). On the other hand, gender inclusion causes empowerment efforts to be woven into the very fabric of community life, making them most resilient to external shocks and political instability (UN Women, 2020).

Well informed women are also far more likely to become aware of gender based violence and discrimination, and how to combat them. For example, capacity building initiatives often have legal rights, self-defense, and advocacy components, which enable women to seek protection and justice against abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Community programs that are inclusive of both genders cultivate an environment of respect and equality, which in turn minimizes the risks of violence, establishing safer spaces for women (Spangaro et al., 2021).

And from my side, to help different types of challenges for rural women of Nangarhar through the capacity building and gender inclusion approach is the tool for women's empowerment and the whole region's sustainable development. These methods help ease the short term socio cultural and economic challenges, while also establishing the foundation for long lasting gender equality and community resiliency. NGOs that manage to execute multi-faceted capacity building and gender inclusion processes will be making a significant difference in rural communities by giving women skills, self-confidence, and opportunities to become socio economically empowered.

1.2 Problem Statement

Women in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province struggle with interconnected socio-economical and geographical components that hinder their empowerment and prevent them from contributing to society's development. The uneven net of development interventions further aggravates these challenges, as such interventions mainly target only urban centers and not the unique circumstances and needs of rural women. Such inequity not only retains gender inequities in marginalized areas but also compromises their potential for long-term socio-economic advancement.

The major problem faced by rural Afghan women is the mushrooming of unregulated jobs. A large number of women in Nangarhar province are restricted to subsistence farming, traditional crafts or areas of informal labor, which offer limited income and few jobs (Wardak, 2025). Lack of regulated employment frameworks compound economic vulnerability, with women having little access to stable and decent work. Moreover, they have significantly limited access to education and training, which improves their ability to gain marketable skills and pursue economic independence (Bukhari, 2023). Rural education is limited, and the educational quality is often very low because of unqualified and lack of female teachers and bad infrastructure. This lack of education keeps women impoverished and dependent on traditional economic roles, perpetuating cycles of poverty.

Geographic disparities are another key element of the challenge. Historically development interventions in Afghanistan have been biased towards urban areas due to the presence of infrastructure and resources (Tanveer, 2024). Such an urban-centric approach especially neglects and marginalizes the rural communities in provinces like Nangarhar. This urban-centric approach overlooks the unique socio cultural and economic realities of rural areas, where women encounter specific barriers such as societal resistance to female education and limited access to healthcare and legal services (Tanveer, 2024). Consequently, rural women in Nangarhar face increased levels of gender-based discrimination and have less chance of socio-economic mobility than their urban siblings.

As countless NGOs (international (INGOs) and local (LNGOs)) have programs targeting women in Afghanistan, the results of such interventions seem unconvincing. One of the main criticisms is that most of the NGO projects are short term and not intended to generate long term effects (Amnesty International, 2023). While many of these initiatives succeed to various degrees, they often fail to provide the sustained attention and resources needed to create real, long lasting change in women's lives. Furthermore, the implementation and maintenance

of NGO activities are often disrupted by the unrest of the security situation and political instability in areas such as Nangarhar, strongly undermining the sustainability of empowerment programs (Amnesty International, 2023). As a result, the potential benefits of capacity building and gender inclusion initiatives are not completely realized, and rural women in Nangarhar are left without the broad vision required for ongoing support in their transitions towards economic and social empowerment.

Yet, despite their central role in efforts to promote women's empowerment in the country, there is a scarcity of systematic research evaluating their impact, especially in rural settings such as Nangarhar. Previous research tends to either concentrate on urban settings or is broad where it neglects the details and contextual determinants of the challenges that govern the success of NGO interventions in rural settings. This gap makes it difficult to check how NGOs can better adjust their program to the needs of rural women and prevents the use of more effective and sustainable strategies for empowerment.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The current study attempts to address the conceptual gap by investigating the functionality and role of the NGOs in the empowerment and integration of women in the rural community of Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. This will be researched to elicit not only the socioeconomic challenges faced by a woman but also its geographical disparities due to the context and sustainability of NGO interventions on rural Afghan women to qualitatively understand the determinants of the success of any women empowerment program. With most of the findings being implemented, this would help NGOs in designing future programs of socio-economic independence and gender equality, being conscious of the past issues, and would serve as a better crafted program, in the longer term, to meet needs specific to vulnerable women in Nangarhar, and beyond.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How do women in Nangarhar perceive the contributions and limitations of NGOs in facilitating their empowerment, particularly in terms of socio-economic opportunities, education, and social inclusion, within the local context?
2. How do socio-economic challenges, such as unregulated employment and limited educational opportunities, impact the lives and aspirations of women in rural areas of Nangarhar province, Afghanistan?

3. What are the experiences and perspectives of rural women in Nangarhar regarding the impact of development interventions, including skills training and economic empowerment programs conducted by NGOs, on their socio-economic status and overall wellbeing?
4. What are the key factors that influence the effectiveness of development initiatives, particularly those aimed at women's empowerment, and how do they align with the cultural and socio economic dynamics of the region?

1.5 Research Objectives

The following research objectives have been derived from research questions to investigate how NGO interventions empower Afghan women to challenge societal norms particularly in rural Nangarhar province:

1. To understand and explore how women in Nangarhar view the role of NGO both in promoting their empowerment such as socio economic opportunities, education, and social inclusion.
2. To analyze the experiences, aspirations and human capital formation of women in rural Nangarhar province, where socio economic hurdles (e.g. informal jobs and inadequate educational opportunities) exist.
3. This study aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of rural women in Nangarhar about the influence of development interventions carried out by NGOs, such as skills development and economic empowerment programs, on their socio economic status and wellbeing.
4. To explore the preliminary key influencers for what makes development interventions for women empowerment successful and how the humanitarian community can and should harmonize development initiatives with the cultural and socio economic contexts of Nangarhar province.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study has significance in various aspects, both academically, practically, and socially. This research examines the role and impact of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) on empowering rural Afghan women, with a focus on Nangarhar province, offering valuable lessons which exceed the periphery of Afghanistan.

1.6.1 Academic Contribution

This study makes an important contribution to the existing body of academic literature by addressing some of the gaps previously noted regarding the evolution of rural women's

empowerment approaches in Afghanistan. Although a considerable amount of research has been undertaken into the empowerment of urban women and the role of NGOs in Afghanistan (both very important and timely subject areas) little in depth work has addressed the specific issues facing rural women ((Mazloun & Sail, 2024). This study fills the gap and provides a comprehensive analysis of how NGOs function in rural Nangarhar both socio culturally and economically thereby enhancing understanding of gender dynamics in these places. Furthermore, this study provides rich, context-specific data through qualitative methodologies that can build on theoretical landscapes on the intersections of gender inclusion and capacity building in conflict affected regions (Seddiqi, 2022).

1.6.2 Practical Implications

This research has significant meaning for practitioners and policymakers allocated towards women's empowerment. By comparing and contrasting the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of rural women in Nangarhar, it fills this gap and makes evidence based recommendations that can be used in realizing, designing, and implementing more effective and sustainable interventions ((Amnesty International, 2025). These insights might help policymakers to tailor their socio economic policies to address the social barriers we found such as unregulated work and access to education and training. In addition, NGOs can also adopt better ways of delivering service to a society where funding agencies need to combine the organization of delivery with a degree to which the service must be culturally consistent or sustainable (U.S. Institute of Peace, 2024) and so the society becomes more effective. It finds that this will be the methodological challenge to expand the potential of NGO interventions and position them against the concrete needs of each community in the autonomous, efficient, and sustainable use of resources where the solutions have a transformative impact through processes of deep empowerment.

1.6.3 Social Impact

On a larger scale, this study serves to inform the social structure by shedding light on gender roles through the lens of sustainable development in a rural Afghan context. Capacity building and gender inclusion to empower women contribute to social cohesion and economic resilience alongside improving individual wellbeing (Spangaro et al., 2021). The research, therefore, critically appraises the development practices of NGOs, reaffirming their commitment to a world of equality, where women and men, hand in hand, contribute to achieving gender based progress (UN Women, 2023). Additionally, the focus of the study on sustainable empowerment interventions is consistent with global development priorities, promoting strategies that provide lasting change instead of short term solutions (World Bank,

2025). The research ultimately lends itself to the promotion of fair policies and practices, advocating for gender inclusivity as a means of contributing to the establishment of equitable societies in which women can engage and add value to their communities.

1.7 Scope and Delimitations

This research study is conducted to investigate the functions and impact of NGOs on empowerments in Nangarhar province, eastern Afghanistan on of Afghan women, which is more integrated together. The outlines of scope and delimitations are presented in the following section to specify the limit of the study conducted.

1.7.1 Geographical Scope

Geographically this research study is limited to the Nangarhar province, eastern Afghanistan. The research has been conducted in Nangarhar because of social, cultural, and geographical diversity and also for the diversity of the rural inhabitants and also because there are many domestic and international organizations for women empowerment (Shinwari, Ashna, & Hayat, 2024). Nangarhar. It explores rural women in the northern region of Nangarhar, an area at the extreme, both because of the layered socio political territory and the ubiquity and scale of certain external intermediaries and external actors (NGOs) that provide an avenue for both challenge and opportunity for women. There is a much richer exploration of the interactions of cultural patterns, economic conditions, and NGO action that result in the findings being of relevance to other rural settings in Afghanistan through this place based lens.

1.7.2 Temporal Scope

This study is temporally scoped to include events after the resurgent Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan in August of 2021. This is a critical time as the Taliban came back to power, which has drastically changed the socio political context in Afghanistan with serious repercussions on women's rights and empowerment programs ((Shuja, 2025). The research aims to address the current NGO activities, the challenges faced by rural women as they undergo economic and social transformation, and thus adapt to the post resurgence era, focusing on the NGO response and changing roles of NGOs in rural areas, evolving challenges faced by rural women and adaptive strategies of NGOs during the post resurgence era. Taking the latest data enables the study to capture the latest context and provide findings that are not only relevant but also timely to inform solutions that can address current needs and realities impacting women's empowerment in the province of Nangarhar.

1.8 Limitations

Notwithstanding the wide scope of this study, some limitations must be acknowledged: Accessibility to and security in Nangarhar province make research a significant challenge. The fragile security context, marked by ongoing conflicts and the Taliban's dominion over extensive territory, could lead to accessibility constraints for particular geographical regions as well as hinder the capacity to conduct face to face interviews and observe in the field (Amnesty International, 2023). Such restrictions may limit the amount and quality of information obtained from participants and, as a result, jeopardize information completeness.

Open and honest conversations in interviews and focus group discussions may be jeopardized by deeply entrenched patriarchal principles and cultural sensibilities in rural Nangarhar. Fear of stigma or repercussions may silence participants on sensitive topics, such as gender based violence, personal empowerment, or economic hardship, affecting the trustworthiness and depth of collected data (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The scope of NGO existence and collaboration in rural Nangarhar can fluctuate, and certain organizations may constrain their openness to the researchers to preserve their operational security. This variation may affect the level of detail in data available on NGO projects and their effects, thus slanting the study towards more accessible or more compliant organizations ((United States Institute of Peace, 2023). Determining constraints in financial resources and logistics may limit the scope of the study in terms of the number of participants to be included and the geographical coverage of areas of Nangarhar. This restriction may influence the generalizability of the results to other rural areas in Afghanistan with different socio economic and cultural contexts (World Bank, 2022). The dynamic nature of language together with the existence of several dialects where Dari and Pashto are used as the various languages spoken in Afghanistan, might make language a challenge for data collection and analysis if you are conducting research in the region. Ensuring that participants' responses are translated and interpreted accurately is critical to the integrity of the data, but this presents challenges in terms of capturing nuanced meanings and expressions (Khyber Institute of Communication, 2024). Similar to much relevant research, the study is limited to more contemporaneous developments in a rapidly changing environment following the Taliban resurgence and may be less informed by longer-term trends and the historical factors that continue to influence the trajectory of women's empowerment in Nangarhar. This temporal nature ensures relevance with the current environment, however, it comes at the cost of the inability to make inferences on the long term trends and effectiveness of NGO interventions.

1.9 Delimitations

The study focuses solely on women's empowerment, for which socio economic opportunities, education, and social inclusion are considered relevant. It doesn't talk about broader gender issues that also impact men or other marginalized communities in the population.

It also focuses on the interventions of non-governmental organizations both international (INGOs) and local (LNGOs) as opposed to other actors such as government bodies or informal community networks. We thus narrow down our analytical scope on NGO strategies and their potential pathways to female empowerment further by this demarcation.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which offers an in depth understanding of women's perspectives and experiences. It may limit the quantitative transferability of the report findings to all rural parts of Nangarhar, or even the whole of Afghanistan. Nangarhar is representative of many provinces across rural Afghanistan, but given the distinctly different sociocultural and economic features of some provinces, the findings might not be fully generalizable to them.

Scope Helps You Know How to Contextualize Your Findings The scope is important because it helps you to understand the findings you are reading about as well as their limitations. Due to the proximity of researched area in Nangarhar province and recent developments of Taliban revival will allow a case study of the role and impacts of NGOs on rural women empowerment. Acknowledging these limitations ensures transparency and sets realistic expectations about how the study adds to the collective knowledge base and how it can be used.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter forms the theoretical backbone of this thesis, offering the context in which the study of women's empowerment is both conceptualized and explored in rural Afghanistan, with a focus on Nangarhar province. Relevant scholarly material, theoretical perspectives, and empirical perspectives are systematically analyzed regarding the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in promoting capacity building and gender inclusivity of Afghan women in rural community contexts. With this aim, we conducted a literature review of relationship marketing and its benefits by synthesizing diverse sources to recognize key themes, highlight research gaps, and establish a solid theoretical foundation for the current study.

The intent of this review of literature, however, is to inform a broader understanding of key concepts associated with women's empowerment in rural Afghanistan. Firstly, it looks at the historical and socio cultural factors of gender inequality in Afghanistan, providing an understanding of the underlying factors that impede the progress of women. Second, the review explores the international and local roles of NGOs, including their strategies and interventions, and assesses the impact of their programs on socioeconomic opportunities, schooling, and social inclusion of women. Thirdly, it tackles the issues of capacity building and gender inclusion, looking over how these approaches become operatively used in NGO programs on rural women empowerment. Another contribution in the literature review discusses the challenges and opportunities for women in rural and urban settings and a specific case study on Nangarhar province, to highlight the context specific factors differing in the two types of settings. Additionally, it delves into how socio economic factors — unregulated employment, poor access to education, economic instability, etc. that affect women's lives and aspirations.

The chapter is divided into two subsections: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework. The Literature Review section is divided into specific subtopics for the logical flow of information. It starts by examining the gender inequality in Afghanistan and establishes the historical and cultural context that frames the recent environment for women's empowerment. Following this, we will identify the types of NGOs involved in women's empowerment, how they contribute to women's empowerment, and who they affect. The review further discusses capacity building and gender inclusion, where the review elaborates

on strategies NGOs are applying to strengthen the skillset, leadership, and decision making involvement of women.

The following subsection will compare both rural and urban empowerment but highlights how disparately women in rural regions like Nangarhar are impacted differently by their urbanized partners. This contrasts with the broader emphasis on need based approaches for NGO interventions. After this, the literature review discusses the influence of socio-economic factors on women's empowerment and explains how economic constraints, educational limitations, and the wider sociocultural environment could be interlinked and their implications on women's empowerment. It ends with a summary of prior research and the gaps that the current study intends to fill, such as the absence of holistic studies on the empowerment of rural women in Afghanistan and the sustainability of NGO intervention.

The theoretical framework section analyzes and presents various relevant theories that inform the study, and justifies its analytical lens on how NGOs contribute towards women's empowerment. Feminist Theory is researched for an understanding of gender behavior and the empowerment of women. Then, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach is discussed when evaluating individual freedoms and opportunities, thus also providing a theoretical framework to evaluate how successful NGO programs are in enhancing women's capabilities. The theory of Social Capital is discussed to show the importance of social networks, community support, and collective action in empowering women. It also synthesizes, if not some of them or similar, these theories into one coherent theoretical framework to direct if necessary the research design, data analysis, and findings interpretation.

2.2 Gender Inequality in Afghanistan

Women in Afghanistan have long faced a struggle for equal rights and opportunities, with gender inequality being deeply entrenched in the country's history and culture which has been shaped by numerous factors including long standing patriarchal norms, socio political turmoil, and foreign interventions. Traditionally, society in Afghanistan has been male dominated, with rigid gender roles that keep women in the most domestic of spaces. Such a patriarchal structure would be supported by tribal customs and social norms that privilege male authority and decision-making power within the household and the community (Eurac Research, 2022). Progress in women's education and contributions to public life developed gradually until the first half of the 20th century when King Amanullah Khan reigned (1919-1929) and implemented modernization steps, including women's rights advocated reforms (Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2021). However, these advancements proved to be

short lived, with conservative forces reigniting traditional values to limit women's roles and access to education and work.

A wide variety of gender dynamics play into this as well, as the cultural context of Afghanistan itself has strict expectations for women who do not conform to them. Traditional practices, particularly those limited to rural organizations, such as purdah (the prescriptive seclusion of women from public observation using clothing and physical barriers) and early marriages, deter women's mobility, independence (social as well as financial), and development (ODI 2024). Also, religious interpretations have a large impact on gender norms in societies. Islam as a religion does not oppose women's rights, but conservative interpretations of Islam have often been used to justify discrimination against women and to restrict their participation in many aspects of life (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Gender inequality has also been fuelled by geopolitical instability and spiraling conflicts in Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion in 1979, the ensuing civil war, and the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s shattered social codes and drastically curtailed women's rights. Women were banned from schooling beyond a particular grade, working in almost every business sector, and were forced to wear the full-fledged burqa, life under Taliban governance for the first time in 1996-2001 was harsh (Nehan, 2022). While the post-Taliban era, marked by the setting up of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, opened the space for some improvement in domicile security and representative policies, many of these advancements were swiftly undone by the Taliban's return to power in 2021, undoing policies that offered women oppression and deepening the gender gap (D'Souza, 2024).

Cultural rules also combine with economic conditions to retain gender inequality. In conservative, rural Afghanistan, women are seen as homemakers and caregivers, and their domestic institute makes them dependent on men, leading to traditional gender roles, thus restricting their workforce participation within the country. This intertwining of culture with economics produces a persistent cycle of poverty and dependency in which women are trapped in gendered roles in large part because of cultural norms as well as economic structures (Sidiqi, 2023).

2.3 Legal and Social Barriers to Women's Empowerment

The legal frameworks in Afghanistan for the past two decades have been insufficient in promoting and protecting the rights of women as well, which somehow has led to creating a gender equality gap. The Afghan legal system, which is based on both civil and Sharia law, has multiple clauses that are discriminatory against women. For example, laws of inheritance favor

male kin and often leave women with few, if any, inheritance rights, weakening their economic independence (Akhtarkhil et al., 2022). Moreover, laws governing personal status, such as marriage, divorce, and child custody, are in favor of men, which leads women to face challenges in defending their rights during family and legal cases (GHRD, 2022).

Furthermore, the absence of strong legal protections against gender based violence only heightens the precariousness of Afghan women. Women's rights are theoretically guaranteed in international agreements and constitutional provisions, but enforcement mechanisms are weak. Women facing violence from an intimate partner, harassment, or forced marriage are often reluctant to seek justice or protection, and with that need for assistance comes tangible social stigma, compounded by the lack of a supportive legal infrastructure (UNAMA 2023). This legal uncertainty not only allows for continued physical and psychological harm but also strips women from engaging in public and economic life due to fear for their safety and wellbeing.

Social barriers, which are closely linked to cultural and legal barriers, are also critical impediments to the empowerment of women. Patriarchal beliefs dictate gender roles and limit the access of women to education, jobs, and leadership. In most rural communities, women are expected to not pursue their development and put household needs first, which has led to low educational attainment and a failure to enter the workforce (Delju & Habibi, 2024). In addition, in those conservative cultures where female education was not only of little value but also sometimes forbidden, restricted access between women and education institutions or vocational training helped reinforce such a societal expectation in women (Hasin et al., 2025).

Furthermore, social stigma and peer pressure in society prevent women from questioning or demanding gender roles beyond the household. That very atmosphere of fear and repression strains women in their ambition and keeps them dependent on the men in the family thereby further perpetuating the institution of patriarchy (Modern Diplomacy, 2023).

Legal and social impediments intersect to form a convoluted landscape that plays both as an obstacle to the empowerment of women in Afghanistan if, for instance, women do gain an opportunity in education or economics they frequently do not then get the legal or social support that guarantees the continuity of that opportunity. The effort and the impact of women, when not recognized in legal definitions of citizenship, and societal acceptance of their roles beyond the traditional domains is tenuous and exposes them to rollback. (UN Women, 2022).

These challenges have been met with various actors working in international agencies and local NGOs that have sought to amend legislation, dispose of legal aid, and challenge discriminatory cultural practices. Yet, their successes are often constrained by the larger

sociopolitical context and the persistence of gender norms. Eurasia Review (2024) states that for reforms to be sustainable legal actions taken are not enough but a shift in perceptions towards gender roles must be adopted and integrated into the fabric of the society to achieve gender equality in all aspects of the society (UN Women, 2020).

These pillars are cementing an environment that sees women as objects, despite being well educated and knowing their rights, thus creating a statement that reflects victimization, not an empowered culture. Therefore, the goal of this study is to comprehend this multi-layer issue to come up with some solutions for other similar opportunities to encourage gender inclusion and capacity building in rural areas such as Nangarhar province. Understanding & correcting both the legal and social aspects of gender inequality, therefore, is of utmost importance in enabling Afghan women to realize their full potential and ability to contribute the society, and to the larger socio-economic development of Afghanistan. The table below summarizes the main points regarding gender inequality and women's empowerment in Afghanistan in terms of historical and cultural context and legal and social barriers.

Table 1 Multidimensional Barriers to Women's Empowerment in Afghanistan: Historical, Cultural, Legal, and Socioeconomic Perspectives

Aspect	Description	References
Historical Context	<p>Patriarchal Society: Afghanistan has a long standing tradition of patriarchy where hold the decision making power and primary authority.</p> <p>The Early Reforms: There were short periods of reform, most notably during King Amanullah Khan's reign (early 20th century), including women's education and public participation.</p> <p>Conflict impact: Multiple prolonged conflicts (Soviet invasion, civil wars, Taliban rule, etc.) have broken down almost all of the societal structures reinforcing traditional gender roles.</p>	<p>(Eurac Research, 2022)</p> <p>Middle East Council on Global Affairs(2021)</p>
Cultural Norms and Practices	<p>Purdah and Restrictions on Mobility: Cultural practices such as purdah confine women in the domestic realm and thus limit their visibility and participation in public life.</p> <p>Early and Forced Marriages: Common in rural areas, limiting educational and economic opportunities for women.</p> <p>Religious interpretations: Conservative interpretations of Islam that are used to defend gender discrimination and restrict a woman's role are an example of a religious interpretation.</p>	<p>(ODI 2024). (Human Rights Watch, 2025)</p>

Impact of the Taliban Regime	<p>1996-2001 Taliban Rule: Banned girls from school, barred women from most workplaces and enforced strict dress codes.</p> <p>Resurgence (Post-2021): Re-implementation of repressive policies, banning of girls' education, removal of female teachers, and an increase in violence against women</p> <p>Reversal of gains: Huge dismantling of achievements gained through the Islamic Republic period.</p>	(Nehan, 2022). (D'Souza, 2024).
Legal Barriers	<p>Discriminatory Laws: Laws of inheritance and of personal status do not favour their women, and this limits the economic independence of women, along with limiting women's legal rights in the cases of marriage, divorce and custody.</p> <p>Weak Enforcement: In spite of constitutional provisions, the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms renders the legal protections for women ineffective.</p> <p>Barriers to Legal recourse: Women have little access to justice for gender-based violence and discrimination.</p>	(Sidiqi, 2023). (Akhtarkhil et al., 2022) (GHRD, 2022) (UNAMA 2023)
Social Barriers	<p>Gender Roles: Women are confined to domestic roles, often prevented from seeking education, employment, and leadership positions.</p> <p>Stigma and Repression: Social ostracism, threats, or violence against women seeking education or a career can deter them from breaking traditional molds.</p> <p>Absence of Support Structures: Limited healthcare, legal, and social resources boost dependency and exposure to exploitation.</p>	(Delju & Habibi, 2024). (Hasin et al., 2025) (Modern Diplomacy, 2023). UN Women (2023)
Economic Constraints	<p>Limited Employment Opportunities: Generally restricted to subsistence agricultural, artisanal, and informal work with low income and lower job security</p> <p>Financial Dependency: Limited access to credit, inheritance rights, and business education keeps women economically dependent on their husbands.</p> <p>Educational deficit: Lack of schools and hiring of female professors resulting in low educational accomplishments and a high drop-out rate among girls.</p>	World Bank (2019)
Intersectionality	<p>Cultural and Economic Interplay: Patriarchal norms combined with economic barriers create a persistent cycle of poverty and dependency for women.</p> <p>Impact of Conflict: Ongoing instability and violence disproportionately affect women,</p>	Eurasia Review (2024)UN Women (2020)

	limiting their ability to access education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Sustainable Empowerment: Legal reforms alone are insufficient without cultural shifts to support gender equality.	
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2.4 Role of NGOs in Women's Empowerment

In Afghanistan, especially in rural communities like Nangarhar province, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play a pivotal role in promoting women's empowerment. INGOs and LNGOs worldwide carry out multiple types of interventions to address the complex barriers to gender equality. These interventions primarily involve some of the following types of initiatives touching on education, economic empowerment, and social inclusion, which are all critical and target specific dimensions of women's lives to drive a comprehensive level of empowerment.

2.4.1 Types of Interventions

One of the pillars of women empowerment efforts implemented by Afghan NGOs is education. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs), such as Save the Children and UNICEF, have emphasized improving access to primary and secondary education for girls, (UNICEF Executive Director Russell, 2025). Particularly in rural areas where educational infrastructure is scarce. With these organizations, they build schools, give scholarships, and train female teachers to have a comfortable learning environment. UN Women, for instance, has enforced programs that provide both educational access and educational quality by creating gender sensitivity and inclusivity teaching curricula (UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2024). By doing so, LNGOs like the Afghan Women's Educational Initiative (AWEI) promote community-based techniques to persuade families to allow their daughters to attend school, thereby challenging existing cultural norms that appear to devalue the education of women (Pashtana Durrani, 2023).

Includes projects like Economic Empowerment that focus on increasing women's independence economically and getting them into the workforce. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as CARE International, functional in Afghanistan since 1961, and the Afghan Women's Artisanal and Rural Support Association (AWARSA) offer vocational training programs in skills such as handicrafts, tailoring, and small-scale entrepreneurship (Husain & Suwannarat, 2024). Such programs equip women with the skills needed to either establish their enterprises or find employment, subsequently minimizing economic reliance on men in their households. Microfinance programs, led by interstate such as Kiva and Grameen

Foundation, afford women credit and financial services that allow them to invest in their businesses and attain economic security (Kiva, 2023).

Social inclusion interventions aim to integrate women into larger societal structures, facilitating their involvement in decision-making processes and leadership positions in the community. Some NGOs, like The Aga Khan Foundation and Women for Women International, hold workshops and seminars to help women gain encouraging opportunities to become leaders in their communities and advocate for their rights (Aga Khan University IHD, 2023). Such programs often provide training in leadership skills, advocacy, and conflict resolution, empowering women to shape policies and mobilize social change. Emphasizing the role of women in local governance and community groups can also break the system of patriarchy and provide an enabling environment (Women for Women International, 2023)

2.5 Successes and Challenges of NGO Initiatives

NGO-led interventions and programs have been successful in empowering Afghan women. These educational programs have led to higher enrollment and retention rates among girls in rural schools, which in turn has contributed to improved literacy and educational outcomes (UNESCO, 2024). Women have gained financial independence, raised their household incomes, and contributed to the local economy through economic empowerment initiatives. One initiative is vocational training programs that have provided marketable skills for women, resulting in successful small-business start-ups and greater employment opportunities (Husain & Suwannarat, 2024). By introducing gender-sensitive policies, social inclusion efforts have increased women's involvement in community leadership roles, improving their ability to advocate for policies benefiting women (The Aga Khan Foundation, 2023). In addition, the partnership between INGOs and LNGOs has promoted culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate approaches to problems, maximizing the sustainability and effectiveness of interventions (Noori, 2025).

However, despite these successes, NGO initiatives encounter many obstacles that prevent them from achieving sustained impact. Of these, the unpredictable security circumstances in Afghanistan are a significant deterrent as program application is difficult, and remote rural areas are not easily accessible (Eurasia Review, 2024). The return of the Taliban has had a specific impact on women's role in public life. Educational and economic initiatives promoting female empowerment have been put on hold (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Moreover, cultural inertia is another challenge when deeply rooted patriarchal values and gender norms work to perpetuate the institutionalization of women's rights violations in

society. Gender-sensitive approaches often face opposition in conservative communities, hence the difficulty when implementing gender-sensitive initiatives, which makes it necessary to come up with innovative plans to engage the locals for these initiatives (Amnesty International, 2024).

A further challenge is the sustainability of interventions. Because many NGO programs rely heavily on external funding and are short-term, beneficiaries often do not receive long-term services (UNDP Asia-Pacific, 2023). The reliance on donor funding further restricts NGOs from expanding successful programs or adjusting to shifts in the socio-political environment. In addition, the capacity limitations of local NGOs can hinder the effective delivery of services, as these organizations may not have the resources, expertise, and infrastructure to support large-scale initiatives (UNDP Afghanistan, 2022). This lack of support is exacerbated by weak governance structures and insufficient policy frameworks that hamper women's empowerment (UNDP Afghanistan, 2024)

Adding to this, gender-based violence is another prevalent challenge that counters the efforts of NGOs to empower women. Even though programs have been established to provide legal aid and support services, women tend to encounter multiple obstacles in accessing these programs due to the fear of stigma and retaliation and the number of ineffective enforcement mechanisms (AP News, 2023). This fearful and repressive milieu prevents women from accessing empowerment programs and leads to cycles of dependency and violence (USIP, 2014).

Moreover, various forms of discrimination and marginalization can intersect to make the empowerment of citizens more complex. Those from minority ethnic groups, women with disabilities, and women living in extreme poverty experience additional barriers that require specific interventions (UN Women, 2020). In response, NGOs face the complex task of adapting programs for diverse groups who need different kinds of services; this often demands more resources and a depth of experience that may not be readily available in organizations serving multiple disadvantaged populations.

In conclusion, NGOs can be both a source of empowerment as well as a vehicle through which Afghan women can find their voice through social intervention at the level of education and economic empowerment. Despite these efforts having remarkable achievements, they also face major challenges for security instability, cultural resistance, sustainability, as well as the pervasive effect of gender-based violence. Overcoming these challenges will require a multi-faceted approach that includes building local NGO capacity, ensuring sustainable funding, generating community buy-in, and advocating for supportive legislation and policies. Focusing

on these challenges will have a greater impact on the long-term economic strength of women in rural Afghanistan. The table below summarizes the main points related to NGOs and their important contributions to the empowerment of Afghan women in rural communities including the types of interventions, the successes achieved, and the obstacles that still lie ahead.

Table 2 NGO Interventions for Women's Empowerment in Afghanistan: Strategies, Successes, and Challenges

Aspect	Description	References
Types of Interventions	<p>Education: NGOs help to make primary and secondary schooling more underprivileged girls, including building schools, providing scholarships and training female teachers. Other initiatives by groups such as Save the Children and UNICEF seek to improve educational quality and promote gender-sensitive curricula.</p> <p>Economic Empowerment: Organizations like CARE International and AWARSA implement vocational training, microfinance, and entrepreneurship programs. These programs provide women with skills, including tailoring and handicrafts, and small-scale businesses, boosting their financial independence.</p> <p>Social Inclusion: Organizations such as The Aga Khan Foundation and Women for Women International help train women to assume community leadership roles and advocate for women in decision-making positions. These efforts encourage women to engage in governance and community development.</p>	<p>(UNICEF Executive Director Russell, 2025)</p> <p>(UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2024)</p> <p>(Pashtana Durrani, 2023).</p> <p>(Kiva, 2023)</p> <p>(Aga Khan University IHD, 2023)</p> <p>Women for Women International, 2023</p>
Successes of NGO Initiatives	<p>Educational Impact: Higher literacy rates and educational attainment due to increased enrollment and retention of girls in rural schools.</p> <p>Economic Gains: Improved financial independence for women through successful small businesses and a greater number of employment opportunities. Vocational training programs have allowed women to launch their own businesses and keep them going.</p> <p>Strengthened Leadership: Increase in the women who lead in their communities, advocating for gender-sensitive policies and driving social change. Culturally sensitive and sustainable intervention have been assured</p>	<p>(UNESCO, 2024)</p> <p>Husain & Suwannarat, 2024</p> <p>Noori, 2025</p> <p>Eurasia Review, 2024</p>

	through collaboration between INGOs and LNGOs.	
Challenges of NGO Initiatives	<p>Security Instability: Continuing wars and Taliban revival hamper program implementation and restrict access in remote rural areas, preventing reliable service delivery.</p> <p>Cultural Resistance: Strong patriarchal norms and traditional societal expectations resist gender-sensitive initiatives, and it is difficult to change entrenched gender roles.</p> <p>Sustainability Challenges: most programs are donor-driven and relatively short term, creating a challenge in sustaining impact over the long term and replicating successful greater initiatives.</p> <p>Humanitarian Aid: Local NGOs struggling with capacity limitations in terms of experience, infrastructure, and resources may be unable to deliver large-scale or specialized programs effectively.</p> <p>Gender-Based Violence: The high prevalence of gender-based violence means that efforts to empower women could all do to be bolstered by support services should they be afraid of stigma or retaliation.</p>	(Eurasia Review, 2024). (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Amnesty International, 2024 UNDP Afghanistan, 2022
Intersectionality and Marginalization	<p>Overlapping Barriers: Women from minority ethnic backgrounds, with disabilities, and those living in extreme poverty face other layers of barriers and will need targeted action.</p> <p>Designing Inclusive Programs: NGOs face complex multiple challenges, and are often required to design programs that are inclusive and address the specific needs across a variety of demographic groups, which often requires more resources and specialized knowledge.</p>	USIP ,2014 Women (2020)

2.6 Capacity Building and Gender Inclusion

The two key concepts essential for the development of women, especially in rural Afghanistan are identified as Capacity building and Gender inclusion. Capacity building is an approach by which individuals, organizations and communities acquire, enhance, and enlarge

skills, knowledge and resources to understand and solve problems and achieve development objectives (UN Women (2023)). Capacity building has traditionally referred to activities and processes that enable individuals or groups, in this case, women, to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve desired outcomes, whether in economic, social, or political settings (UN Women 2023). And remains a pillar of women's empowerment core component pillar.

It entails intentional inclusion of women and marginalized genders across the breadth — from development to decision-making processes. This implies that gender perspectives are mainstreamed into policies, programs, and activities, decreasing systematic inequalities and ultimately increasing gender equity (IASC 2022). Therefore, gender inclusion in Afghanistan, as in many conservative societies, is critical to address and transform the traditional patriarchal practices of discrimination against women and other forms of gender-related practices (IASC 2022). Capacity building and gender inclusion are essential in empowering rural Afghan women. Through capacity building, women acquire the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary for economic, social, and political upliftment (UN Women 2023). Including gender ensures that the voices of women are heard and their needs recognized to build an enabling environment for gender equality (IASC 2022). Collectively these strategies are vital to dismantling obstacles to women's empowerment and advancing sustainable and equitable rural development in the long term (UNDP Afghanistan 2024).

2.7 Strategies Employed by NGOs for Capacity Building

Women-oriented NGOs working in rural Afghanistan have adopted different strategies to promote capacity building and gender inclusion. The approaches have been customised to overcome the exact challenges faced by the communities, such as Nangarhar province where traditional customs and security had an impact.

2.7.1 Educational and Vocational Training Programs

One of the strategies of capacity building is educational and vocational training programs implementation. NGOs like Save the Children and UNICEF have built schools and training centers that offer women educational and skills training resources (UNICEF USA, 2025). These programs are primarily aimed at improving literacy, numeracy and vocational skills including tailoring, handicrafts, and small-scale entrepreneurship which are important for increasing women's employability and economic independence (UNICEF Afghanistan, 2024). Assets made available by new skills also provide women with the means to earn income, support their families, and lower their economic dependency on male kin (Husain & Suwannarat, 2024).

2.7.2 Leadership Development and Mentorship

One of the most crucial approaches used by NGOs to strengthen the ability of women is through leadership development activities. For example, organizations such as the Afghan Women's Artisanal and Rural Support Association (AWARSA) conduct leadership training and mentorship programs to prepare women for leadership positions in their communities (Aga Khan Foundation Canada, 2021). The emphasis of these programs on skills such as public speaking, negotiation, and strategic planning frames the training that women undergo for them to impact decision-making bodies and fight for their rights (Aga Khan University Institute for Human Development, 2023). The NGO sector model for gender equity is predicated on its ability to create women with leadership capabilities, conjuring a new social subject, empowered women who can henceforth act with confidence and assertiveness, undermine power relations, and promote and create gender equity (Pande, 2022).

2.7.3 Access to Financial Resources and Microfinance

Access to credit is fundamental for the economic empowerment of women. To address the access of women to financial services, NGOs like Kiva and the Grameen Foundation undertake the provision of microfinance services that provide small loans and financial assistance for women to establish or grow their businesses (Sultani & Chandrashekhar, 2023). The article further elaborates, that women translators use financial resources to invest in entrepreneurial ventures, buy needed equipment, and expand operations, boosting their income and economic stability (UNDP, 2024). Some NGOs also provide financial literacy training to enable women to better manage their finances, plan, and make informed economic decisions (Kiva, 2023).

2.7.4 Advocacy and Policy Reform

Women's empowerment necessitates a conducive environment which is only possible through advocacy and policy reforms. Authorities in these countries do their part, while NGOs

like Women for Women International engage in advocacy to spur government action, work to get laws passed, and improve women's rights (UN Women Engagement in Afghanistan, 2025). They collaborate with lawmakers to create gender-responsive measures that target challenges like gender-based violence and workplace discrimination and help pave the way for gender availability in education. (Qazi Zada, 2020). NGOs try to address these issues by advocating for policy changes that would dismantle systemic barriers and create an enabling legal environment that ensures gender equality (Noori, 2025).

2.7.5 Community Engagement and Social Norms Transformation

A deep transformation of social norms and the establishment of a support community are important since the actions of the initiatives aimed at gender inclusion will be more fruitful. Organizations engage with the community to involve men and boys in issues of gender equality and the advantages of female empowerment (Palermo et al., 2022). Such approaches include community dialogues, awareness campaigns, and participatory workshops, all geared toward disputing and evolving sedentary patriarchal mindsets and enhancing a gender-inclusive culture (UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2024). NGOs enable this needed collective subversion of social norms, as they inextricably link gender inequities to broader cultural and social structures (UN Women, 2023). Enabling the community at large to be part of the solution, moving towards more equitable gender relations in the long run.

2.7.6 Health and Well-being Programs

Health and well-being programs laid the groundwork for capacity building, targeting the physical and psychological barriers to women. Organizations such as Médecins sans Frontiers (MSF), and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) administer maternal and child healthcare services, mental health care, and nutrition programs that improve women's health outcomes (UN Afghanistan, 2024). Gaining better health would enable women to participate more in economic activities, education, and community leadership which enhances their overall capacity for empowerment (Guardian, 2023). Therefore, by tackling health-related issues, NGOs enable women to have the strength and firmness they need to benefit from opportunities for empowerment (UNHCR, 2024).

NGOs in Afghanistan also implement strategies for empowering rural women, such as capacity building and gender inclusion. NGOs combat the multidimensional challenges to women empowerment by offering education and vocational training; promotion of leadership; access to financial resources; advocacy for policy reforms; community mobilization, and health and well-being initiatives. Overall, according to the literature, while NGOs have achieved great milestones in improving women's social and economic stability and increasing their leadership

potential in many regions, they still face various obstacles such as security instability, strain of cultural attitudes, sustainability of change and violations of women's rights. Addressing these challenges will require an inclusive response tailored to context, prioritizing local NGO capacity-building, organizing stable support mechanisms, and advocating for a legislative culture conducive to NGOs. NGOs will positively uphold the long-term empowerment, and socioeconomic development of women in rural Afghanistan through navigating these barriers, thereby mitigating gender-equality issues and sustainable development in the region.

2.8 Rural vs. Urban Empowerment

2.8.1 Differences in Challenges and Opportunities

The empowerment of women in Afghanistan varies between rural and urban settings as a result of differences in socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural conditions. Women from the province of Nangarhar and other rural areas have particular problems, which are often more acute and diverse compared to urban areas. The decrease in cultural transmissions within patriarchal institutions constrains women's access to formal education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (Hasin et al., 2025). Which remains particularly relevant in rural societies. These areas are generally characterized by lower levels of education for girls as schools are limited, educational infrastructure is lacking and cultural opposition to female education exists (UNESCO, 2025). In addition, the majority of rural women work in subsistence farming and handicrafts, which provide limited income opportunities and do not have formal employment protections, thus increasing their economic vulnerability (UNDP, 2025). By contrast, urban women in cities such as Kabul and Herat have more access to educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and varied jobs. Urban regions also have better infrastructure schools, hospitals, and markets that foster women's entry into the workplace and public life (UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2024). Moreover, urban contexts are typically more progressive regarding gender norms, with a higher societal acceptance of women receiving education and entering the workforce (Ahmad, 2015). Urban women experience their challenges too. Higher cost of living, scarcity of affordable childcare, and exposure to gender-based violence in crowded areas (UN Women, 2023).

Despite these disparities, women across both spectra in Afghanistan face systemically imposed barriers to empowerment, such as legal discrimination, gender-based violence, and socio-cultural limitations. However, the extent and type of barriers vary widely between rural and urban settings. Urban and rural women, for example, may struggle not only with work

versus home, but differential access to education and economic opportunity (UN Women, 2025).

Case Studies Highlighting Rural-Specific Issues

Case Study 1: Nangarhar Province

Nangarhar province illustrates the specific challenges faced by rural women in Afghanistan. Located in the eastern part of the country the major employment of the people in Nangarhar is farming and traditional craft (World Bank, 2019; ICRC, 2025). Women in Nangarhar have engaged mainly in subsistence farming, which provides little profit and is highly sensitive to economic and environmental changes globally (World Bank, 2019). Access to education, or rather the lack of it, keeps these women from developing alternative skills that would help them solvent economic dependency on male family members (UNESCO, 2025).

The Afghan Women's Artisanal and Rural Support Association (AWARSA) is one of many Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) in Nangarhar that have established vocational training programs to improve women's training related to handicrafts and small-scale entrepreneurship (WFP via IRIN, 2023). Such initiatives also modeled women the way to create and market their products to improve their economic status and establish greater financial independence. Yet, the impact of these programs is diminished by continued security challenges and a cultural aversion to women's inclusivity in the economy (Peace Insight, 2021). Even with training and support, many women still operate under social stigma and lack access to markets, which restricts the scalability and sustainability of their enterprises (Future Business Journal, 2025)

Case Study 2: Rural Education Initiatives in Nangarhar

Another important sector in which women in Nangarhar face difficulties to compete with urban women is education. Local NGOs such as Save the Children have established community-based schools which have helped increase female enrollment (AP News, 2024). Providing gender-sensitive curricula, as well as female teachers, girls-focused schools create a supportive learning environment (Education International, 2024). However, obstacles such as the lack of facilities, lack of trained teachers, and constant Taliban disruption persist in fulfilling educational aspirations among rural women (UNAMA via AP, 2024).

In addition to this, the cultural focus on early marriage diverts girls' education even more with families prioritizing marriage over schooling to graduate economic uplift or social integration (RFE/RL, 2024). Hence, addressing this cultural barrier requires a multifaceted

approach that includes educational initiatives and broader community engagement and advocacy to challenge societal attitudes towards female education (Delju, 2024).

Case Study 3: Economic Empowerment through Microfinance in Nangarhar

Microfinance approaches addressing the rural women in Nangarhar have proved successful in improving empowerment economically. Kiva (n.d.) shows that one of several NGO-facilitated programs engages with women by giving them small loans to help their normal in lining business (for example, tailoring, handicrafts, etc. This financial capital allows women to reinvest in their businesses, improve household incomes, and promote local economic prosperity (UNDP, 2024). However, the effectiveness of these programs is often constrained by challenges such as a lack of financial literacy, poor market access, and the lack of an enabling ecosystem (Reuters, 2024).

Moreover, the dependence on external funding raises concerns about sustainability, as the withdrawal of donor funding may lead to the discontinuation of beneficial programs and the re-emergence of economic vulnerabilities (UNDP Sectoral Recovery Project, 2024). The solutions for this, according to Narula and Mucel (2021), would be adopting sustainable financial models and also developing local ownership of economic initiatives.

Nangarhar is but one example of how empowered women in Afghanistan's rural areas - whose experiences defy the monolithic stereotypes often used by outside observers - create intersectional societal change on multiple levels. Though much response through NGOs has been done to address these such as targeted interventions in education, economic empowerment, and social inclusion, the challenges in terms of cultural resistance, security instability, and sustainability issues are prevailing. Thus, successful empowerment can not only focus on enhancing skills, and opportunities but also on changing the underlying structures by using a holistic and context-specific approach to supporting gender equality. By overcoming rural-specific challenges, the work of NGOs will not only sustainably empower Afghan women but also significantly aid in their larger socio-economic development.

Table 3 Rural–Urban Disparities in Women’s Empowerment in Afghanistan: Challenges, Opportunities, and Case Studies from Nangarhar Province

Aspect	Description	References
Differences in Challenges	Rural Challenges:	(Hasin et al., 2025) (UNESCO, 2025) (UNDP, 2025)

	<p>Limited Educational Access: Lack of schools and trained female teachers.</p> <p>Economically Vulnerable: Primarily living in subsistence farming and traditional crafts with little income.</p> <p>Cultural Resistance: Patriarchal norms strongly restricted women's mobility and participation.</p> <p>Urban Challenges:</p> <p>High cost of living: parents are facing financial test with fewer affordable daycare or childcare services.</p> <p>Gender-Based Violence: Being forced to live closely with people in densely populated places.</p>	
Differences in Opportunities	<p>Rural Opportunities:</p> <p>Alleviating Poverty: Focused initiatives by community-based organizations delivering skills acquisition and micro-loan services.</p> <p>Community Programs: mentored women to forge their own social acceptance and leadership</p> <p>Urban Opportunities:</p> <p>Enhanced Infrastructure: Availability of various learning and earning facilities.</p> <p>Progressive Gender Norms: More aspirations for women, as women were increasingly</p>	<p>(UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2024). (UN Women, 2025).</p>

	allowed to go to school and work.	
Case Study 1: Nangarhar Province	Educational Initiatives: Non-governmental organizations including Save the Children, set up schools and training centers to increase girls' access to education in Nangarhar. Some attempt to overcome this by building strong housing first models, however due to lack of infrastructure, lack of awareness in some cases, and role of community extenuating the problem educational programs only go so far.	(World Bank, 2019; ICRC, 2025) (WFP via IRIN, 2023)
Case Study 2: Rural Microfinance	Economic Empowerment: Kiva gives microloans to rural women in Nangarhar, helping them to start or grow a small business. Yet scalability is obstructed by restricted market reach and reliance on foreign capital, undermining sustainability.	(UNAMA via AP, 2024). (RFE/RL, 2024). (Delju, 2024).
Case Study 3: Leadership Programs	Community Leadership: AWARSA conducts leadership training for women in Nangarhar to become involved in their communities. Although the programs are effective in developing skills, they are constantly challenged by security threats and a cultural prejudice that limits women's ability to transition to leadership positions.	UNDP, 2024 Reuters, 2024 UNDP Sectoral Recovery Project, 2024

2.8.2 Impact of Socio-Economic Factors on Women's Empowerment

Rural Afghanistan is a socio-economically shaped land that affects significantly the empowerment trends of women. The basic elements of economic independence, participation in community decision-making, and improved well-being for women are employment,

education, and economic resources. In provinces such as Nangarhar, where the local economy and traditional crafts shape women's socio-economic status, these two facets of women's lives cultural and economic intersect significantly.

2.8.3 Employment, Education, and Economic Resources

Employment is a key indicator of women's empowerment since it not only presents financial independence but also improves social stature. Employment opportunities for women in rural Afghanistan are largely restricted to subsistence farming, traditional crafts, and informal labor sectors (Reuters via UNDP, 2024; World Bank, 2024). These jobs often offer little income, stability, adequate compensation, or social recognition. There are few formal employment opportunities for women, which prevents them from reaching economic security and diminishes their bargaining power on a household and community level (AP News, 2023). Education is also important to empower women, as it provides the knowledge, skills, and prospects for pursuing various career paths and meaningfully participating in decisions involved in life. (UNICEF via AP, 2023) While there has been some progress made in cities, rural areas continue to lag as schools are often too far away for girls to travel due to a lack of resources, culture, and security concerns. Lack of access to education not only limits women's employment opportunities but also limits their ability to speak out for their rights and engage actively in socio-political processes (PeaceWomen, 2024). Education positively impacts health status, age of marriage, and economic participation, leading to overall empowerment (UNDP via Reuters, 2024).

Economic resources such as access to credit, property rights, and financial services are critical ingredients for women's economic empowerment. In rural Afghanistan, women do not often have control over financial resources which fosters economic dependency on males in their families (UNDP Afghanistan, 2024). To address this gap, microfinance initiatives by NGOs like Kiva and the Grameen Foundation have provided women with small loans to start up or grow their businesses (Kiva, n.d.). Such financial means allow women to develop business opportunities, boost their earnings, and continue building economic resilience (CARE International, 2020). Yet, the success of these endeavors is frequently hindered by a lack of financial literacy, insufficient market access, and the viability of microfinance models in unstable economic conditions (World Bank, 2019).

2.8.4 Influence of Local Economy and Traditional Crafts

Agriculture is the major economic activity in the rural economy of Afghanistan, and subsistence farming provides the foundation of these local economies. This model of finance puts strict limits on women's employment opportunities and leads to jobs that are mainly labor-

intensive and underpaid (World Bank, 2019). This dependency on agriculture limits women's participation in diversified economic activities and leaves them vulnerable to external shocks such as climate change, market shocks, and conflict-driven disruptions (UNDP, 2025). However, economic empowerment initiatives in these contexts need to go beyond poor rural women's limited economic vulnerabilities to be truly impactful (Noori, 2025).

Traditional crafts are an important part of the local economy and also provide a unique opportunity for women's economic participation. Carpeting, textiles, and other handicrafts are produced in Nangarhar province, where they hold cultural and economic importance, particularly for women (World Bank, 2025). These crafts enable women to generate an income that can be flexible and is often balanced with their domestic responsibilities. Nonetheless, traditional crafts are often rendered economically unviable since they are subject to low market prices, limited access to wider markets, and competition from mass-produced objects (World Bank, 2017). In addition, the absence of formal recognition and support for traditional artisans hampers the ability of these enterprises to scale and become profitable (Noori, 2025).

NGOs are providing training on advanced techniques, and access to the markets, as well as the establishment of women's cooperatives, which enhance the economy of traditional crafts (World Bank, 2017). One such initiative is AWARSA (Afghan Women's Artisanal and Rural Support Association) that focuses on supporting women artisans to develop their skills; facilitate fair trade practices; and connect them with buyers outside the country (World Bank, 2025). These initiatives not only boost women's income but also provide cultural preservation and sustainable economic practices in rural communities.

But the success of such programs hinges on overcoming fundamental hurdles. Security instability, cultural resistance, and limited infrastructure remain barriers to the full realization of economic opportunities for women (Peace Insight, 2021). Another example: to ensure that traditional crafts remain a sufficient source of income, continuous investment, market diversification, and innovation are needed to adapt to changing economic conditions and consumer preferences (UNDP, 2025).

Socio economic factors including employment, education, and access to economic resources plays a pivotal role in empowering women in rural Afghanistan. However, these efforts have proven to be constrained due to some challenges associated with the local economy, traditional crafts, and more broadly to the socio-cultural barriers in the area. Thanks to NGOs that slowly but surely taking action with targeted interventions. The solution to these issues is not a one-dimensional, limited, or narrow perspective of development but rather a multi-faceted plan that includes economic, social, and legal developments for the sake of rural

Afghan women's long-term socio-economic independence. Through improved access to education, expanded work opportunities, and support for traditional crafts, NGOs can play a vital role in empowering rural Afghan women, laying the groundwork for a more equitable and sustainable socio-economic environment.

2.9 Previous Studies and Gaps

In the last few decades, especially after the several socio-political tumult in Afghanistan, the body of literature on women's empowerment in Afghanistan has witnessed development. The different forms of barriers to women's empowerment including sociocultural norms, legal, economic, and even conflict especially have been well-researched by scholars and practitioners (Hasin et al., 2025; UN Women Country Profile, 2024). A large number of studies have been conducted concerning gender inequality in Afghanistan, indicating the strength of the traditional patriarchal structures denying women to access education, employment, and political participation (Hasin et al., 2025; Noori, 2025).

Studies have emphasized the important role of international (INGOs) and local NGOs (LNGOs) in reducing these barriers and empowering women. A range of studies have documented the ways that NGOs put into practice diverse interventions from educational programs and vocational training to economic empowerment initiatives and advocacy efforts that seek to improve the socioeconomic status of women and advance gender equality (UN Women, 2020; Aga Khan University IHD, 2023). Developmental agencies have had a prominent role as well, such as CARE International and UNICEF (UNICEF USA, 2025; World Bank Blogs, 2019), which focused on establishing educational institutions as well as scholarships aimed at increasing female enrollment in schools, especially in rural areas where there are limited institutions that offer education.

It also highlights the importance of capacity building and the inclusion of a gender perspective as a fundamental strategy for sustainable empowerment. Examples of capacity-building initiatives include vocational training, leadership development programs tailored to women's needs, and other complementary services that enable women to pursue economic opportunities and contribute to decision-making within their communities (UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2024; Pande, 2022). Besides, gender-inclusive initiatives promote women's integration into decision-making positions and structures of ethnic community governance to subvert and transform existing gender norms (UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2024; Pande, 2022).

Empowerment studies: Studies comparing rural and urban empowerment have shown that women from different characteristics face varying level of challenges and opportunities.

Even though women in urban areas tend to have better access to education and employment compared to rural women, the latter face more severe sociocultural and economic hindrances such as less infrastructure, stricter patriarchal values, and fewer economic opportunities (UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2024; World Bank, 2024). For example, case studies from provinces such as Nangarhar have shown how issues specific to rural areas such as dependence on subsistence farming and traditional crafts further complicate achieving gender equality (Hasin et al., 2025).

Additionally, investigations of the influence of socio-economic factors have revealed the influence employment, education, and access to economic resources have in catalyzing women's empowerment. Microfinance and entrepreneurship programs are also very promising economic initiatives that can increase women's financial independence and decrease their reliance on male family members (UNDP via Reuters, 2024; Hasin et al., 2025). Nevertheless, such interventions commonly grapple with issues of sustainability, cultural fit, and market access constraints that limit their continued impact (UNDP via Reuters, 2024; Noori, 2025).

2.9.1 Identification of Gaps

While there has been considerable research on women's empowerment in Afghanistan few studies have focused on rural settings like Nangarhar province. Most previous studies will only either look into urban areas or provide a broad overview without focusing on the context-specific challenges & opportunities of how NGO interventions fare in rural communities (Hasin et al., 2025; UN Women, 2024). Such urban-centric bias restricts insights into the socio-cultural and economic dynamics of rural contexts and how these can shape women's empowerment initiatives.

These gaps include, among others, the absence of systematic evaluation of the effectiveness and sustainability of NGO interventions in rural Afghanistan over the long term. Many studies have shown the immediate impact of the educational and economic programs, but only a few have investigated the long-term outcomes of the initiatives, particularly given the decades of security fragility, and social and cultural resistance (Noori, 2025; Amnesty International, 2022) It is essential to comprehend how long-lasting those programs to be able to create the necessary strategies to grant a permanent empowerment and socio-economic growth to rural women.

Moreover, very little work has been done on the intersectionality of socio-economic factors in rural contexts. Current literature tends to consider factors like employment, education, and economic resources in isolation from one another, neglecting to examine how these interact and compound to affect women's empowerment (Kabeer, 1999; Narula & Mucel,

2021). This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the interactions between these factors and assessing their combined impact on the lives and aspirations of rural women in Nangarhar.

A key gap is the lack of specific studies concerning the strategies used by NGOs in rural contexts to foster capacity building and gender inclusion. Although literature discusses these strategies, there remains limited in-depth analysis of the way NGOs adjust their approaches to better fit the cultural and economic characteristics of rural areas (Ager et al., 2011; UN Women, 2024). This study aims to gain a deep understanding of what methods and practices are utilized on NGO projects in rural Afghanistan, and how they are implemented to achieve gender equality and sustainable development.

In addition, there are many studies out there that feature women but they often just feature women as a program outcome, or their strategies for being organizationally effective, not stories of their real lives. More qualitative studies are needed to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and aspirations of rural women to better understand how they feel about the role of NGOs- the contributions made and shortcomings ((UN Women, 2020; Hasin et al., 2025) in their empowerment journey. This study will fill this gap by incorporating primary data from interviews and focus groups conducted with women beneficiaries, which will provide a more holistic and empathic view of their empowerment processes.

Finally, literature on context-specific case studies that provide a clear and localized perspective on issues endemic to rural areas or the rural impact of NGO interventions is also significantly lacking. Although there are case studies that address the empowerment of women in rural areas through the agency of NGOs, they tend to be of limited scope leaving out elaboration of the means through which such agencies instigate empowerment amongst women in rural settings (Noori, 2025; Amnesty International, 2022). Focusing on Nangarhar province, this study seeks to generate case-specific findings to facilitate informed stakeholder engagement and inform more relevant interventions in similar rural contexts in Afghanistan.

In conclusion, despite considerable research highlighting the challenges and opportunities for women's empowerment in Afghanistan, major gaps exist, especially in rural contexts such as Nangarhar province. The present study seeks to address these gaps: by conducting a systematic appraisal of NGO interventions, examining the intersectionality of socio-economic determinants, and capturing the subjective experiences of rural women. Through filling these gaps, this research aims to enhance our understanding of women's empowerment in rural Afghanistan in a more comprehensive and context-specific way that intends to provide more effective and long-term strategies to ensure gender equality and socio-economic development in the region.

2.10 Theoretical Framework

2.10.1 Relevant Theories on Women's Empowerment

A sound theoretical base that informs our understanding of rural Afghan women rooted in complex narratives of gender, socio-economic circumstances, and external dynamics is essential to understanding women's empowerment. With the help of three key theories: Feminist Theory; Capability Approach and Social Capital Theory, processes of empowerment of Afghan women can have a broad spectrum to analyze through the introduction. Not only do these theories provide foundational concepts for the study, they help to determine how empirical data should be interpreted.

2.10.2 Feminist Theory

Feminist theory provides a crucial framework for analyzing and fighting for the rights of women and gender equality. Feminist Theory, as per Butler (Butler, 1990), is founded on the analysis of patriarchal structures and examines the systemic inequalities that women encounter across different aspects of life: social, economic, and political. These concepts include gender roles, patriarchy, and intersectionality- all of which show how social norms and power relations reinforce differences in how individuals experience gender (Crenshaw, 1989).

Feminist theory is also very suitable in a rural context in Afghanistan since it has highlighted how deeply entrenched patriarchal structures limit women's mobility, education, and economic participation (Ahmad, 2015). Applying Feminist Theory to the study will help in critically understanding how cultural and social structures in Nangarhar province hinder the empowerment of women and through the role of NGOs in challenging and changing these patriarchal structures (Kandiyoti, 1998). Moreover, feminist theory holds that agency and empowerment are crucial, as members of the opposite sex should actively participate in the outcomes in both domestic and societal contexts (Butler, 1990). This theory indicates the importance of not just facilitating women vis-a-vis external obstacles but also structural empowerment, where building on these internalized barriers is further sustained.

2.10.3 Capability Approach (Amartya Sen)

The Capability Approach was developed in the works of the Economist Amartya Sen and addresses how to assess individual well-being and social arrangements in terms of the opportunities that individuals have to achieve what they value (Sen, 1999). While other economic indicators focus on the means that can secure outcomes (such as income or resources), the Capability Approach focuses on the ends (that is, the real opportunities 'or capabilities' individuals have to attain the outcomes they value) (Nussbaum, 2011).

The Capability Approach can, in the context of this study, serve as a tool to evaluate how socio-economic elements such as education, market employment, and the availability of financial resources augment or restrict the capabilities of rural Afghan women (Sen, 1999). Examine existing practices: For example Vocational training and microfinance programs initiated by NGOs can be evaluated against the extent to which they enable women to pursue an economic activity, achieve financial independence, and enter leadership in their communities (Narula & Mucel, 2021). In doing so, the study can capture empowerment not only as increased wealth but also as increased freedoms and opportunities, which afford women the agency to make significant choices regarding their own lives (Nussbaum, 2011).

In addition, the Capability Approach matches the study interest of capacity building and gender inclusion, as the approach emphasizes the need for enabling environments to develop women's potential and to be able to exercise their freedoms and well-being (Sen, 1999). Utilizing this theoretical lens enables the research to evaluate the impact of the different interventions by NGOs toward developing the overall well-being and determination of rural women in Nangarhar.

2.10.4 Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory explores social networks, community ties, and collective norms that enable groups to work together and accomplish shared objectives (Bourdieu, 1986, Putnam, 2000). However, research globally would define social capital as the value that one can derive from social networks and social relationships that help gain access to the gatekeepers of information, opportunity, and support (Coleman, 1988).

Considering the strength of community networks and social connections available to women in rural Afghanistan, Social Capital theory offers many insights into how women are empowered by their social networks and participation in community efforts (Putnam, 2000). Social capital can be harnessed by civil society/NGOs and this can involve maintaining a network that promotes the gathering of women together to share, mentor, build relationships and trust (Ager et al., 2011) AWARSA (Afghan Women's Artisanal and Rural Support Association) and other NGOs offer training in women's cooperatives and in leadership that help build ties at the community level, enabling women to unite in advocacy for their rights and to address joint challenges (Barfield, 2010).

Social Capital Theory also discusses how bridging and bonding social capital has contributed to gender inclusion. Bridging social capital; that is, connections that cut across diverse social bifurcations, and that can then be used to share information and resources (Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, bonding social capital is about strong ties in a homogeneous

group, providing emotional support and cohesive social groups (Coleman, 1988). Both these forms of social capital are of particular significance to NGOs as they help establish inclusive networks that tap into broader systems of support whilst fostering a sense of community solidarity that has the potential to empower women, especially in rural Nangarhar (Ager et al., 2011).

2.11 Integration of Theories in the Study

It indicates that Feminist Theory, Capability Approach, and Social Capital Theory provide a more integrative and multi-dimensional perspective for the analysis of the women empowerment phenomenon in the context of rural Afghanistan. While Feminist Theory helps to identify the various social constructs and cultural impediments that limit women further within the patriarchal edifice; the Capability Approach helps to assess the effectiveness of the range of interventions being employed by the NGOs to empower women through increasing their 'freedoms and capabilities' by working and tracking the journey of converting capabilities to 'functioning'. Social Capital Theory complements these views by highlighting the importance of social networks and community resources available to facilitate empowerment as a collective effort.

So by employing these theories, the study will cover the gender agency with the socio-cultural norms and the community dimension to have better integration to understand the drivers of women's empowerment in Nangarhar province. Furthermore, this chapter contextualizes the analysis including theoretical implications aiming to lay the foundations for arguing the kind of strategies NGO can share to overcome barriers and facilitate sustainable empowerment of rural Afghan women.

This combination strengthens the analytical framework as it establishes a connection between women's agency and the capabilities they have access to and Social Capital Theory emphasizes the role of social networks and support systems, which have been recognized as important for women in rural communities. Being collectively socio-culturally, economically, and communally, they have vital features in realizing field-based insights for giving agency to rural women. Such a perspective would help the research analyze critically how NGOs are well placed to promote gender inclusion and capacity development that would foster effective and sustainable empowerment strategies in Nangarhar province.

2.12 Application of Theories to the Study

Connecting Feminist Theory with Capability Approach and Social Capital Theory undoubtedly presents a holistic and multidimensional perspective for examining the evidential

impact that NGOs exert on the empowerment of women in the context of rural Afghanistan. Through different angles of how empowerment occurs, and what can block it, these theories inform the research questions and objectives as a whole.

2.12.1 Informing Research Questions and Objectives

Feminist Theory is central to framing the research questions and aims, as it highlights the need to understand and interrogate the patriarchal structures that contribute to gender inequality in rural Afghanistan (Butler, 1990). Such a theoretical lens will guide questions about how social practice, including socio-cultural norms and patriarchal orders, restricts women's opportunities, and whether NGOs are empowered to dismantle such restrictions. For example, Research Question 1 “How do women in Nangarhar view the contributions and limitations of NGOs on their road towards empowerment, especially regarding their socio-economic opportunities, education, and social inclusion in the local context? Is derived from Feminist Theory’s concern with power relations and gender dynamics (Ahmad, 2015).

The study’s objectives are based on Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach, which emphasizes the importance of both capabilities and functioning, rather than the mere allocation of resources (Sen, 1999). This assignment is central (for both theoretical and data collection purposes) to the stated Research Question 2 “How are socio-economic challenges and barriers (for example unregulated employment, and limited access to formal and informal education) affecting the lives and ambitions of women living in rural areas of Nangarhar province in Afghanistan?” by insisting on assessing how NGO interventions deepen these capabilities and expand their practical discourses of choice in their lives (Nussbaum, 2011). Similarly, Research Lab 3 “What are the perceptions and experiences of rural women in Nangarhar on the effects of development interventions (including skills training and economic empowerment programs implemented by NGOs) on their socio-economic status and well-being?” resonates with the Capability Approach’s emphasis on individual agency and well-being.

Social Capital Theory further supports these ideas by emphasizing the role of social networks, communal support, and collective action in promoting women's empowerment (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000). Research Question 4 “What are the driving social factors surrounding women empowerment development initiatives and how do they reflect upon the dynamics of culture and socio-economy in the region? Is guided by this theory. By demonstrating how social capital can help the sustainability and impact of NGO programs (Coleman, 1988). Ager et al. (2011) provide insights into the role of bridging and bonding social capital, underscoring the potential of community engagement and support networks to magnify the effects of empowerment interventions.

2.12.2 Framework for Analyzing NGO Impact on Women's Empowerment

The three theories used together create a strong analytic framework to analyze the effects of NGOs on women's empowerment in rural Nangarhar. Evaluation of NGO interventions and their implications for socio-economic development can be critically reflected through feminist theory. This perspective helps to analyze how well NGOs tackle the socio-cultural nuances that inhibit women's access to education, employment opportunities, and leadership.

If applied in practice, it could provide a metric of the real change in women's situation through NGO programs. This shift in perspective allows for a richer appreciation of how educational and economic interventions lead to greater freedoms and opportunities for women (Sen, 1999) through enhancing women's capabilities. This approach is especially important in the context of evaluating vocational training and microfinance programs, where the study's measurements can align with such changes as those granted by dignity, by both analyzing access to resources and women's agency and decision-making (Nussbaum, 2011).

Social Capital Theory complements this framework, emphasizing how communal networks are integral to sustaining empowering efforts. This framework allows us to measure the role of NGOs by looking at how NGOs are bridging gaps between women and the community through social networks that provide support and collective voice (Putnam, 2000). Without the social capital focus, it is impossible to grasp how sustainable the various dimensions of empowerment will be (Coleman, 1988), and to what extent these dimensions are indeed rooted within the local socio-fabric.

This enables a contextual consideration of the structural, individual, and communal dimensions of women's empowerment in analyzing NGO impact drawing on these perspectives, this paper aims to provide a holistic analysis of the contribution of NGOs to women's empowerment. It constitutes a comprehensive assessment of the dynamics involved in the ways NGOs negotiate and co-create socio-cultural norms, enhance women's capabilities, and mobilize social capital to produce sustainable and meaningful empowerment outcomes.

This multidimensional lens is crucial to understanding and analyzing the holistic process of women's empowerment in rural Afghanistan, as is the case with the application of Feminist Theory, Capability Approach, and Social Capital Theory. The use of three dimensions of the capabilities approach in this study is grounded in the two dimensions of the capabilities approach- firstly, the Functioning (outcomes of agency, descriptions of what a person chooses, achieves, or is), and secondly, Agency (refers to the ability to choose and act) and NGO Development Data is also collected from another source, such as the Recommendation of

External Agencies or Professionals, for later analysis of the study, because the finding will not only strengthen the discussion but make the finding more comprehensive, appropriate and practical for constructing more successful sustainable empowerment programs in Nangarhar province.

2.13 Conclusion

The Literature Review and Theoretical Framework chapters offered a holistic view of the complex interactions that shape women's empowerment in rural Afghanistan, especially in the context of Nangarhar province. Drawing on the literature on gender inequality in Afghanistan (Ahmad, 2015; Barfield, 2010), the exploration started with an analysis of the entrenched history and culture of the country that shaped patriarchal practices that challenge women's access to education, occupation as well as the political arena. The inequalities faced by women become further compounded by legal and societal barriers, such as discriminatory inheritance laws and societal expectations that impose domesticity on women (Kandiyoti, 1998; UN Women, 2020).

Many in-depth reviews have advocated for the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to alleviate these barriers through the application of different interventions in the fields of education, economic empowerment, and social inclusion that improve women's socio-economic status and promote gender equality (Yar & Sail, 2025; UN Women, 2020). It is evidenced by such remarkable achievements as higher educational enrolments for girls and the creation of women's cooperatives, these initiatives struggle with tremendous challenges in the landscape of security instability, cultural resistance, and sustainability (Gibney, 2021; Amnesty International, 2022).

Additionally, the importance of capacity building and gender inclusion has been highlighted in the literature explaining how NGOs work with strategies like vocational training, leadership development, and financial literacy programs to empower women (Kabeer, 1999; Ager et al., 2011). Rural women experience greater socio-cultural as well as economic hurdles compared to their urban counterparts, which calls for innovative context-sensitive implementation for effective empowerment (Barfield, 2010; Narula & Mucel, 2021). Nangarhar case studies highlighted the specific challenges of rural women like dependence on subsistence farming and traditional crafts, and illustrated proposed solutions through (effective and less effective) targeted NGO interventions (UNICEF, 2020; AWARSA, 2021).

Key socio-economic factors in promoting women's empowerment through a review of socio-economic factors - the interlinkage of employment, education, and access to economic

resources. Although limited and often informal, employment opportunities give women financial autonomy and serve to bolster their social standing (World Bank, 2019; Kandiyoti, 1998). Education appears as a key driving force for women to take various professions and make informed decisions, allowing for increased agency and socio-political engagement (Rashid, 2008; UN Women, 2020). Economic resources help women become less dependent on their male counterparts, incentivizing entrepreneurship through microfinance and property rights (Kiva, n.d.; CARE International, 2020).

The study reviewed the theoretical framework briefly and then integrated Feminist Theory, Capability Approach, and Social Capital Theory to give a holistic review of women's empowerment through the social capital approach in rural Afghanistan. Feminist Theory provides critical lenses through which to view the gendered power dynamics and structural inequalities that thwart women's empowerment (butler, 1990). Following the Capability Approach, the study was sensitized to how a dimension of well-being was the ability to have choice—yes or no, expanding women's capabilities (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011) and to participate in development with (or without) NGO intervention. The role of social networks and community support in sustaining economic empowerment efforts is one of the critical dimensions identified by Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988) and this highlights the need for collective action and community engagement to encourage gender inclusion.

These theories served as lenses for viewing and understanding the multifaceted nature of women's empowerment and helped shape the research questions and objectives. They enabled an integrated assessment of how NGO interventions interplay with socioeconomic realities to yield positive and sustainable empowerment outcomes among women in rural Afghanistan.

From the chapter addressing research literature in-depth, the development of a strong theory now comes the turn of chapter 3: Research Methodology. The following chapter will detail the research methods implemented in this study to assess NGO interventions on women in Nangarhar province. It will describe the research design, data collection procedures, sampling techniques, and analytical methods used to investigate the research questions established in the previous section. Using qualitative approaches, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with women beneficiaries and NGO practitioners, the study seeks to obtain insights into the daily experiences and views of rural Afghan women.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The Research Methodology chapter outlines the systematic procedure used to explore the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) in women empowerment in Nangarhar though this study provides empirical evidence from rural Afghanistan. The study's blueprint is laid out in this chapter, which includes the research design, the process of data collection and the methods of analysis to be applied to investigate the research questions raised in the previous chapters. The chapter does so by orientating the reader with a thorough explanation of the methodological construct, which will afford the research context and facilitate the reliability, validity, and replicability (Creswell, 2014) of this paper, which would in return enhance the robustness of the findings of the study.

The main objective of this chapter is to clearly explain why the research design and approach were selected for the study and what theoretical implications they serve. The section

thus starts with a description of the overall research design, where it explains whether the research adopts a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approach and justifies this decision about the nature of the research questions and the contextual factors in rural Nangarhar. This is followed by a description of the data collection methods including selection of participants, instruments, and ethical standards. It also describes how the data analysis methods that will be used to make sense of the gathered data will be connected to each of the theoretical concepts explored before, namely Feminist Theory, Capability Approach, and Social Capital Theory (Yin, 2018).

Additionally, this chapter outlines the limitations and biases within the research design and ways to address them in order to carry out this research study. The chapter's systematic progression through the methodological approach enhances transparency allowing for a critical appraisal of the study's methodological robustness. Such methodological robustness is essential for yielding credible and actionable knowledge on how NGO interventions can effectively accelerate women's empowerment in rural Afghan settings, addressing the identified literature gaps and contributing to the wider academic discourse of gender and development (Patton, 2015).

Thus focusing on the Research Methodology chapter is essential as it is a blueprint of the research study following which the research is conducted ensuring that the research design, research method, sampling method, and data analysis technique are systematically aligned with each other as well as with the research goals and theoretical underpinnings. Not only does the alignment improve the validity and reliability of the findings but it also allows the study to adequately examine the multifaceted nature of socio-cultural, economic, and organizational factors contributing to women's empowerment in rural Afghanistan.

3.2 Research Design

This research is designed through an analysis of the research objectives and questions, providing the foundation for establishing the most appropriate research design to be adopted for this proposed study. The study aims to analyze the Contribution of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in liberating women in rural areas of Afghanistan with respect to Nangarhar province. Since the research inquiries are exploratory in nature, in order to ascertain the perceptions, experiences, and socio-economic changes that rural women undergo, qualitative research design is deemed most suited.

3.3 Research Strategy

3.3.1 Case Study Approach Focusing on Nangarhar Province

Drawing on a case study in Nangarhar province, this study examines this relationship, providing a more nuanced and contextually grounded analysis of implications for women's empowerment of NGO interventions. In this case, a case study is the relevant research methodology to use as it can act as 'assessors of complex phenomena in real-life contexts (e.g. Yin, 2018)' and is relevant to the study being that it addresses a topic that cannot be easily separated from its context.

3.3.2 Rationale for Choosing a Case Study Approach:

Nangarhar province offers these distinctive features in terms of socio-cultural, economics and security perspectives. A Case Study enables an exploration of how these contextual factors shape the success of NGO interventions in unleashing women's empowerment (Harrison et al., 2017). This enables a comprehensive exploration of the complex interplay among NGOs, socio-economic conditions, and women empowerment. It allows for the integration of multiple data sources (e.g., interviews, surveys, observational data) to build a holistic understanding of the empowerment processes (Yin, 2018; Nowell & Albrecht, 2019). As outlined in Section Two, available literature specifically examining Nangarhar rationale for carrying out this case study are limited; therefore, the case study approach allows new understandings to be generated in an under-explored area while contributing to existing literature on gender and development in Afghanistan ((Gerring, 2017). The case study design allows for an exploration which can apply and expand theoretical frameworks. This study draws on Feminist Theory, Capability Approach and Social Capital Theory — allowing for the analysis of how they are positioned within the particular context of Nangarhar (Yin, 2018).

Nangarhar is chosen due to its large number of rural women, outreach of NGOs and a mix of traditional and modern socio-economic practices. This province offers an ideal case study for exploring the forces that impact women's empowerment in a rural, Afghan setting. The study relies on several lines of evidence, including: Through case study analysis, this paper provides a specific discussion of NGO programs in the area, where through In-depth Interviews with beneficiaries of NGO programs, NGO practitioners and local community leaders, the ways in which empowerment processes are understood are explored. Focus Group Discussions with groups of women were conducted to examine shared experiences as well as community-level effects of NGO interventions. NGO reports, policy documents and relevant literature were analysed to situate the empirical findings within existing frameworks and practices (Document Analysis). Data triangulation helps involve validation and a holistic perspective with the effect of NGOs on women's empowerment through the dimensions of

social change, social relationships, and economic activity. This exercise serves as a cross-check and tames individual data source barriers (Noble & Heale, 2019). In this way, case studies nurture the ability to discover contextual factors unique that contribute to success or pitfalls of NGO initiatives. Their specific nature allows for customized recommendations and strategies that can inform ways to promote women's empowerment in both rural and poorer contexts (Thomas, 2021).

3.4 Population and Sample

3.4.1 Target Population

This research is focused on rural women of Nangarhar province of Afghanistan who are directly involved or ultimately affected by programs of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) Nangarhar, located in eastern Afghanistan, is an agrarian based economy with diverse ethnicities and many international and local NGOs working on various types of women's empowerment, including education, economic development, and social inclusion (Barfield, 2010; Ahmadzai, 2020).

Research on rural women is even more urgently needed because they encounter more powerful socioeconomic and cultural obstacles than urban women. Empirical Evidence of Distal Social Protection Mechanisms and Care Policy for Central Asia: 20 years of Central Asian social protection policy reveals an explicit policy priority towards economic growth that has undermined the role of the state as a social provider (Sujaev et al. 2019). This population was selected so that more knowledge could be derived about what particular needs and issues are experienced by women that these NGO led programs ultimately aim to address (Grace & Pain, 2004).

3.4.2 Sampling Technique

This study necessitated a purposive sampling method for answering the research questions. Purposive sampling (that is, judgmental or selective sampling) is a sampling technique in which researchers rely on their own judgment when selecting subjects (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Such a non-probability sampling approach suits qualitative research in that we seek depth of understanding rather than to make generalizations to a wider population (Patton, 2015).

This study will utilize a purposive sampling design to select rural women with experiences in the NGO programs in Nangarhar. This allows us to ensure that participants had the experience and knowledge necessary to provide meaningful and relevant insights to the ways in which NGOs can influence women's empowerment (Campbell et al., 2025; Palinkas

et al., 2015). The broader agenda of purposive sampling also helps to achieve diversity of perspectives by factors such as the age of the participants, the level of education, the economic status, and participation in different types of NGO programs where one can ensure that the sample has adequate representations across relevant variables, and therefore the data gathered is as rich as possible, facilitating the comprehensiveness of the study (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

3.4.3 Sample Size

This study has retained the principles of qualitative research in sampling, whereby the emphasis was on the richness and depth of data, not on number of samples. Consisting of 20 in depth interviews and two focus group discussions with ten women each, to provide sufficient sample size. This number of participants was selected to achieve data saturation, which is the stage at which no new themes or insights arise from additional data collection, thus ensuring the comprehensive and reliability of the results (Guest et al., 2021; Hennink et al., 2017).

3.4.5 Focus Group Discussions:

Two focus group discussions with 10 women each provide a platform for collective dialogue, enabling the emergence of shared experiences and community level insights. Focus groups can reveal dynamics and consensus that individual interviews might not capture, thus complementing the qualitative data from interviews (Morgan, 1998; Nyumba et al., 2018)

3.4.6 Data Saturation:

Findings show that for many qualitative studies, data saturation starts to occur somewhere in the range of 20–30 interviews, hence a total of 30 participants were sufficient to gain a wide breadth, and depth of personal experiences relative to NGO intervention in rural Nangarhar (asileiou et al., 2018; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022)

3.4.7 Resource Constraints:

A sample size such as 30 is a pragmatic judgment based on pragmatic constraints of time, access, and resources, and will not bring detriment to the overall depth and quality of the research (Vasileiou et al., 2018). The purposive sampling of 30 participants also included a range of stakeholders, informing the study analysis with a diverse breadth of perspectives on the effects of NGO interventions on women's empowerment in Nangarhar. Such a sample size is critical to unraveling the myriad influences of socioeconomic factors, cultural norms, and organizational interventions in the formation of women's experiences and subsequent outcomes, enabling the generation of findings that hold wide ranging applicability and implications for action, in both the academic and practical domains.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

3.5.1 Primary Data Collection

Collecting primary data is crucial for this study, as it allows access to firsthand accounts of the experiences, perceptions, and effects of NGOs on women's empowerment in rural Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. For holistic understanding, the study was based on qualitative methodologies including semi structured interviews, and focus group discussions. These techniques are employed to collect and elucidate on both individual and group perspectives, facilitating a polyphonic interpretation of the empowerment processes.

Interviews: The data collection method relies on semi structured interviews providing the required flexibility while remaining within a framework to systematically investigate relevant issues revolving around women's empowerment (Brinkmann, 2018). Two groups were interviewed here, the women beneficiaries being the first one while the second one was about NGO staff members.

Women Beneficiaries: Additionally, it uses semi structured interviews with women who are direct beneficiaries of NGO intervention, and so, able to provide rich qualitative data on how these programmes affect the lives of these women for the better. Questions would be about changing the socio economic situation based on the experience of education and some economic programs, the difference made in such education programs in improving the socio-economic situation and important challenges in this journey. This allows participants to articulate their narratives and share their lived experiences with their own voice which reveal the nuance and context that a purely quantitative method may overlook (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

NGO Staff Members: asking NGO staff on how they design, implement, and evaluate empowerment programs. You will learn about approaches that addressed gender inequalities, challenges in carrying out the program, and measures towards sustainability and cultural sensitivity. NGO practitioners must know how interventions are implemented and how effective they are from an organizational perspective (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Justification: A semi structured interview style is appropriate for this study as it favors an in depth exploration of participants' experiences with the opportunity for probing further based on responses (Bryman, 2016). This is in line with the qualitative nature of the research design that allows the collection of rich, detailed data that can contribute to the development of the theoretical frame of Feminist Theory, Capability Approach, and Social Capital Theory (Yin, 2018).

Focus Groups: The individual interviews will be complemented by focus group discussions that will capture group views and mediated interaction among group members

(Morgan, 1998, Nyumba et al., 2018). An Establishment Direct Analysis with two focused groups (10 women beneficiaries in each group) will be conducted on the same issues and share their experiences with NGO programs and sociocultural dynamic community for women empowerment.

Organizing focus groups to promote the sharing of similar challenges and successes will encourage these women to voice their opinions on how interventions made through the NGO impact the community as a whole. This context enables participants to respond to and build on one another, exposing consensus or variation in attitudes within the community (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Getting to know how are behave in a group can give more layers to understanding social norms, social support, and group views about women's empowerment. Such methods are powerful in eliciting context about community level features that may not be as easily integrated into individual interview formats (Green & Thorogood, 2018). Focus groups allow for individual sexuality to take place as women can see how the women they are engaging with understand and experience the empowerment initiatives getting them to share narratives or giving credit to communal ways of knowing (Liamputtong, 2011). This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the social context and collective dynamics that shape individual empowerment, complementing the individual level insights and contributing to the depth of the overall analysis (Morgan, 1998).

Observations: Observational methods will include visits to NGO project sites and community settings in Nangarhar province. All these observations will add context to data while providing the researcher with an opportunity to witness, directly, the application of empowerment programs vis-a-vis interactions in the community. Through the observation of NGO operations (Mulhall, 2003), which could include training sessions, workshops, and community meetings, for example, the researcher can examine the practical side of program delivery, e.g., participant engagement, resource utilization, and compliance with program objectives (Angrosino, 2007). Field observations will document the interactions between NGO staff and community stakeholders that illustrate the cultural context responsiveness of interventions. This approach will also allow for the discovery of informal practices and unwritten rules that shape women's empowerment (Angrosino, 2007).

Combined with self-reported data from interviews and focus groups (Tracy, 2019), observations offer a non-intrusive method for collecting data about what people do and how they interact. Embedded cases permit a holistic view of the processes of empowerment,

providing the context in which the processes occur, which has been shown to enhance the validity of research (Yin, 2018).

Integration of Data Collection Methods: Combining semi structured interviews, focus group discussions and observations to triangulate and improve the quality of the research findings ((Flick, 2018). This technique cross checks details between sources, with consideration for biased approaches (Patton, 2015). The use of such methods provides the study with a holistic and nuanced understanding of how the NGO in rural Nangarhar retains individual as well as collective influence on the various dimensions of women's empowerment.

3.5.2 Secondary Data Collection

Document Analysis: Apart from primary data collection methods, secondary data stems an important role in this research in delivering contextual background, enriching depth of analysis and triangulation of findings. Document analysis is the approach often adopted for secondary data, defined as a systematic approach to examine and interpret existing documents related to the context of study (Bowen 2009). This involves the reviewing of reports from NGOs, policy papers, and previous research, revealing the context of women's empowerment initiatives in the rural Nangarhar province in 2010s Afghanistan.

Regular reporting with a detailed data matrix on the goals, implementation methods, and outcomes of programs to empower women will be an excellent source of information (CARE International, 2020). These reports often include quantitative data on program reach, qualitative narrative accounts from beneficiaries, and assessments of program effectiveness – all essential information to capture the scale and impact of these interventions in the field (CARE International, 2020). The analysis of these documents allows for the identification of best practices, the effectiveness of theory relating to NGO activities, and the sustainability of empowerment practices.

Policy Documents: Policy Documents defining the government and regulatory framework governing the operations of NGOs in Afghanistan and how it indirectly influences women empowerment (Government of Afghanistan, 2019) these include national developmental plans, gender equality policies and legal statutes concerning women empowerment and rights. By reviewing policy documents, the study contextualizes the NGO interventions in the wider socio political environment, noting policy features that can either facilitate or constrain the implementation and success of empowerment programmes (Barfield, 2010). Policy analysis may uncover disparities between policy intent and real world

implementation, which could suggest areas in which NGOs need to push for policy change in order to be more effective.

Previous Studies: Previous Studies which have taken place in Afghanistan, indicating the lack of research on the subject in the context of Afghanistan, and setting the stage for the analysis presented in the existing study (Samimy, 2020). An examination of the academic literature is thus useful for recognizing important themes, approaches to methods and findings from previous studies, anchoring the current scholarship in existing literature. Such literature review will not only help in the refining research questions and hypotheses, but will also ensure that the study extends and adds value to existing academic discourses (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, comparisons with previous studies and longitudinal trends in women's empowerment will be important to assess the progress made and the barriers that remain in rural Nangarhar.

Rationale for Document Analysis: By including document analysis as a second type of data collection method, although primary data collection provides a wealth of information, document analysis creates a rich and in depth method of triangulation (Bowen, 2009). While primary data reflect experience, secondary data attest to the history of a situation, offering longitudinal and contextual insights that provide evidence of trends over time, and a more complete perspective of systemic factors that shape women empowerment (Altheide, 2006). Document analysis is also inexpensive in both monetary and temporal cost because scholars can draw upon a vast source of information without being bound by the logistical constraints of primary data collection (Fink, 2013).

Integration with Primary Data: This study collects primary data that will be further analyzed using document analysis as an analytical tool, with data sources including interviews, focus groups, and social observations. It also enables data triangulation which in turn enhances confidence in the validity and reliability of the research findings (Denzin, 1978). For example, data from NGO reports could provide some contextual information which can be checked against the experiences and observations of interviewees and thus uncover consistencies or discrepancies and a deeper understanding. Policy documents can also serve as an external explanation for the relevance of NGO interventions and present a general understanding of the empowerment processes (Barfield, 2010).

To sum up, the document analysis of NGO reports, policy documents, and previous studies served as a critical part of the secondary data collection approach for this research. It grounded the problem, the interpretation of the primary data, and the exploration of the environment where the outlined elements of women's empowerment are enabled or suppressed

in the rural Nangarhar province. Regular reviews and combination of the documents helped produce a holistic and informed analysis, which, in turn, strengthened the quality and justification of the findings.

Data Collection Instruments: The study required a deep understanding of the role played by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in empowering women in Afghanistan's rural districts of Nangarhar province, the data collection tools involved were mix of specific instruments: interviews, focus group guides and observation checklists. Subsequently, the relevant instruments are identified after connecting them with the research questions and objectives.

Interview guides are instrumental to the main data collection strategy, guiding semi-structured interviews with NGO staff and women beneficiaries of the NGO programs. If the beneficiaries we are looking at are women, then the interview questions are designed to probe into their lived experiences of educational and economic programs, for example, "Please tell me about the programs you have attended through the NGO? And "How have these programs influenced your employment opportunities and economic state?" These questions are intended to elicit detailed narratives of the impact of NGO interventions on their own lives. Interviews with NGO staff members are likewise focused on the design and implementation of these programs, such as "What are the main goals of the NGO's women's empowerment programs? And "What approaches do you take to ensure that these programs are culturally sensitive and effective?" The combination of these two perspectives enables a comprehensive analysis of both project target groups' perspective, as well as the systemic development, which thus provides an in depth insight into the empowerment trajectory (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

In addition to individual interviews, gains to prepare focus group protocols that led to group discussions with women beneficiaries these focus groups are organized around key topics that include their experiences with various NGO programs, their perceived notions of empowerment, and barriers to empowerment. For example, conversations could be stimulated with questions such as "What kinds of programs have you and other women in your community joined?" and "How have these programs together affected your community?" Another valuable aspect of focus groups is that their structured yet flexible nature allows respondents to build off of one another's responses, which can uncover shared experiences and different opinions within a community. This approach not only complements the types of collective insights that can be gained but also brings to the forefront the social dynamics and community level impacts of the NGO intervention (Morgan, 1998).

Besides interviews and focus group is also used as an observation checklists during the field visits to the NGO project site and/or community settings. These checklists serve as a systematic framework for documenting observations regarding program implementation, participant experiences, cultural sensitivity, infrastructure, and community engagement. Such notes meticulously include such criteria as whether there are educational and vocational training activities present, the level of women participant engagement, and the manner and way in which local cultural norms are presented. For example, whether women are showing up, the nature of the interaction between NGO staff and participants, and whether program locations are accessible and well kept. Collecting objective data allows the study to record the actual outcomes of NGOs, providing a further contrast with the qualitative data collected through interviews and focus groups (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Since the research instruments are integrated, they enable triangulation that increases the reliability and validity of the research results. This is further validated through crosschecking information from individual interviews, group discussions, and personal observations that provide a holistic and in depth understanding of the effect of NGO interventions on women empowerment within rural Nangarhar. Denzin (1978) emphasized the importance of this kind of multifaceted approach, arguing that using multiple methods to gather data provides rich insights not only about individual experiences but also with regard to how experience is shaped within wider community contexts and organizational practices.

Conventionally, to ensure a thorough and valid data collection process, respondents are provided with interview guides or focus group protocols from which the data are collected — observations are also done as a form of observation checklists. The inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative data sources allows for a comprehensive understanding of the program's effectiveness, while the participatory nature of sure instruments ensures that the voices of the beneficiaries are heard and integrated into the findings.

3.6 Data Analysis Techniques

3.6.1 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data, which is derived from semi structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observations will undergo thematic analysis, a well-established process for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which is an appropriate analytic technique to apply to this study as it enables the systematic identification and examination of patterns and themes within data drawn from different sources (Braun & Clarke,

2006) thus revealing deeper meanings and insights relevant to women empowerment in rural Nangarhar province. To this end, this approach is perfectly suited to the theoretical frameworks of the study of Feminist Theory, Capability Approach, and Social Capital Theory by allowing to identification of themes that capture the sociocultural, economic, and communal aspects of empowerment produced via NGO participation.

3.6.2 Coding Procedures

Coding is the first step of thematic analysis and refers to the process of organizing and sorting qualitative data into meaningful segments (Saldaña, 2016). A systematic coding procedure will be used to guide interpretation of the quality of data, and a systematic method for interpreting the findings. Open coding will first be performed, wherein segments of data are assigned preliminary codes that reflect the content of those segments without preconceived expectations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Then comes axial coding, during which the relationship between codes is identified, and larger categories or themes begin to be revealed. Lastly, selective coding will be performed to refine and integrate these themes, ensuring that they comprehensively address the research questions and align with the theoretical frameworks (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Inter coder reliability will be established to increase reliability and validity through consensus on coding discrepancies among three researchers (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). It helps to reduce individual bias and allows for a more objective interpretation of the data. They will also involve iterative review and refinement of codes. Such an approach was taken so as to more closely reflect the complexity and context driven nature of women's empowerment experienced in rural Nangarhar (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.6.4 Integration of Data Analysis Techniques

By incorporating thematic analysis, systematic coding procedures, and qualitative data analysis software, a solid foundation is established for analyzing the qualitative data within this study. This represents a complex approach to data scrutiny, permitting the extraction of multidimensional, intricate themes that expose the entangled intersections among the sociocultural, economic, and community domains concerning the enablement of women's empowerment in rural Nangarhar (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). Using both rigid description and software, the analysis of data is done to the depth

and most reliability and validity which significantly adds to the field of gender and development.

The thematic analysis draws on well-established qualitative research principles and offers a detailed systematic process using qualitative data analysis software, which supplemented the qualitative analysis in this study. We believe using key informants in this process allows for an in depth examination of how these systems operate, and how they influence individual and collective experiences for rural Afghan women, while concurrently not straying from the theoretical foundations established through Feminist Theory, Capability Approach, and Social Capital Theory. The use of these data analysis techniques makes the study well positioned to reveal significant patterns and themes that help to clarify the impact of NGO interventions on women's empowerment in Nangarhar province and guide the formulation of effective and sustainable empowerment strategies.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

The reliability and validity of the findings of this research were important to maintain the credibility as well as the academic strength of this study regarding the effect of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) on women's empowerment in the rural area of provincial Nangarhar in Afghanistan. To ensure high credibility in the study several strategies including triangulation and member checking were applied. Triangulation Refers to using multiple sources, methods, and perspectives to cross check data and findings to reduce bias and lead to deeper levels of understanding (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018). Triangulation is also achieved where the findings of the present study are strongly corroborated by different sources of evidence, such as data through semi structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observational field notes. Also, member checking is employed by soliciting the participants' feedback on how well the data reflects their transcriptions and interpretation. Preliminary findings are shared with a subset of interviewees and focus group participants after data analysis so that they can verify and validate the researcher's interpretations. This not only checks the data for accuracy but also builds a collaborative relationship between the researcher and the research participants which improves the credibility of the study overall (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Noble & Smith, 2015).

Derived from credibility, trustworthiness in qualitative research includes the principles of dependability and conformability, which ensure that the findings are consistent and replicable under similar conditions (Shenton, 2004; Morse, 2018). To improve reliability, the use of an explicit and transparent research process is applied in this study that includes the

thorough documentation of data collection and analysis procedures. Ensuring audit trail, all research decisions, procedures, and alternative options chosen during the research study are recorded, thus permitting external audit to determine the credibility of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Confirmability is established by reducing the potential for researcher bias and by providing an audit trail to substantiate that the outcome is dictated by the data and not the researcher's preconceived ideas. This process is enabled through reflexivity in which the researcher constantly reevaluates their influence on the process of the research study and outcomes, as well as via code-recode strategies. The data is coded and is then re-coded later on to ensure consistency between the coding systems and documented differences are discussed and resolved using consensus among the research team (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). The use of NVivo and other qualitative data analysis software also promotes adaptability and systematic coding and creation of themes, which goes a long way to ensure confirmability (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

In addition, prolonged engagement and persistent observation enhance trustworthiness. As long term involvement allows for socialization within the research setting, cultivates trust, and deepens knowledge of context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), this practice not only improved the credibility and dependability of the study but also increased the trustworthiness of the findings within nuanced contexts. Persistent observation, on the other hand, should be aimed at identifying the aspects that are the most important to the phenomenon in question to ensure that the research accounts for the complexities and subtle realities of women's empowerment processes (miles, huberman, saldana, 2014).

In the context of this study, the standardized collection instruments were employed by all participants across the setting, ensuring reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, the researcher achieved consistency by using the same process of data collection, allowing other researchers to repeat the study and check the reliability of the results obtained. Furthermore, these approaches help validate the researcher's findings as well as enhance the credibility and reliability of the research output, making the results more trustworthy. In sum, this combination of methods results in a rigorous and credible exploration of the impact of NGOs' interventions on women's empowerment in the Afghan province of Nangarhar, the findings of which might be utilized to inform policymakers and practitioners' efforts and guide further research on the subject of gender and development.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Considering all the described challenges and the sensitive nature of researching the people of rural Afghanistan in Nangarhar province, it is especially important to ensure the project follows all the ethical standards to protect the rights and safety of the participants. This study follows high ethical standards, which means that informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural competence in the indigenous context are ensured. These aspects are critical for establishing a proper level of trust, ensuring the safety of participants, and guaranteeing the quality of the research (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001; Tracy, 2020).

One of the most important ethical considerations related to human subjects' research is the need for informed consent from study participants (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). In this study, informed consent will be obtained through Pashto spoken explanations that inform all women involved in this study about the aim of this study and that their participation is voluntary. They will also be notified that they are free to withdraw from the study at any point in time without any negative consequences. Where possible, written informed consent forms will be used and for some illiterate participants' verbal consent will be recorded through audio recording or relying on a witness signature to maintain ethics (Creswell, 2014).

Preserving confidentiality is essential to safeguarding the identities and private details of individuals, particularly within a conservative and patriarchal context, where revealing sensitive information can result in social backlash or physical harm (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). All data obtained will be coded and no direct identifiers will be contained in transcripts or reports to maintain confidentiality. Data will be stored securely in password protected digital files and locked cabinets, with access only by the research team. Furthermore, results will be reported in an aggregated manner that will make it impossible to identify individual participants (Polit & Beck, 2021).

Sensitivity to Context is pocketed in the need to respect the cultural values of rural Nangarhar communities while conducting research (Goodwin, 2011; Liamputtong, 2022). This study recognizes the systemic nature of patriarchy and the sociocultural forces that permeate women's lives. Data collection will be done with cultural humility in mind. Respectful interactions are crucial to account for, and the study will not stereotype or over-generalize culture. Gender sensitive approaches will be used (for example, only female interviewers will conduct interviews with female participants) to provide the opportunity for a comfortable and trusted environment. In addition to that, there will be potential risks to participants participating, including stigma or negative feedback from community members, which will be additionally addressed and minimized through the use of de-identified data collection and maintaining participant confidentiality (Smith et al., 2017; Bhandari et al., 2021). The study

will also be performed per appropriate IRBs and the ethical principles related to involving human participants (American Psychological Association, 2017; Resnik, 2020). Additional ethical training will be provided to each member of the research team to help each individual address sensitive topics specifically and be professionally responsive to ethical dilemmas. Throughout results interpretation, continuous supervision, and ethical reflection will ensure the ethicality of the study. In conclusion, this study will focus on ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity. Failure to involve these principles may prevent researchers from conducting respectful and responsible research. As a result, this may ruin the trust of participants and ultimately question the trustworthiness of the results. Hence, the specific principles are crucial to developing an academically rigorous and proper investigation of the women of rural Nangarhar province's empowerment.

Chapter 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, this study's findings are presented in relation to the four central research questions that guided the investigation. The result is based on the qualitative data gathered based on semi structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observations that are adaptable to study the perceptions, experiences, and challenges that rural women in Nangarhar province face on their way towards empowerment. The chapter starts with women in Nangarhar phrasing the strengths and weaknesses of NGOs in driving their empowerment, especially with

Education, socioeconomic opportunities, social inclusion, It reviews the benefits, like skills and education access, reported by participations while also showcasing, the barriers of cultural resistance, short term interventions, and security issues. The chapter later highlights the socioeconomic challenges that greatly impact rural women in terms of unregulated employment opportunities, lack of access to quality education, and restrictive cultural practices

such as early marriages and traditional system of gender roles. The structure of the book, as it leads you from one challenge into the next, gives you a real sense of how these issues compound to inhibit women from attaining economic independence and social mobility. Additionally, the chapter highlights the experiences and perspectives of rural women on developmental interventions introduced by NGOs, specifically those pertaining to skills training and economic empowerment. It refers to the practical advantages, like increased financial autonomy, and equitable access to resources, but also the constraints in scalability and sustainability, when confronted with sociocultural and economic limitations. It concludes with highlighting crucial factors for development projects focused on women's empowerment to be effective, including cultural sensitivity, community engagement, and capacity building. It examines how these elements coincide or don't coincide with the particular cultural and socioeconomic context in Nangarhar, defining the effectiveness or shortcomings of NGO engagements. This chapter aims to do this by systematically presenting and elaborating the findings so that it creates a comprehensive narrative about the multifaceted relationship between socioeconomic status, cultural norms and processes, and the intervention of NGOs in the field of women empowerment in Nangarhar.

4.1 FINDINGS RELATED TO RESEARCH QUESTION 1

The following section examines how women in Nangarhar understand the role of NGOs in their empowerment, specifically highlighting opportunities related to socioeconomic prospects, education, and social inclusion. Drawing on an analysis of interview and focus group data, the analysis describes key themes, sub-themes, patterns and codes arising that illustrates the complicated roles that NGOs play in the broad spectrum of needs of rural women and what hampers their effectiveness. The results illustrate that although NGOs have progressed considerably towards the idea of women's empowerment, many structural, cultural and operational constraints still remain.

Respondents often emphasized the role of the NGOs in providing socio economic opportunities. Women identified the need for vocational/income generating programs including those relevant to arts and crafts and micro enterprises. These programs were seen as important both in terms of helping women to attain financial independence and for adding to

household income. But a recurrent theme was that these programs couldn't be scaled up. While participants noted that many programs lacked follow up support, they felt that few women had access to tools or networks necessary to continue with their economic activities. Access to broader markets to sell handicrafts, for example, was a significant hurdle, and some women said they were frustrated at the lack of further mentoring and links to potential buyers

In the context of education, the study found that NGOs are vital in providing education to the girls; especially in the rural areas, where learning facilities are not available. Initiatives to induce community schools or provide secondary school scholarships were referred to as transformative. These interventions led to higher literacy and awareness levels about fundamental rights among participants. But the results also reveal deep seated cultural resistance to educating girls, as many families refuse to send them to school due to traditional beliefs or fears about the safety of their children. There were no female teachers' particularly in rural areas and that many interventions being led by these NGOs have very little impact on education.

Some NGOs were highlighted as promoting social inclusion through women platforms for participation in decision making and advocacy at the community level. Women's inclusion in public places and need for awareness campaigns were among the recommended tools for acting against traditional gender roles and increasing female presence across public spaces. However, despite this progress, the results reveal deep seated cultural barriers hampering social integration. Many women said they encountered stigma and resistance from male relatives and community leaders who considered such moves to be threats to traditional structures in society. On the other side, there was no opportunity for women to take part in social and political arena due to the suppressing environment of the Taliban way of rule.

The results, too, highlight another important theme the short term orientation of many interventions by NGOs. The programs tended to be donor driven and many worried about their sustainability, participants said, and there was little long term vision. Beneficiaries became dependent on the funds and it brought more trouble for women, when the fund finished, there was no more project assistance. Respondents also mentioned operational challenges like NGO and local stakeholder coordination issues that had a negative impact on the effectiveness of interventions.

But overall the findings show a nuanced landscape of the role that NGOs play in Nangarhar. Although they have had concrete achievements for women's socioeconomic opportunities, education and social inclusion, systemic obstacles such as cultural resistance, operational inefficiencies, and security problems undermine their full potential. Overcoming

these barriers will necessitate more sustainable, context driven, and collaborative solutions to enable women in Nangarhar to realise lasting empowerment.

Table 4 Thematic Analysis of Women's Empowerment Initiatives in Afghanistan

Themes	Sub-Themes	Patterns	Codes
Socio-Economic Opportunities	Vocational Training	Income generation, financial independence, limited market access, lack of follow-up support	Skills development, economic reliance, market barriers, lack of mentorship, vocational skills gaps, inadequate resources, cultural constraints on training participation
	Small-Scale Entrepreneurship	Traditional crafts, limited scalability, absence of market connections	Handicrafts training, small businesses, market access, lack of long-term planning, low business literacy, dependence on local buyers, lack of entrepreneurial networks
Education	Access to Education	Community-based schools, scholarships, female literacy, cultural resistance	Literacy improvement, scholarships, family restrictions, awareness barriers, unequal access to resources, low retention rates for girls, lack of transportation to schools
	Educational Infrastructure	Lack of female teachers, inadequate facilities, security concerns	Shortage of teachers, school infrastructure gaps, Taliban restrictions, security risks, absence of learning materials, underfunded programs, lack of incentives for teachers
Social Inclusion	Community Engagement	Advocacy platforms, leadership programs, stigma, cultural resistance	Community awareness, gender roles, leadership challenges, societal norms, lack of male allyship, insufficient outreach, weak integration into community programs
	Visibility and Participation	Awareness campaigns, restricted mobility, Taliban-imposed limitations	Mobility restrictions, cultural resistance, policy barriers, limited women's representation, fear of backlash, poor engagement in public forums, weak advocacy structures
Sustainability and Challenges	Short-Term Interventions	Donor-driven projects, lack of	Program dependency, donor focus, absence of long-term

		follow-up, dependency	impact, fragmented planning, lack of exit strategies, weak post-project evaluations, participant drop-off
	Operational Inefficiencies	Poor coordination, limited stakeholder involvement	NGO-local collaboration gaps, weak planning, insufficient community input, lack of transparency, duplication of efforts, resource misallocation, absence of monitoring systems

4.1.1 Theme A: Socioeconomic Opportunities

The first general theme, Socioeconomic Opportunities, discusses the role as well as the constraints of the NGOs in improving the socioeconomic condition of women in Nangarhar. This theme encapsulates the ways in which skills development programs and enterprises led by NGOs have enabled women to engage in economic independence and agency, while also revealing some of the structural barriers that threaten to undermine their endurance. Each of the findings reflects the empowering potential of these programs but also the enduring problems related to scalability, sustainability, and fit in context.

Vocational Training: Vocational training programmes emerged as a prominent sub-theme under socioeconomic opportunities. It is these types, mentioned by respondents as transformational for hundreds of thousands of women, to learn the critical skills to earn income and help pay for their families. There were reports of improved sewing, embroidery and other crafts, leading some women to launch businesses they run from home. For many, those initiatives represented their first step toward attaining some level of financial independence and self-worth.

However, frequently noted challenges included limited market access, lack of follow up support and insufficient mentorship. The respondents stressed that the benefits of vocational training programs often stopped after the training phase, meaning that women were poorly equipped to sustain their businesses. Women said they had difficulty finding dependable buyers or scaling their businesses because their access to markets was limited and they lacked the means to produce larger quantities. One participant said:

“NGOs train us for the skills but they don’t tell us what to do after that. We’re on our own and more often than not, it’s hard to even find someone who can purchase our products.”

A deficiency of vocational training, market barriers, and lack of mentorship, poor follow up, economic dependence, and resources are all also represented in codes under this sub-theme, representing the elements of skills finalisation. These issues make a case for designing programs that go beyond skill building to include market access, mentorship and ongoing support.

Small Scale Entrepreneurship: For socioeconomic opportunities, another specific sub-theme was the small scale entrepreneurship program provisioned through NGOs. Such programs focused, typically, on helping women to sell traditional crafts or start micro-businesses were described as vital for promoting economic self-sufficiency. Many women said initiatives like these were giving them the financial capital and rudimentary business skills they needed to start small enterprises, such as tailoring, producing food or honing handicrafts.

While they showed considerable potential, participants frequently described the limited scalability and relative dependence on local markets of such alternative products. Respondents moaned about entrepreneurial networks, poor business literacy and a lack of ways to expand products or customers. : 'I opened a tailoring shop in 2020 using a loan I got from an NGO but I can only sell to people from my village. If I could sell to other markets, I could make more money and scale my business.'

This area was coded for interrelated codes including handicraft training, limited entrepreneurial networks, and low levels of business literacy, market access problems, and dependence on local buyers, restricted product range, and resource dependency. In conclusion, these findings imply that entrepreneurship programs for small scale businesses undeniably serve to fill economic gaps in the short term, but, because there are few programs in place to help businesses grow, they may only achieve limited success in the long run.

4.1.2 Theme B: Education

The next cross cutting theme is Education and considers how NGOs have made a difference to the educational access and infrastructure for women and girls in Nangarhar, as well as what barriers prevent the success of these initiatives. It is an occasion to highlight the valuable contributions of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) who are mainly involved with the establishment of community based schools, offering scholarships through various funding programs, improving female literacy in society. Yet, ongoing obstacles like cultural opposition, poor infrastructure, and security threats greatly stifle the success of these initiatives.

Access to Education: Access was framed as a sub-theme for education, where it became evident as a major issue that emerged, with education as the dominant overarching theme. The

transformative role played by community based schools and scholarship programs commenced by NGOs was uniformly stressed by the respondents. Such efforts have opened the door to education for millions of girls, particularly in remote communities. As a result of these initiatives, participants note that literacy rates have improved and there is a heightened awareness about fundamental rights. One respondent noted: “There was no place for girls to study before the NGO opened a school in our village. Now my daughter can read, she can write, and she has opportunities that I never had.”

Cultural resistance to female education is a major barrier, even with these significant contributions. Due to traditional mindsets, many families are unwilling to send girls in school, more so beyond basic school level. Additionally, cultural barriers awareness and unequal access to resources contribute to this, with a tendency to prioritize boys' education over girls. Other challenge highlighted was girls' retention rate in schools were very low because of the societal pressures were always had come out for say early marriages or money problem.

Transportation to schools was also mentioned as a huge barrier. In remote regions, many girls are unable to continue their schooling due to a lack of safe, reliable transport options. One participant explained: “My daughter quit school because it was too far, and there was no way to secure her safety on the way there.”

The codes grouped under this sub-theme were: literacy improvement, scholarships, family restrictions, awareness barriers, resource gaps, inadequate retention of girls, and transportation to schools. These findings underscore the importance of taking a multifaceted approach that goes beyond improving access to education and includes addressing the barriers, both societal and logistical, that keep girls out of the classroom.

Educational Infrastructure: Another significant sub-theme that emerged was education infrastructure was inadequate. A lack of female teachers was often cited by respondents as a major barrier to girls' education, particularly in conservative communities where cultural expectations restrict interactions between male faculty and female students. One respondent stated:

“Parents in our village are not willing to send their daughters to school in the absence of female teachers. They worry that girls will be “exposed... to an environment that isn’t good for girls.”

Deficiencies in school infrastructure and the absence of basic amenities such as clean water and functioning toilets were also widely reported. These shortfalls cause families to refrain from sending girls to school altogether, but they also make the environment hostile, unsafe, even for those who do.

Another theme that emerged repeatedly was concerns about security, particularly under the influence of the Taliban. Many schools have shut down or remained on partial locks due to this volatile security situation, participants reported. This is compounded by the absence of basic teaching resources, unfinanced programs, and the absence of teaching incentives for teachers. “We teach with very little — no textbooks, no supplies, very minimal,” one teacher said. “Most of the teachers leave because they don’t get paid enough or they’re not safe to go to schools.”

The emergent codes in this sub-theme are teacher shortage, school infrastructure gaps, Taliban’s restrictions, security threats, learning materials gap, underfunding and lack of teachers’ incentives. They emphasize the need to invest more in making educational infrastructure and teacher training safe and conducive for girls to learn.

4.1.3 Theme C: Social Inclusion

The third major theme, Social Inclusion, discusses how NGOs have opened doors for women to integrate into social and community life and how they have addressed the barriers that keep women from gaining visibility and participating. This thread reflects both the wins that come from advocacy and leadership efforts and the cultural and structural barriers that continue to prevent women’s full participation in social and civic life.

Community Engagement: Social inclusion was a critical sub-theme, with engagement in community activities emerging as a sub-theme where NGOs were praised for creating advocacy platforms and leadership programmes that enable women to raise their challenges and have an input in decision making. These initiatives raise awareness of women’s rights and more acceptance of women leaders in the community, respondents observed. Many participants described transformative leadership training that equipped them with the skills and confidence to advocate for their own needs. A volunteer participant wrote: “Before joining this NGO’s leadership program I thought I will never be able to speak in front of other people. Now, I talk for myself and the other women in my village.”

Though there have been strides around these subjects, traditional social and cultural dynamics remain a wall toward the community. Many respondents reported that women’s participation in community matters was still generally limited by traditional gender roles that actively discouraged women from leadership roles. Male allyship, on the other hand, is limited in this regard, as male members of the community often see such initiatives as undermining existing patriarchal structures. Some even noted that not enough NGOs are reaching out to engage men in advocacy work, which many see as a missed opportunity to generate support throughout society.

Another concern raised in three papers was the weak integration of women focused programs into wider community activities, which had reduced their acceptance and sustainability. One participant explained: “Women’s programs are viewed as separate from everything else, and that almost always creates a sense of separation as far as feeling included or supported.”

This sub-theme clustered around the codes of community awareness, gender roles, leadership challenges and societal norms, lack of male support, and both insufficient outreach and weak integration into community programming. In addition, these codes highlight the need for inclusive strategies that engage both men and women. Both genders need to be involved in order for community engagement efforts to be effective and sustainable.

Visibility and Participation: Visibility and participation of women in the social and political space was the other important sub-theme. NGO were credited with launching awareness campaigns that questioned cultural practices and encouraged society to involve women in public discussions and initiatives. Such efforts have contributed to growing movement around what women can bring to their societies. Certain participants noted increased visibility and value as a consequence of these campaigns within their communities.

Yet they also reported substantial barriers to visibility and participation. Family or community imposed mobility restrictions inhibit women from attending events or taking on leadership roles. The involvement of women in economic activities is further limited by policy barriers and conservative cultural resistance, with many fearing backlash or stigmatization for stepping outside the traditional household role of women. One participant recounted: “People were questioning my character in the village because I attended an NGO meeting in the city. It is difficult to carry on when you get the kind of criticism you get.”

The authority of Taliban has made the whole situation more difficult where many women have been pushed back into the shadows of their own homes as the security threat is far in evidence, in addition to policy changes that prevent them from taking part in all but the most limited public activities. The lack of participation in public forums, and weak structures of advocacy, were also called out as barriers that limit women’s ability to influence decision making processes.

Identified codes under this sub-theme were mobility constraints, cultural resistance, policy barriers, women’s representation constraints, fear of backlash, low participation in public forums and weak advocacy structures. These results are significant as they speak to the need for efforts that target structural as well as cultural barriers to women’s visibility and participation.

Under the theme Social Inclusion, the findings tell both a story of progress, and a story of challenges that still must be met. Although NGOs have contributed in promoting women engagement, visibility, and advocacy of various agendas, which includes awareness campaigns on women issues, such transformation has not yielded an acceptable structural effort where systemic cultural impediments and policies hinder effective contributions. Some may become conscious of their male privilege and support women as allies and as others, themselves unmasked, submit to depersonalised violence while women are driven underground, as in China. Overcoming these challenges will involve a crucial mix of sensitised male allies together with inclusionary community initiatives and policies that demand security and visibility of participation. Addressing these issues will allow NGOs to continue uplifting women to be active participants in their communities and beyond.

4.1.4 Theme D: Sustainability and Challenges

The final overarching theme, Sustainability and Challenges, outlines the structural and operational challenges that limit NGO response in Nangarhar, exploring the sustainability of interventions as well as the underlying inefficiencies that constrain their lasting impact. This aspect underlines that donor dependency, lack of effective follow up mechanism and poor coordination remain perennial hurdles that further weaken and jeopardise NGO activity focusing on empowering women.

Short Term Interventions: Under this theme, one of the key challenges identified was the short term nature of many NGO interventions. Respondents often described projects that were developed with a focus on outputs, not sustainable long-term outcomes. Much of the programming was donor-driven, leaving little room for tailoring to local needs or extending the impact beyond the lifetime of funding. Several participants said the support ended along with the funding, leading beneficiaries to feel abandoned and unable to continue the gains they had achieved. A participant shared: “NGOs launch these programs with such good intent, but when the funding goes away, everything just collapses. There is no guidance or support left to us.”

One of the most common themes that emerged from our qualitative analysis was that the ways in which short-term interventions figured into patterns of dependency where beneficiaries dependent on external assistance were a significant concern. The lesson from that report, published last month, was the fragmentation of planning, and the absence of exit strategies from many programmes: they did not include mechanisms to ensure a smooth transition to community-led initiatives. Weaker post-project evaluations, also limited the capacity of NGOs to learn from past interventions and design more effective approaches.

The codes reoccurring under this sub-theme included program dependency, donor focus, no long-term impact, crisp planning, no exit strategies, poor post-project evaluations and participant drop-off. Further these findings of focus on more sustainable program designs that allow for long-lasting commitment and ownership within the community.

Operational Inefficiencies: Operational inefficiencies was another notable sub-theme in the sustainability and challenges category. Common obstacles to program implementation included low stakeholder participation levels and lack of coordination among NGOs, respondents noted. Participants cited breakdowns in collaboration between NGOs and local communities, resulting, at times, in misguided priorities and duplication of efforts. “There are all these NGOs that come with similar programs, but they don’t communicate or engage the community,” one respondent said. That creates waste and confusion over roles and responsibilities.”

Weak program design and substandard community engagement were also common problems. Many efforts included no input from local stakeholders either in the plans or the way they were executed. This meant that initiatives were often culturally out of place or only addressed needs that did not actually exist in the community. Respondents further added that scarce resources were being allocated without proper transparency which reduced their overall trust in the authorities and subsequently increased barriers to efficiency in utilizing the resources.

Other areas respondents noted gaps in were the lack of better monitoring systems. Few programs had systems in place to track progress or assess their impact, making it difficult to spot and fix problems in real time. The described initiatives were also not unique in terms of resource misallocation and duplication of efforts that was also one of the common factors among the focus group participants and how some of the NGOs resources when not channelized properly due to lack of coordination and monitoring were ineffective.

This sub-theme is characterized by all codes related to gaps in NGO local collaboration, weak planning, limited inclusion of the community, lack of transparency, duplication of efforts, misallocation of resources, and missing monitoring systems. Reshaping NGO interventions Evidence from the survey highlights the importance of addressing these issues to improve the effectiveness and impact of NGO interventions, though such efforts need further promotion.

Systemic challenges limiting sustainable NGO facilitated positive change in Nangarhar, revealed under the theme Sustainability and Challenges Most of the time, short term programs financed by donors, which do not promote self-sufficiency or create community ownership,

only create dependency and when donor funds are gone, beneficiaries should go fend for themselves. These challenges are compounded by operational inefficiency such as poor coordination and engagement of key stakeholders and lack of monitoring system. If NGOs are to effectively address these issues, they need to adopt a more sustainable, inclusive, coordinated approach that emphasises long term planning, community engagement and robust accountability mechanisms. In the absence of such initiatives however, it is unfortunately likely that NGO interventions will only serve to empower a handful of individuals, not result in meaningful or long term changes and ultimately build resilience among women and NGO personnel in Nangarhar.

4.2 FINDINGS RELATED TO RESEARCH QUESTION 2

This part covers the socio economic barriers women in rural Nangarhar province face such as irregular jobs and education opportunities. Summary of Findings: Data drawn from interviews and focus group. Findings reveal two high level concepts: Employment Vulnerabilities, Educational Constraints, sub-components, patterns and codes of systemic issue endemic to systems which preserve inequality and are hostile to progress.

4.2.1 Theme A: Employment Vulnerabilities

Unregulated employment is one of the biggest challenges women struggle with in Nangarhar. Participants had also worked in informal sectors characterized by low pay, precarious working conditions and exploitative practices. Many of the women felt that their contributions were ignored and had little to no access to legal protections or benefits. One participant said: “I’m working long hours sewing clothes, but little money; I hardly buy food for my children. There’s no contracts, there’s no guarantees, and I’m always scared I’m going to lose my little money.’ ”

The sub-themes on Economic Exploitation and Cultural restrictions on employment elaborate further how limited access to formal employment and restricted cultural norms around women’s abilities inhibit women’s agency and financial independence. Respondents

also pointed to a lack of regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms that exacerbate these vulnerabilities.

4.2.2 Theme B: Educational Constraints

Education was the second theme that intruded on the lives, hopes and futures of rural women. Access to quality education came up chained as one of the underling block towards achieving their goals, and it was frequently foregrounding in the focus group discussion with the participants. Nested within the larger themes are sub-themes, for example, Access Barriers to Education and Inadequate Educational Infrastructure, indicative of systemic problems such as cultural resistance to female education, financial constraints and lack of resources in rural schools.

Respondents described barriers like these as keeping girls stuck in cycles of poverty and dependence, and said many did not return to school when they fell victim to early marriages in their communities or lack of transportation.

One participant remarked: “I always wanted to be a teacher, but my family didn’t feel a girl needed to be educated. Now, I only dream about what my life could’ve been.”

Table 5 Thematic Analysis of Barriers to Women’s Employment and Education in Afghanistan

Themes	Sub-Themes	Patterns	Codes
Employment Vulnerabilities	Economic Exploitation	Unregulated employment, low wages, job insecurity, economic exploitation	Low wages, job insecurity, economic exploitation, seasonal work, lack of worker protections, absence of contracts, unpaid labor
	Cultural Restrictions on Employment	Limited employment options, restrictive gender roles	Cultural restrictions, limited skill development, societal norms, dependency on domestic work, limited entrepreneurial opportunities, stigma
Educational Constraints	Access Barriers to Education	Cultural resistance, financial barriers, unequal access to schools	Cultural resistance, financial barriers, early marriages, unequal access to education, awareness gaps, low retention rates, transportation challenges
	Inadequate Educational Infrastructure	Lack of female teachers, security concerns, poor facilities	Shortage of female teachers, school infrastructure gaps, absence of learning materials, underfunded programs,

			security risks, lack of incentives
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In short this study indicates many economic issues and barriers limit the empowerment and dreams of women in rural Nangarhar as unregulated labor in overcrowded, unfit conditions, and lack of opportunities for education to study further. Unregulated and exploitative work environments limit financial independence and expose women to continued insecurity through employment vulnerabilities. Both cultural norms and lack of infrastructure — as well as stalled or neglected systems — limit women’s education and, by extension, women’s potential. Meeting these challenges will involve collective action to regulate work conditions, design equitable education systems, and change the cultural and structural factors that contribute to inequality.

4.2.1 Theme A: Employment Vulnerabilities

The first theme is Employment Vulnerabilities, analyzes systemic barriers to fair and secure employment for women in rural Nangarhar. It emphasizes the dual effects of Economic Exploitation and Cultural Limitations on Work, demonstrating how the deregulation of job markets and cultural prohibitions enforce financial specters and reduced agency of rural women. The results point to an intricate interaction of structural and cultural causes that make it harder for women to gain economic independence.

Economic Exploitation: A prominent sub-theme that emerged within Employment Vulnerabilities was the unregulated nature of work, which respondents cited as exploitative and coercive conditions of informal work environments consistently. Many women described work that is found in sectors like sewing, agricultural labor, and domestic services, which include low wages, job instability, and a lack of worker protections. Participants said they had been paid far less than their male counterparts and frequently without formal contracts or legal protections. One respondent explained: “I am a tailor, but I take pay with orders, and the orders don’t come all the time. I have no income guarantee, and if there’s no work, my family suffers.”

Seasonal work was a common pattern among participants and job insecurity was a common concern. Women talked about how the lack of long term employment options had left them vulnerable to financial precarity, making it challenging to think about the future and even to invest in their children’s education. Two other reasons was the lack of legal protections and enforcement mechanisms that allowed employers to exploit workers without facing consequences. As a housemaid, one participant noted: “Sometimes we are expected to work without being paid, but we have no right to complain because we lack written agreements and protection.”

Some common codes under this sub-theme are low wages, job insecurity, economic exploitation, seasonal work, no protections for workers, no contracts, unpaid labor, etc. These findings highlight the immediate need of regulatory frameworks supporting just payment, legal protection, and job consistency for rural Nangarhar women.

Cultural Restrictions on Employment: Another major sub-theme was the social hurdles that made converting women into a labor force revolutionary difficult. Women were to take jobs deemed “appropriate” for women based on rigidly defined social mores and gender roles, with respondents recalling domestic work or small businesses run from home. And if it is, it is because these types of restrictions did not just sever the line to work for women — they effectively isolated the avenues through which work could reward women, redrawing the balance between the home and the workplace, ushering women into lives that were at once more limited and more dependent on male family members for financial support. “Women in my community can’t go and work in a place out of house unless it’s something small run them, like sewing, or cooking.” “It’s bad for women to work, that’s what men say.”

Now combine these restrictions with the fact that we could only generate a limited number of skills. Women also reported struggling to access any training programs or seed money that could aid their pivoting into new fields or help them cultivate their careers. That came with social stigma: women who went out of the home to work faced ridicule and ostracism. “There is home abuse for seeing me bring money with work,” one, who started a small tailoring business, said. “This is why women stay at home while men earn,” says this one.

This sub-theme pointed out such domestic and care work as a form of work that has a tendency of maternal casting and is the primary obstruction to effective participation in economic structures. Women told of being trapped in pretty miserable or low paid jobs without any path to financial independence or self-sufficiency because they had little options.

Under this category sub-theme, these codes recur or frequencies ones were concern on culture restriction, Limited skill development, Society standards, domestic work dependence, limited business opportunity and sustainable stigma. These statements justify the need/requirement for social agents, practitioners to encourage going out of social/cultural patterns, guidance in terms of useful skill development and diversification of women labor with different opportunities.

Table 6 Focused Coding of Employment-Related Barriers to Women's Empowerment in Afghanistan

Sub-Themes	Patterns	Codes
Economic Exploitation	Unregulated employment, low wages, job insecurity, economic exploitation	Low wages, Lack of permanent jobs, Exploitation, Seasons, No worker rights, Exploitation, No contracts
Cultural Restrictions on Employment	Limited employment options, restrictive gender roles	Cultural constraints, limited skill development, societal norms, reliance on domestic work, few entrepreneurial opportunities, stigma

Combating these challenges will require implementing policies and regulations that protect workers' rights, initiatives to shift social norms and expanding skill development initiatives for women. These initiatives are critical to help women in Nangarhar secure their economic empowerment and increased independence.

4.2.2 Theme B: Educational Constraints

The second broad theme, Educational Constraints, explores the systemic obstacles that continue to restrict women's and girls' access to quality education in rural Nangarhar. To address this underlining issue of Education, this theme aims to cover two significant sub-themes Access Barriers to Education and Inadequate Educational Infrastructure. As they shed light on how sociocultural, financial and physical barriers prevent women and girls from achieving their educational ambitions. The results indicate that such barriers are a hindrance not just to breaking the cycle of poverty and dependency, but to women's ability to realize their potential for personal and societal progress.

Access Barriers to Education: Access barriers to education became a prominent sub-theme, with respondents repeatedly referencing either some form of cultural resistance or financial constraint as a significant barrier. In rural Nangarhar, many families subscribe to traditional gender norms, which diminish the value of female education, thus prioritizing boys' schooling over girls'. They told how cultural expectations create pressure in society to not spend money on girls' education, and how early marriages were frequently mentioned as a reason for high dropout rates for girl students. One respondent explained:

“My father would say this because girls don’t need these kinds of education, he said, because they will finally get married and remain home,” That’s how I couldn’t finish school.”

Access to space was another common problem, especially for those with limited means. School fees, uniforms, and transport costs—many parents were unable to afford any of these, restricting access further for girls. In other instances, parents were forced to decide whether to send their sons or daughters to school, with the boys often getting the upper hand. This economic inequity also created an ongoing cycle of few opportunities for women and girls in their communities, respondents said.

The other major barrier identified was the lack of safe, reliable transportation to schools. Participants spoke of how transport infrastructure was lacking and, with security an ongoing issue, this kept many families from sending daughters to school. As one participant described it: “My parents are worried about my safety, because the school is far from our village.” That’s why I stopped going.”

This sub-theme again generates constant codes like cultural resistance, financial barriers, teenage marriages, the disparity in educational awareness, knowledge gap, supply and demand, retention and transport issues, etc. These findings underscore the need for dual faceted interventions that address both the sociocultural framework and action barriers to girls’ education in Nangarhar.

Inadequate Educational Infrastructure: Education infrastructure acts as a major barrier to girls’ education in rural Nangarhar. The lack of female teachers was a key obstacle identified by respondents, particularly for conservative communities where families are reluctant to allow their girls to attend schools with only male teachers. One said: “My parents won’t let me study in a school without female teachers. It’s not befitting for a girl,” they say. The results also reveal persistent gaps in school infrastructure, including dilapidated or overcrowded buildings, lack of clean water, and lack of working toilets. These shortcomings create an unwelcoming and unsafe school environment that deters girls from going to school.

Another pressing issue were security risks, particularly with the Taliban’s pull. Participants discussed how volatile security conditions often resulted in school closures or interruptions to the academic calendar, impeding school age children from continuing their education consistently. Furthermore, learning materials were nonexistent, programs were grossly underfunded, and teachers received no motivation to work in these schools. One teacher shared: “There are not enough textbooks or supplies, and teachers are unmotivated because

they earn so little. Unfortunately, many of my peers are also leaving because they cannot afford to stay.”

The sub-theme codes for this theme included: shortage of female teachers, school infrastructure gaps, absence of learning materials, underfunded programs, security risks, and lack of incentives. Our findings point to the importance of systemic investment in educational infrastructure, teacher recruitment and allocation, and the provisioning of learning resources to adequately support girls’ education in rural Nangarhar.

Table 7 Focused Coding of Education-Related Barriers to Women’s Empowerment in Afghanistan

Sub-Themes	Patterns	Codes
Access Barriers to Education	Cultural resistance, financial barriers, unequal access to schools	Cultural resistance, financial barriers, early marriages, unequal access to education, awareness gaps, low retention rates, transportation challenges
Inadequate Educational Infrastructure	Lack of female teachers, security concerns, poor facilities	Shortage of female teachers, school infrastructure gaps, absence of learning materials, underfunded programs, security risks, lack of incentives

In short the Results under the theme Educational Constraints highlight the complex factors that prevent women and girls in rural Nangarhar from realizing their educational goals. Access barriers cultural resistance, financial constraints and transportation challenges hinder girls’ ability to attend school and receive an education. Providing better quality education requires multiple approaches, reducing poverty, creating safe spaces for girls to learn and explore, and developing skilled female teachers are key. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to these challenges, but targeted efforts to change cultural practices, boost investments in infrastructure, and policy change to prioritize girls' education and teacher recruitment will be needed. Such changes are not only critical for unlocking the potential of women and girls in Nangarhar;

4.3 FINDINGS RELATED TO RESEARCH QUESTION 3

This section provides an analysis based on the experiences and insights of rural women in Nangarhar concerning the influence of development interventions, namely skills development and economic empowerment initiatives delivered by NGOs. As such, the overarching conclusions reveal two core themes at play: the Regulation of Skills Training, and

Economic Empowerment, together which shed light on the effectiveness and shortcomings of interventions aimed at improving the socioeconomic standing and general wellbeing of women.

4.3.1 Theme A: Impact of Skills Training

It turned out that one sub-theme was more prominent than any other: skills training programs, which respondents described repeatedly as transformational for their personal and financial wellbeing. Many of the women also mentioned such programs as having given them vocational skills like tailoring, embroidery, and handicrafts which they utilized to provide a livelihood for themselves and their families. A participant shared: “Before the training, I relied on my husband for everything. “I can now make money sewing clothes! I feel so proud of helping my family.” Participants also cited skills training in enhancing individual reliance and self-esteem. Some woman trained with these programs acquired entrepreneurship skills that enabled them to establish small businesses that reduced their dependency on their husbands. However, the scalability of these efforts was similarly limited. Many women shared that even though they learned new skills, they were unable to expand their businesses or make a sufficient income because they lacked access to wider markets or enough resources. Yet another complaint was the lack of follow up support or mentorship even after training programs ended which the speakers cited as a reason for participants feeling unprepared in terms of dealing with real world skill application challenges.

The common codes under this sub-theme consists of vocational skills development, income generation, confidence development, entrepreneurial skills, lack of market, lack of resources and lack of mentorship. The implications suggest that its impact could be extended with by holistic training programs which can incorporate market integration and also long term support strategies.

4.3.2 Theme B: Economic Empowerment

Another important sub-theme, which aligned with the socioeconomic effects of development interventions, included economic empowerment programs. Across focus groups, microfinance programs and income generating projects were the most frequently credited factors allowing participants to establish small businesses or invest the money productively. Such programs gave women an access to capital, something that was not possible because of culture and systems. One participant explained: “Using the loan I received, I have opened a small shop in my village. It has enabled me to pay for my children’s school fees and other things.”

The results also showed a recharging effect by economic empowerment programs on participants’ overall wellbeing. Women noted that they were more respected in their homes

and communities, with their financial contributions improving their standing and their role in decision making. However, challenges were also noted, for example, beneficiaries were under pressure due to high repayment rates of loans. Furthermore, certain women mentioned insufficient financial literacy training that hindered their capacity to control funds effectively and attain sustainable economic prosperity.

Another recurrent issue was the fact that rural women were excluded from more advantageous financial or business opportunities which would have facilitated the scaling of their enterprises. These are just a few examples of what participants reported when asked to consider how best to achieve their stated goals for economic justice; programs must be relevant to the local economic context, they told me, as many of the interventions that we discussed were not in line with the specific resources or needs of their communities.

Under this sub-theme, the recurring codes identified were access to microfinance, income generation, improved household status, decision making power, financial literacy gaps, high repayment rates and lack of business networks. These results highlight the need to incorporate financial education, programming tailored to commercial viability, and support for business scaling into economic empowerment efforts.

Table 8 Focused Coding of Vocational Training Outcomes and Post-Training Challenges for Women in Afghanistan

Themes	Sub-Themes	Patterns	Codes
Impact of Skills Training	Vocational Training Outcomes	Vocational skills, income generation, confidence building	Vocational skills development, income generation, confidence building, entrepreneurial skills, lack of market access, insufficient resources, absence of mentorship
	Post-Training Challenges	Limited scalability, lack of follow-up, insufficient real-world application	Lack of market access, lack of post-training support, participant drop-off, limited resource allocation
Economic Empowerment	Financial Access and Outcomes	Microfinance, income generation, improved household status	Microfinance access, income generation, improved household status, decision-making power, financial literacy gaps, high repayment rates, lack of business networks

	Scalability and Local Relevance	Exclusion from networks, lack of tailored programming	Lack of business networks, limited scaling opportunities, misaligned program goals, absence of advanced opportunities
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Briefly, the results indicate that development interventions, with an emphasis on skills training and economic empowerment programs, have proved to be remarkably positive for the rural women of Nangarhar. Women will thrive due to skills training programs that have provided them with vocational and entrepreneurial abilities, and we have also provided them with the ways to make money and develop confidence. But they are not sustainable, as they are constrained by limited market access, inadequate funding and no aftercare. Similarly, initiatives to bring economic empowerment for women have achieved substantial gains in their financial independence and bargaining power in the household, but have often found it hard to address high rates of repayment, challenges in financial literacy and prospects of scale. In order to overcome these challenges, a more holistic solution is required which needs a yet another comprehensive approach to integrate market access, financial literacy and customized antidotes to save the survival of the female population against the social and economic hindrances in the rural Nangarhar.

4.3.1 Theme A: Impact of Skills Training

The broad theme is that the Impact of Skills Training It emphasizes the impact of vocational training programs in the socioeconomic and personal advancement of rural women in Nangarhar. This theme reflects both the detectable benefits of such training, as well as the challenges that diminish its effectiveness over time. The results reveal two sub-themes, namely, Vocational Training Outcomes and Post Training Challenges, which focus on the positive aspects and the challenges of such initiatives in empowering women.

Vocational Training Outcomes: Vocational training programs are successfully carried out by NGOs, and the importance of such programs as a component/feature of such NGO derived programs was emphatically mentioned several times by the participants as an encouraging impact given by such programs, in the specific areas of skill acquisition, income generation and confidence building. Similar programs had provided many women with the skills they needed, in tailoring, embroidery and handicrafts, to make an income and help support their families. As one participant said: “I didn’t know how to make money before I

went for the training. Now I sew clothes and sell them in the village. It's boosted my confidence and made me feel independent."

Beyond the economic gains, many of these programs offered opportunities for personal growth, with participants citing improved confidence and a feeling of empowerment. For certain women, the training skills also led to little entrepreneurship ideas that promote home based reminders and also approach their first step towards financial autonomy.

Nonetheless, alongside these positive effects, barriers such as a lack of resources and limited access to market were commonly emphasised. The participants elaborated that despite acquiring valuable knowledge and skills, there were still no support systems available to help them, such as access to wider markets or financial resources that would help them "scale" their businesses. One respondent remarked: "I was taught tailoring through the NGO program, but there is no avenue for me to sell my clothes outside of the village. It's very difficult to grow without a market."

Vocational Skills Development, Income Generation, These findings highlight the importance of integrated programs that link skill development to market access and organizational resources to achieve maximum impact.

Post-Training Challenges: Though vocational training programs typically offer bit of a foundation, post training difficulties often impede their success long term. The absence of follow up support was repeatedly mentioned by respondents as a key challenge they faced as they attempted to leverage their skills into real world applications, often without the guidance (or mentorship) they were expecting. The inconsistency would often lead to hands on training drop offs, or not fully leveraging acquired skills. One participant explained: "Once the training was over, we were on our own. I didn't know how to run my business or deal with challenges, so I ceased production."

Another common problem was limited scalability, with participants lamenting that their businesses had remained small and local because they lacked resources and networking opportunities. The inability to grow or diversify almost always resulted in stagnation, and the women were unable to achieve sustainable economic growth. There were setbacks as well, such as a lack of resource availability, that prevented them from purchasing essential tools or supplies to continue running their businesses.

Participant drop off, limited allocation of resources, lack of market access, disrupted market chain, and lack of post training support were the recurring codes under this sub-theme. Our findings underscore the need for training programs to not only be well structured but also

include strong follow up mechanisms, both financially and through access to joint distribution to larger markets, to ensure the long term success of beneficiaries.

Table 9 Focused Coding of Vocational Training Outcomes and Post-Training Challenges for Women in Afghanistan

Sub-Themes	Patterns	Codes
Vocational Training Outcomes	Vocational skills, income generation, confidence building	Vocational skills development, income generation, confidence building, entrepreneurial skills, lack of market access, insufficient resources, absence of mentorship
Post-Training Challenges	Limited scalability, lack of follow-up, insufficient real-world application	Lack of market access, lack of post-training support, participant drop-off, limited resource allocation

The summary of the Findings under the theme Impact of Skills Training show how vocational training programs can be empowering but hold significant challenges for rural women in Nangarhar. The impact of these interventions is evident in vocational training metrics like skill acquisition, income generation and developing a sense of agency. Nonetheless, post training challenges such as limited scalability, lack of follow up support, and inadequate resource availability become obstacles to the sustainability of these participants. The success of these initiatives will be bolstered by NGOs taking a more comprehensive approach that incorporates mentorship, market integration, and sustainable support systems to help facilitate the economic and personal development of women in the region.

4.3.2 Theme B: Economic Empowerment

The second cross cutting theme, Economic Empowerment, focuses on wider socio economic impact of development interventions for increasing decision making power and financial autonomy of rural women in Nangarhar. Through the lens of two sub-themes of Financial Access and Outcomes and Scalability and Local Relevance, this theme underscores the successes and challenges of these programs in advancing economic resilience and wellbeing.

Financial Access and Outcomes: The financial access was a common sub-theme, with respondents often crediting microfinance interventions and income generating programmes with having allowed them to set up small businesses or invest in productive enterprises. Many women explained that these programs opened up financial avenues that systemic and cultural barriers had previously closed. One participant shared: “The loan I got helped me open a small shop in the village. It enabled me to make money for my family and send my kids to school.”

Participants noted that these programs had enabled them not only to be financially autonomous but to increase their standing in their households and communities. Qualitative accounts in the same study reported that as women started to earn and contribute to the household and community, they were socially valued and respected more, and thus given more decision making power in the home and in the community. Another respondent remarked: “Now that I generate revenue in the house, my husband and I decide together. “I feel that my opinion is important.”

Alongside these positive outcomes, challenges with high repayment rates and a lack of financial literacy frequently listed. Respondents described the toll the pressure to repay loans took, noting that it was particularly hard when their businesses did not bring in enough money. Also, the knowledge gap regarding financial management hindered their capacity to take well informed decisions on where to invest and save, making numerous even less financially sound.

Common codes that fell under this sub-theme are access to microfinance, income generation, improving household status, power to make decisions, financial literacy gaps, high repayment rates, and low savings opportunities. Such services must be combined with financial education and appropriate loan frames to achieve the full potential of economic empowerment programmes.

Scalability and Local Relevance: Economic empowerment programs diverge on scalability and local relevance, another important sub-theme. Although these interventions received accolades for their immediate effects, many of respondents lamented they had no means of scaling their businesses or diversifying their revenue streams. Women described being stuck in small local markets, without access to larger frameworks or resources to help them expand their enterprises. One participant explained: “I sell my products in the village, but there are a limited number of buyers. “I can’t expand my business without access to bigger markets.”

As many programs left respondents feeling disconnected from their local economy, others were able to tailor offerings to their economic context (i.e., skills, resources) that were needed within their community. In particular, some women noted that the training programs had targeted crafts or products that had weak market demand in their regions, resulting in low returns on their investments. A participant noted: “We were trained to produce certain things, but it is not demand in our region. It seems that the program didn’t take into account what people here actually need or want.”

The sub-theme codes were lack of business networks, limited scaling opportunities, misaligned program goals, and absence of advanced opportunities, market access barriers, and

limited product diversification. Such findings stress the importance of market analysis, targeted programs, and access to regional or national markets for ensuring scale and sustainability in development programs.

Table 10 Focused Coding of Financial Access and Economic Empowerment Challenges for Women in Afghanistan

Sub-Themes	Patterns	Codes
Financial Access and Outcomes	Microfinance, income generation, improved household status	Microfinance access, income generation, improved household status, decision-making power, financial literacy gaps, high repayment rates, limited savings opportunities
Scalability and Local Relevance	Exclusion from networks, lack of tailored programming	Lack of business networks, limited scaling opportunities, misaligned program goals, absence of advanced opportunities, market access barriers, limited product diversification

In summary the Findings under the theme Economic Empowerment show how development interventions can lead to very significant improvements in women's financial independence and social standing. Financial inclusion and outcomes show the way microfinance and income generating schemes improve women's capacity to educate their families and make choices. However, obstacles such as high default rates and low financial literacy undermine the impact of these programs. Scalability & local relevance also emphasize the importance of creating tailored programming, market access & business growth opportunities for sustainable, economic empowerment. To overcome these challenges development programs will have to become more integrated and localized, allowing women from rural Nangarhar to build resilience and achieve economic stability.

4.4 FINDINGS RELATED TO RESEARCH QUESTION 4

The following section highlights the major elements which affect the success of development programs targeting women's empowerment and how they match with the cultural and socioeconomic climate of Nangarhar. The results uncover two vital themes Cultural Sensitivity and Community Engagement and Program Design and Sustainability that underscore both the facilitators and constraints to creating authentic and durable impact of such programs.

4.4.1 Theme A: Cultural Sensitivity and Community Engagement

Factors that emerged as acting upon the success of development initiatives included community engagement and cultural sensitivity. Respondents noted that programs that were consistent with cultural norms and developed in consultation with community stakeholders were more likely to receive acceptance and support. Many participants emphasized the importance of involving male household members and community leaders in the planning for

and implementation of women focused initiatives. One participant explained: “If my spouse and the elders of my village are in support of a program, it is easy for me to participate. Women may not participate freely without their endorsement.”

Participants consistently emphasized the role of religious and cultural norms shaping attitudes around women’s empowerment. Respondents noted that programs that got viewed as contentious to traditional values ended up in resistance, which then made for low participation rates. In contrast, programs that defined empowerment in terms of Islam or community values resonated better. One respondent shared: “My family allowed me to go when the program leaders explained that it is also permissible in Islam for women to get an education.”

Another important factor of cultural sensitivity was stigma concerning women entering public or nontraditional roles. They found that increased acceptance and reducing resistance in the community can be achieved via awareness campaigns and dialogues with community members. But the respondents also identified shortcomings in outreach, especially in rural areas where traditional norms are deeply rooted.

Under this sub-theme, recurring codes are involvement of male allies, engagement with local leaders, fit with cultural norms, religious framing of empowerment, awareness campaigns, stigma, and rural outreach gaps. This result confirms the relevance of culturally adaptive strategies with an inclusive community engagement process in maximising the effectiveness of development programs.

4.4.2 Theme B: Program Design and Sustainability

The relevance of program design and sustainability of development programs was another major theme, influencing their effectiveness. Respondents repeatedly underscored the necessity of adapting programs to the local socioeconomic contexts; the programs should meet the needs and challenges of the local community. Without careful attention to the interplay with local processes, programs tended to be ineffective at a meaningful scale. A participant noted: “Specific programs came with ideas from the outside that weren’t consistent with our way of life or what our community needed. These projects are not for us, that’s why they don’t last.”

Sustainability was another common theme, with many respondents noting that short term, donor driven projects lacked long-term vision and follow up mechanisms. Other programs that terminated suddenly had beneficiaries feeling unsupported and unable to build on their gains. They also highlighted a need for funding to support capacity building initiatives that allow the community to take ownership of and sustain projects when support ends.

Allocate and monitor your own resources. Respondents narrated how these processes, plagued as they often are by limited resources and poor oversight, undermine implementation of programs, generating inefficiencies and lost opportunities. However, things like transparent planning and robust monitoring systems were found to be critical in terms of making sure that the resources were used effectively and programs achieved their targets;

The codes under this sub-theme identified custom programming, capacity building, plans for sustainability, donor constraints, resource allocation, monitoring and evaluation and local ownership. These findings underscore the importance of well designed, community led programs that are sustainable in the longer term and efficient in their use of resources.

Table 11 Thematic Analysis of Cultural Sensitivity, Community Engagement, and Program Sustainability in Women's Empowerment Initiatives in Afghanistan

Themes	Sub-Themes	Patterns	Codes
Cultural Sensitivity and Community Engagement	Cultural Adaptation and Framing	Involvement of male allies, engagement with local leaders, alignment with cultural norms	Involvement of male allies, engagement with local leaders, religious framing of empowerment, alignment with cultural norms, addressing stigma, awareness campaigns, gaps in rural outreach
	Community Involvement	Religious framing, addressing stigma, outreach efforts	Addressing stigma, awareness campaigns, community dialogues, rural outreach, acceptance through cultural alignment
Program Design and Sustainability	Tailored and Practical Programming	Tailored programming, local relevance, alignment with socio-economic contexts	Tailored programming, local relevance, community-driven design, addressing specific local needs, adaptive program models
	Sustainability and Ownership	Capacity building, sustainability	Capacity building, sustainability planning,

		planning, monitoring and evaluation	donor-driven limitations, resource allocation, monitoring systems, local ownership
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In summary the research findings highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and community engagement to gain acceptability and achieve the objectives of women's empowerment development initiatives. Programs that engage male allies, are sensitive to cultural and religious values, and address social stigma, are more likely to have high participation rates and sustain impact. Likewise program design and sustainability play a major role with tailored, community centred interventions that have strong monitoring systems improving the longevity of these programmes. No, the development programs of Nangarhar are not effective at addressing the plight of women in the province, neither has a sociocultural competent approach been taken in designing the programs to facilitate women empowerment, the researchers also suggest that local communities should be engaged more effectively in the planning, execution and evaluation of programs, further supplemented with practical sustainability planning and capacity building programs to enable lasting empowerment in the region.

4.4.1 Theme A: Cultural Sensitivity and Community Engagement

The first big theme we learned is Cultural Sensitivity and Community Engagement: It is how the corresponding development efforts with local cultural customs and the involvement of communities make the program's concentration on women empowerment effective in Nangarhar. This theme emphasizes the importance of cultural adaptation, and of actively engaging community members, especially male allies and local leaders, to a successful and sustainable implementation of these initiatives.

Cultural Adaptation and Framing: The pivotal role of cultural adaptation in reducing the resistance and driving the success of development projects came to the fore. Respondents consistently stated that initiatives in line with local cultural and religious values had a greater chance of receiving community support and encouraging women's participation. Those programs that presented women's empowerment as consistent with Islamic teachings were particularly successful at overcoming resistance. One participant noted: "When the NGO workers talked about how education and work for girls are encouraged in Islam, my family was more open to the idea of me joining the program.

Another important aspect of cultural adaptation was the role of male allies' husbands, fathers and local leaders. Male approval emerged as a nonnegotiable requirement in order for women to join empowerment programs, many shared. This led to decreased resistance and a more supportive space due to the inclusion of male community members. A respondent explained: "For women to participate without being afraid, the men in the village have to support a program. Otherwise, there will always be obstacles."

Strategies such as awareness campaigns and community dialogues were found to be suitable for addressing stigma and changing attitude towards women empowerment. But respondents also noted gaps in outreach efforts, especially in rural areas where traditional norms run deep, and information about programs often does not reach those who could benefit from them.

Under this sub-theme, the prominent codes are male ally involvement, local leaders engagement, religious framing for empowerment, cultural norms alignment, awareness campaigns, stigma and rural outreach gaps. These findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive interventions that actively engage community stakeholders and align with local values

Community Involvement: Another important sub-theme was the active role of the communities in planning development programs and driving their implementation. Community members had been involved in designing the programs, which loaded the dice in favor of meeting local needs and ensuring wide support, respondents emphasized. Creatively, foundational programs that engaged local leaders and listened to their input during program design were reported to be more effective and sustainable.

Community perceptions were also influenced by religious leaders. Support of programs helped alleviate resistance and increase participation, as many families regarded religious leaders as respected authorities. One respondent explained: "When the village imam backed the program and talked about it during Friday prayers, the people of our community started to be more accepting of allowing their daughters and wives to participate."

But, respondents stressed that community consultations were often limited as stated, and some programs, even if undertaken, were planned and implemented without adequate exercises with local stakeholders. This disengagement occasionally resulted in a disconnection with community needs and lower participation numbers.

Codes pertaining to this sub-theme are community dialogues, outreach in rural areas, acceptance through cultural alignment, engagement with religious leaders, stigma addressing campaigns, awareness campaigns, and community driven planning these recommendations

suggest that development efforts be more inclusive and participatory so that the local communities take part in the development activities.

Table 12 Focused Coding of Cultural Adaptation and Community Involvement in Women's Empowerment Programs in Afghanistan

Sub-Themes	Patterns	Codes
Cultural Adaptation and Framing	Involvement of male allies, engagement with local leaders, alignment with cultural norms	Involvement of male allies, engagement with local leaders, religious framing of empowerment, alignment with cultural norms, awareness campaigns, addressing stigma, gaps in rural outreach
Community Involvement	Religious framing, addressing stigma, outreach efforts	Community dialogues, rural outreach, acceptance through cultural alignment, engagement with religious leaders, community-driven planning, inclusion in decision-making

To conclude under the theme of Cultural Sensitivity and Community Engagement, the findings highlight that ensuring that development initiatives are culturally sensitive and engaging communities is crucial for the effectiveness of development programs and initiatives. Educating male allies, including local leaders in planning, and reframing empowerment in ways that better resonate with local culture contribute to greater acceptance and better engagement. However, some initiatives have gaps in outreach and community involvement that hamper their effectiveness. Primary to closing these gaps will be moving toward a more inclusive and participatory methodology, ensuring that programs are designed and executed in collaboration with local stakeholders and actors to maximize impact and sustainability

4.4.2 Theme B: Program Design and Sustainability

The second overarching theme, Program Design and Sustainability, provides insights into the role of the design, implementation, and sustainability of development programs in ensuring their effectiveness in empowering women in Nangarhar. This theme further emphasizes the need for projects to be attuned to local socioeconomic contexts to manage pacing and to maximize resource efficiency (strategic anticipation) and the need for longer term planning to have lasting impact.

Tailored and Practical Programming: The effectiveness of the programs was found to hinge on whether or not they were tailored to the socio-economic and other specific cultural factors of the Nangarhar context. Do so, and respondents consistently emphasized, initiatives designed with a strong understanding of local needs, assets, and challenges will be more successful. On the other hand, programs that considered the skills, interests and economic situation of the targeted community had better participation rates and greater impact. One

participant shared: “Some programs train people for jobs that don’t exist in our region, such as making products that nobody in this area buys. The programs must meet the needs our villages.”

Designs rooted in community were also seen as critical to relevance and practicality. Programs developed with input from a range of local stakeholders were more likely to attend to the demands of the actual community, respondents said. On the other hand, interventions that copied from foreign models without adjusting them frequently fell short in getting environmental relates results.

Codes in this sub-theme include targeted programming, local relevance, and community-led design, focusing on local needs, flexible program models, and skills for practice. These findings highlight the need for initiatives to be community informed and context-specific.

Sustainability and Ownership: Another sub-theme identified was sustainability and local ownership. Respondents expressed frustration that short term, donor driven programs frequently ended at a crucial moment of momentum when participants were not ready for follow-up support to help them sustain their progress. We saw this as a huge impediment to creating long term impact. One respondent wrote: “After the program ended, we were left to our own. “It was difficult to put into practice what I learned when there were no resources or follow up support.”

Capacity strengthening and sustainability planning were recurring themes as necessary to overcome these challenges. Participants mentioned that programs that trained community members to implement and support initiatives without outside assistance were linked to longer term benefits. Furthermore, upset at the establishment of sound monitoring and evaluation mechanisms were considered crucial for tracking progress and ensuring optimal use of resources. Another recurrent theme was resource allocation and efficiency. Some respondents described inequitable and ineffective resourcing practices that led to duplicated activities and missed opportunities. Transparent planning and accountability mechanisms were identified as key mechanisms for overcoming these inefficiencies.

The key recurrent codes of this sub-themes are: capacity building; sustainability planning; donor driven limitations; resource allocation; monitoring systems; local ownership; and efficient use of resources. This means that development programs must be structured in a way that solutions are sustainable and sustainable by empowering local ownership of dialectics.

Table 13 Focused Coding of Tailored Program Design and Sustainability in Women's Empowerment Initiatives in Afghanistan

Sub-Themes	Patterns	Codes
Tailored and Practical Programming	Local relevance, community-driven design, addressing specific needs	Tailored programming, local relevance, community-driven design, addressing specific local needs, adaptive program models, practical skill development
Sustainability and Ownership	Capacity building, sustainability planning, efficient resource allocation	Capacity building, sustainability planning, donor-driven limitations, resource allocation, monitoring systems, local ownership, efficient use of resources

The conclusion of the findings for Program Design and Sustainability show that development initiatives are most effective when they account for local context and long term impact. Programming is tailored and based on the concrete needs and realities of Nangarhar communities on the ground making it more relevant, effective, and participatory. On the other hand, sustainability and ownership are essential for sustained impact, where building capacity, resource efficiency and a strong monitoring systems ensures communities can run and scale programs on their own. Overcoming the design and sustainability gaps will be necessary to ensure that women's empowerment efforts in Nangarhar have maximal impact.

4.5 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS IN THE LIGHT OF LITERATURE

4.5.1 Discussion of Socioeconomic Opportunities

The results show that the presence of NGOs positively impacts the socioeconomic empowerment of women in Nangarhar through vocational training and income-generating activities. Women directly credited these initiatives for their improved financial independence and confidence. This resonates with the larger literature that highlights vocational training as an important driver of women's empowerment in developing countries through increased employability and earning potential (Ebrahimi et al., 2022; 3ie, 2023). Likewise, microfinance programs usually bundled with skills training have found to increase women's hubs of power in decision making and household poverty decreases (Khursheed, 2022).

However, the limitations raised by participants, including lack of market access and inadequate follow up, are consistent with critiques in the literature (ICVA, 2022; Kibrit et al., 2022; Fishstein & Farahi, 2023). A study specifically pointed out that, although NGOs manage to stimulate economic activities with the residents, their programs have not actually been able

to provide the required infrastructure to make the activity sustainable (ICVA, 2022; Kibrit et al., 2022).

Education: Based on findings from global studies, NGOs were credit with widening access to education via community-based schools and education scholarships. Programs focused on schooling of the girls have had a transformative impact on these aspects (UNESCO, 2021) and their contribution for improved literacy rates is widely recognized. Community-based school models had significant success in rural Afghanistan, where oftentimes access to formal schooling is limited, or culturally constrained (Arooje & Burrridge, 2021; UNICEF, 2019)

But the results also uncovered ongoing barriers, like cultural resistance, a lack of female teachers, and poorly funded schools. These challenges are not new and overlapping the existing literature of gender and education in conflict affected regions. Research shows that traditional norms and security concerns have especially limited girls' educational opportunities in Afghanistan (UN Women, 2021; UNICEF/press reporting 2024). Moreover, conservative societies tend to face a shortage of female teachers, an issue that is well documented in the case of those households.

Social Inclusion: By advocating for the establishment of platforms and leadership development programs for social inclusion of men in gender equality efforts, NGOs' actions were cited as key to countering the entrenched nature of gender roles. This decomposition is in line with studies stressing the contribution of advocacy to endowing with power the underprivileged ((WHO, 2019; Ruane-McAteer et al., 2020). In Afghanistan for instance, campaigns that increased the visibility of women in public spaces yielded positive effects on their involvement in decision making components (Bagai, 2022).

However, the cultural and societal resistance highlighted in the findings is a persistent theme that emerges in the literature. Many experts say that widely ingrained patriarchal norms in rural Afghanistan erode gender equality efforts (Bagai, 2022; Fishstein & Farahi, 2023; WHO, 2019). Many of these programs face serious pushback and therefore are less effective because they either fail to engage male allies or fail to address the stigma faced by survivors in society at large.

Limitations of NGO Interventions: The study showed many NGO programs are donor dependent, time bounded and non-sustainable. Such challenges are reminiscent of complaints about the wider development sector. Citing other similar studies, researchers commonly argue that external funding results in fragmented, unsustainable projects (Fishstein & Farahi, 2023; ICVA, 2022). Field experience in Afghanistan also illustrates the difficulties described above

coupled with the impact of changing security environments and evolving donor priorities in exacerbating these obstacles to program stability.

Poor coordination among NGOs and inadequate integration with local communities were also listed among the most important challenges. In conclusion, some studies highlight the importance of local ownership and community participation in all kinds of developments (Fishstein & Farahi, 2023; ICVA, 2022). If they do not engage communities in meaningful ways, development interventions risk being seen as imposed from outside, thus reducing their uptake and effectiveness.

4.5.2 Discussion of Socio-Economic Challenges Impacting the Lives and Aspirations of Women in Rural Nangarhar

Employment Vulnerabilities and Unregulated Employment: The study correlates concerns with unregulated employment, including low wages, job insecurity, and exploitative practices particularly for women as identified through the interviews, to demonstrate the challenges facing employment in rural Nangarhar. Such challenges align with global research on informal labor markets that shows how the lack of regulation is unjust to marginalized groups, especially women (ILO, 2021; Samandar & Wardak, 2025). Women in informal employment often have no legal protection and are therefore particularly vulnerable to exploitation and economic insecurity (ILO, 2021).

The reliance on seasonal work and the absence of contracts articulated by respondents are aligned with findings from studies in South Asia, where women's labor is low paid, and work security is uncommon (ADB, 2020; OECD, 2022). In Afghanistan, cultural practices limit women even more, tightly converging them to the low paid economic opportunities of agriculture or domestic work (Samandar & Wardak, 2025). Similar trends have been seen in other patriarchal situations, where women's mobility and dependency on male family members economically is socially restricted (World Bank, 2022).

They are also consistent with critiques of gender segregated labor markets that leave women concentrated in precarious jobs with little chance for promotion (UN Women, 2020). Regulatory frameworks to safeguard workers' rights and initiatives promoting skill development and gender equality in employment must be introduced to address these vulnerabilities.

Educational Constraints and Limited Opportunities for Girls: The results of the study suggest that while women in rural Nangarhar have high ambitions, access to education remains inadequate, negatively affecting their goals. This aligns with global evidence that gender gaps in education carry over into broader socioeconomic inequality (UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF,

2023). An analysis also from Afghanistan found that cultural resistance, financial constraints and inadequate infrastructure are stronger barriers to the education of girls than boys, especially in rural populations (UNESCO, 2024; Safi, 2024).

The underrepresentation of women among teachers, identified in the findings, is pervasive in the literature. In conservative societies, female teachers make a significant difference in getting and keeping girls in school (UNICEF, 2023). However, the lack of women teachers in Afghanistan's rural areas deepens existing barriers, entrenching the belief that education for girls is less valuable (UNICEF, 2023).

Transportation issues precisely match up with what other low income and conflict affected contexts tell us, where limited access to safe passage to schools acts as a barrier for families unwilling to send girls to study (UNICEF, 2023). Likewise, early marriages, a key driver of dropout rates, are well documented as an obstacle to girls' education in Afghanistan and elsewhere (Safi, 2024). The fact that education is the be-all and end-all of personal growth is directly related to the findings of the current study.

Intersection of Employment and Education: The findings of the study reinforce the interconnected relationship between employment and education, highlighting the cyclical aspect of poverty and inequality. A lack of educational opportunities limits women's access to formal employment, which leaves many women with low paying and insecure jobs that lead to economic dependence and constrain their ability to invest in their children's education. This cycle is well established in research on gender and development ((Sumner & Kandil, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

Research conducted in Afghanistan has demonstrated that investing in female education not only significantly improves their socioeconomic outlook but also provides additional benefits, such as lower rates of child mortality, and higher household income (World Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2024). However, addressing systemic barriers in both employment and education is needed for the benefits to be realized for that broad spectrum of rural women.

4.5.3 Discussion of Experiences and Perspectives of Rural Women on Development Interventions in Nangarhar

Skills Training: Empowerment and Limitations: Skills training services, implemented at the NGO level, have contributed to improving the status of women in terms of different mean variables such as socioeconomic status, degree of vocational skills, and confidence in these women, ultimately leading to independence. Such results correspond to universal research that highlights the significance of skills training in enhancing women's empowerment by enhancing their employability and income potential (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra & Schulte, 2023).

Vocational training programs have also been instrumental in helping women participate in income generating activities, particularly those related to tailoring, handicrafts, and embroidery, contributing to household finances (World Bank, 2020).

But the results also underscore some limitations like inadequate follow up support, no market access, and tight resource constraints. These challenges are in line with critiques articulated in the literature that while training programming delivers critical skills, they do not fully address systemic discrimination that limits women's ability to utilize those skills (UN Women, 2021). Studies in Afghanistan have also found that vocational training programs often lack scaling mechanisms or formal economic networks to integrate women, limiting their long term impact (AREU, 2020).

Economic Empowerment: Microfinance and Income Generation: The results show that economic empowerment programs have been particularly important for microfinance and income generating schemes helping to increase women's financial independence and their overall wellbeing. Women said they were taking loans to start small businesses, allowing them to make a steady income for their families. This also fits well with extensive literature that emphasizes the importance of microfinance to alleviate poverty and improve the bargaining power of women (Pitt & Khandker, 1998; Sinha & Banerjee, 2021). Such assistance programs, like micro-finance, have been highly efficient especially to develop entrepreneurship among women, empowering them with the means to start small enterprises (OECD, 2020).

But participants regularly voiced challenges of high repayment rates, lack of financial literacy, and limited access to top-tier financial opportunities. There are challenges here too, in line with evidence from other low income settings that increasing pressure to repay loans can increase rather than reduce financial stress among beneficiaries (D'Espallier & van Rooyen, 2019). Women, on the other hand, do not have financial literacy training that would allow them to manage funds effectively and thus, reduce the sustainability of their ventures (FAO, 2021).

The findings also show that most economic empowerment programs are not designed to tackle structural barriers, such as limited access to wider markets and exclusion from formal financial systems. This resonates with literature alternative viability of women run businesses if market linkages and sophisticated financial products are made available in a systematic manner (ILO, 2020).

Broader Socioeconomic Impacts: The lessons learned go beyond finances or job prospects and affirm the significant socio-economic impact of development interventions on women's well-being and position within households and communities. Those who engaged in these programs consistently reported heightened self-esteem, improved decision making

ability, and greater respect from family members. These findings are consistent with prior research that shows how economic independence and social engagement drive women's empowerment and agency (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; UNDP, 2021).

But the findings also highlight the cultural and systemic barriers that constrain the effect of those interventions. Women experienced pushback from male family members and community leaders who believed that women's participation in empowerment programs threatened traditional norms. This is in line with the studies that have emerged from Afghanistan and elsewhere in my new area of research, patriarchal societies, that stress the need to include men and local leaders in development efforts to gain wider buy-in and to build trust over time (Jewkes et al., 2015; Iqbal & Azizi, 2022).

4.5.4 Discussion of Key Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Development Initiatives for Women's Empowerment in Nangarhar

Cultural Sensitivity and Community Engagement: The study underlines the need for cultural awareness and engagement of communities in deciding the success of the development programmes in Nangarhar. If programs were consistent with local cultural and religious values, they were better able to be accepted and embrace participation. This reflects the global evidence that culturally innovative strategies are key to success for women empowerment programs, and more so if these programs take place in patriarchal societies (Marcus, 2021). Facilitating male allies and local leadership was the major enabler, decreasing the resistance to women and bringing more women into the fold. And the literature backs this up, suggesting that efforts to engage men as allies for gender equity are more effective at changing social norms or reducing gender disparities (UN Women, 2020). Religious leaders hold a particularly powerful position in shaping attitudes in Afghan communities, and the notion of their endorsement of development programs has been shown to enhance acceptance and participation (Oates et al., 2020).

Awareness campaigns and dialogues with community leaders were also mentioned as effective ways to combat stigma and promote women's visibility indoors and outdoors. These results are consistent with studies showing how advocacy and public education can influence

a change in societal attitudes toward gender roles (Heidari et al., 2021). However, findings confirm gaps in outreach and engagement in rural areas, complementing literature on development in conflicts affected areas (World Bank, 2022).

Program Design and Sustainability: The results suggest that customized program design and sustainability plans are key for the successful adoption of an intervention. Contextually relevant programs co-designed with local stakeholders were more likely to address community needs effectively. This aligns with participatory development theories that stress the significance of engaging beneficiaries in the development of programs to improve their relevance and impact (Hickey & King, 2019).

Short lived, donor driven projects were often criticized for their unsustainability. It has been noted before in literature that dependence on external grants, lack of long term vision, etc., are well documented limitations in the state (Banks et al., 2020). For example, in Afghanistan, unstable security situations and changing priorities of donors have made sustainability planning even more important and difficult.

Establishing local ownership and building capacity were found to be critical, wherein programs continue to serve the community well after external enabling fades. This resonates with literature that emphasizes the importance of capacity development in contributing to the ability of marginalized groups to be more resilient and self-reliant (OECD, 2019). Transparent measures for the distribution of resources and physical systems for gripping were also elevated as influential factors, mirroring some of the literature calls for higher accountability and green energy engineering in this discipline (Transparency International, 2021).

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

In this section, we provide a synthesized overview of findings across the four research questions, summarizing key insights on women's experiences, challenges they face, and opportunities available to them in Nangarhar as revealed through the study. This highlights the complex nature of women's empowerment, the impact of development interventions, and the socioeconomic and cultural contexts that can become barriers.

5.1.1 Research Question 1: Contributions and Limitations of NGOs

NGOs were considered essential to empower women in Nangarhar, through vocational, educational and social inclusion programs. Women who received these interventions reported greater financial independence, literacy rates, and participation in community decision making. However, significant constraints were identified, including the stages of impact with short project lifetimes, no follow up support for the most impacted participants, and cultural resistance to the increase in public and economic life to women. These findings illustrate the intriguing dualism of NGOs as both enablers and inept facilitators, constrained by cultural conventions and operational limitations

5.1.2 Research Question 2: Impact of Socioeconomic Challenges

Jobs without regulations, minimal education options, and other socioeconomic obstacles inhibit both women's hopes and women's quality of life in rural Nangarhar. Accumulating low wages, insecurity and exploitation, women in informal employment make it harder even for girls to access education in terms of sociocultural and economic barriers. These systemic barriers feed into one another, sustaining cycles of poverty and dependence, and early marriages and transport issues compound them further. These challenges can only be resolved through integrated approaches that address both structural and cultural barriers.

5.1.3 Research Question 3: Impact of Development Interventions

Skills training and economic empowerment programs, in particular, emerged as significant drivers of positive change in the socioeconomic status and general wellbeing of women. Vocational training programs taught women practical skills and helped improve their confidence, and microfinance schemes allowed some to start up small businesses. However high repayment rates, lack of access to markets, and inadequate follow up support hindered the long term success of these interventions. Collectively, these findings emphasize the need for designing holistic programs that combine financial literacy, market linkages and post intervention support to ensure impact.

5.1.4 Research Question 4: Factors Influencing Effectiveness of Initiatives

Cultural sensitivity and program design emerged as two prominent features affecting the sustainability of development initiatives. Programs that incorporated the local cultural and religious values and encouraged male allies and community leaders to participate were particularly effective. Here's another quote, emphasizing that ground up approach through context specific designs and sustainability planning. In contrast, short term, donor driven projects with weak monitoring and follow up mechanisms proved less fruitful. These outcomes highlight the importance of participatory and culturally adaptive strategies, recognizing the need for sustainable and readily accepted initiatives for empowering women.

5.2 Implications

This study has important implications for policy, practice, and future research on women empowerment in the context of Nangarhar and similar socio sociocultural contexts. If these challenges are addressed, development initiatives will be more effective, sustainable, and inclusive. On the policy level, cultural aspects have to be integrated into development policy design and implementation. Involving religious leaders, male allies, and community gatekeepers to contextualize women's empowerment programmes in culturally appropriate narratives can help minimize pushback and encourage involvement. Moreover, it provides a

more balanced approach to focusing on formal and informal work in governance and the output is especially beneficial for direct application in Nangarhar. Policies that encourage skill enhancement and employment diversification are equally important to facilitate entry into the formal labor market for women. By investing in women's education building educational infrastructure, hiring female teachers, and offering scholarships to address cost barriers access to learning opportunities for girls can be improved. Finally, development policies will have to prioritize sustainability and accountability, requiring that development projects take a long term view and that local people own these development initiatives, which would ensure that the benefits of a development project are felt long after it has been built.

NGOs and development organizations should, therefore, seek to develop focused and context specific programs that are relevant to rural women. To be most impactful and sustainable, such programs need to combine skill building with financial literacy training, market linkages, and mentorship. Focusing on program design alone, community engagement should be prioritized, with participatory approaches proactively including community members, to build an effective support network, with men as allies. Societal stigma and acceptance of women's participation in public and economic activities can be desensitized and improved through awareness campaigns and community dialogues. In addition to economic empowerment, we should also aim to tackle social and cultural barriers through initiatives focused on cultivating confidence, leadership, and decision making skills in women that can instigate widespread societal changes. Moreover, the developers need to focus on market integration by creating cooperatives and networking opportunities along with e-commerce platforms to enable women to reach wider markets and expand their businesses.

The findings also point to important directions for future research. Longitudinal studies are required to capture the long term effects of development programs on women's empowerment including social and economic dimensions. Research needs to be done at the intersection of age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, all these play a role in women's experiences and access to opportunities. Future studies should evaluate the efficacy of engaging men and boys in women's empowerment programming to provide insights into approaches to transforming social norms and decreasing resistance. Another important area of exploration will be investigating the role of technology in facilitating women's access to education, training, and markets. Internet based devices and distance education systems have the potential to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, providing creative opportunities for women in rural areas.

Its sociocultural implications highlight the need to continue changing gender norms that restrict women's positions and opportunities. Programs for empowerment have to be rooted in discussions with communities on achieving gender equality and highlight successful female role models as catalysts for larger community changes. Empowering women to enhance resilience at the community level by improving household incomes, increasing educational attainment, and promoting social cohesion. Development efforts should focus on the community level value of the participation of women to elicit wider community recognition. The study, therefore, emphasizes integrated, culturally adaptive, and sustainable approaches to women's empowerment. Effective administration through specific policies, well implemented practices, and ongoing research can provide solutions to socioeconomic and cultural hindrances for significant and long term transformation, both at individual women levels and regional socioeconomic growth and stability.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

This study gives important insight into the history, challenges, and opportunities of women's empowerment in Nangarhar, however, several limitations must be noted to contextualize the findings and direct future research.

First, the study was geographically limited to rural regions of Nangarhar, restricting the generalizability of its conclusions to other areas of Afghanistan or other sociocultural contexts. Women's experiences and perspectives can vary considerably between provinces as a result of differences in cultural attitudes, security conditions, and the availability of development programs. Future studies can focus on diverse geographic areas that are less well represented to understand a wider range of experiences.

Second, given that the study was qualitative, despite the use of such methods being perhaps best to capture in depth perspectives and complex insights, it lacks the generalizability that quantitative approaches allow. Given that the report is largely based on interviews and focus groups, the findings are what the report calls "self-reported"; they reflect participants' subjective experiences, which might not reflect the views of all women in the region. Furthermore, the potential for social desirability bias in responses, especially given the

potentially sensitive nature of the context around discussing gender roles and empowerment, may have shaped the data.

Third, although the study's reliance on self-reported data reflects the goal of the study, it raises issues on the potential for recall bias, or how participants interpret their experience. Perceptions of empowerment and impact/barriers might differ by individual circumstances or expectations. Future work could supplement qualitative approaches with longitudinal or mixed-method designs to objectively assess longer term effects of interventions.

Fourth, it is a study done at a particular moment which expressed also the socio political context of the time. Given the volatile political and security situation in Afghanistan, the findings may not capture the full scope of changing challenges and opportunities for women in Nangarhar. More restrictive policies as well as shifting donor priorities could reshape the funding landscape for women's empowerment programs.

Lastly, though this study centered on women's experiences, it lacked a systematic exploration of the attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of other crucial stakeholders, such as male relatives, local leaders, who have a substantial impact on the success of any development program. Integrating these viewpoints into subsequent studies may offer a breadth of understanding of the sociocultural forces influencing women's empowerment.

Nonetheless, the study provides insights to the general understanding of women empowerment in Nangarhar, establishing a website for focused interventions and future research. Future studies could overcome these limitations, adding greater depth, breadth, and relevance to findings, thereby underpinning more effective and inclusive strategies for securing women's development in Afghanistan.

As the purpose of this study and those noted above is exploratory, future research should attempt to replicate this work in other regions of Afghanistan that have varied cultural, social, and economic conditions. These insights into the differences in these challenges across more and less rural areas would allow for more tailored and effective interventions. Moreover, the use of quantitative or mixed-methods approaches will support the diversity and generalizability of findings while providing qualitative methods with detailed and rich insights.

Evaluation of the long term effects of development initiatives can only be achieved through longitudinal studies. Tracking participants over time can provide valuable insights into the sustainability of interventions; revealing how skills training, economic empowerment programs, and educational initiatives influence the socio-economic status and wellbeing of women years after the completion of a project. Such studies can also paint more detailed pictures of the factors leading to or preventing the lasting success of these programs.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore the intersectionality of women's experiences by considering the extent to which contextual factors (age, ethnicity, marital status, and disability) impact women's access to empowerment opportunities. By informing us of the specific barriers that more marginalized subgroups experience, this approach can help ensure that interventions do not impede participation further and do attend to the various needs. Equally important is listening to and engaging male family members, local leaders, and other community stakeholders to design culturally sensitive programs that can promote broader acceptance and support for women's empowerment.

Another track worth studying is how technology may empower women. Studies can explore how digital solutions, including mobile learning platforms and e-commerce, can transcend geographical and cultural barriers and familiarize women with education, training, and markets. Furthermore, by analyzing the success (or deficiencies) of government initiatives that aim to empower women, it is possible to get a sense of what is lacking and how to tailor strategies that will have the desired impact.

Future research must focus on models of sustainability. Exploring other approaches for building capacity, promoting local ownership, and mobilizing local resources can yield longer term benefits from local development interventions. Such comparative studies in other conflict affected or highly culturally conservative contexts may highlight valuable lessons and best practices that could be contextually attuned to the Afghan case.

Finally, research should investigate how changes in Afghanistan's security and political situation impact women's empowerment initiatives. Useful information about the effectiveness of achieving change of these changes can inform adaptive strategies to sustain change during difficult circumstances. They will also ensure accountability and results by developing strong monitoring and evaluation frameworks, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes for women across Nangarhar and beyond.

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Annexure

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Interview Guideline for Data Collection on Empowering Afghan women in rural communities: The impact of NGOs on capacity building and gender inclusion

Contact Person:

Najeebullah

National University of Modern languages- Islamabad (NUML University)

Pakistan

Email: n.qasmi55@gmail.com

CONSENT FORM

I, the undersigned, declare that I am willing to take part in this research project entitled: **“Empowering Afghan Women in rural communities: the Impact of NGOs on capacity building and gender inclusion”**.

- I declare that I have been fully briefed on the nature of this study and my role in it and have been given the opportunity to ask questions before agreeing to participate.
- The nature of my participation has been explained to me and I have full knowledge of how the information collected will be used.
- I am also aware that my participation in this study may be recorded (audio) and I agree to this. However, should I feel uncomfortable at any time I can request that the recording equipment be switched off. I am entitled to copies of all recordings made and I am fully informed as to what will happen to these recordings once the study is completed.

- I fully understand that there is no obligation on me to participate in this study.
- I fully understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without having to explain or give a reason.
- I am willing/not willing to be identified as a participant in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Interview Details

Department: _____ **Interviewer(s):** _____

Tehsil Name: _____ **Name of the Institution:** _____

Location: _____ **Date:** _____

Start of the interview: _____ **End of the interview:** _____

Introductory Statement

Thank you very much for taking the time for this interview! I appreciate it a lot. First, let me introduce myself. I am Najeebullah, an MPhil student from NUML University, Islamabad, Pakistan. The research study aims to:

1. To investigate how women in Nangarhar, Afghanistan perceive and experience the contribution of NGOs in enhancing their socio-economic empowerment.
2. To explore the impact of skills training and economic empowerment programs conducted by NGOs to empower women.
3. To investigate the contextual factors (Cultural, economic, and social) that influence the effectiveness of development initiatives by NGOs targeting women's empowerment.

Hence, I will ask open questions on some topics of interest for our research. Please feel free to skip a question if you do not want to talk about a topic. We have as much time as your schedule allows for the interview.

Before we start: do you mind if we record the interview?

Bridging card

Could you please name the most important activities that your NGO carried out in the Nangarhar regarding women's empowerment since you came into office?		
Prio- rity	Module	Entry Question
1.	1. Women's perception of the contribution of NGOs	To investigate how women in Nangarhar, Afghanistan perceive and experience the contribution of NGOs in enhancing their socio-economic empowerment.
2.	2. Programs conducted by NGOs	To explore the impact of skills training and economic empowerment programs conducted by NGOs to empower women.
3.	4. Contextual Factors	To investigate the contextual factors (Cultural, economic, and social) that influence the effectiveness of development initiatives by NGOs targeting women's empowerment.

Opening		
0.1. Could you please name the most important activities that your administration/NGO carried out in the Nangarhar regarding women empowerment since you came into office?		
Indicator	Specifying questions	Neutral questions
	0.2. What were the main projects that your administration has implemented? 0.3. What are the main priorities for your administration? 0.4. Does your department value women empowerment and how?	- Is there anything else? - What do you mean when you are saying....? - And then? - What else? - What other factors can you think of?

Module 1 : Women's perception of the contribution of NGOs		
1.1. To investigate how women in Nangarhar, Afghanistan perceive and experience the contribution of NGOs in enhancing their socio-economic empowerment.		
Indicator	Follow-up questions	Specifying questions
Women's perception of the contribution of NGOs	<p>1.3. What specific programs or initiatives does your NGO have in place to support women's socio-economic empowerment in Nangarhar?</p> <p>1.4. How many women have benefitted from your NGO's initiatives, and what measurable impact have you observed in terms of socio-economic empowerment??</p> <p>1.6. How does your NGO engage with the local community, particularly women, to ensure that programs are culturally sensitive and meet their specific needs??</p>	<p>1.2. Can you provide a brief overview of your NGO's mission and activities in Nangarhar, specifically related to women's socio-economic empowerment?</p> <p>1.5. To what extent does your NGO collaborate with local organizations, government agencies, or other stakeholders to enhance the effectiveness of your women's empowerment initiatives?</p> <p>1.7. In what ways does your NGO gather feedback from women beneficiaries to assess the effectiveness of your programs, and how do you use this feedback to improve your initiatives?</p> <p>1.8. How does your NGO ensure the sustainability of women's empowerment initiatives beyond the duration</p>

	<p>1.9. To what extent are women in Nangarhar aware of the specific programs and projects implemented by NGOs for their socio-economic empowerment, and how well do they understand these initiatives?</p> <p>1.11. From the perspective of women in Nangarhar, how culturally sensitive are the approaches and strategies employed by NGOs in their socio-economic empowerment initiatives?</p> <p>1.13. From the viewpoint of women beneficiaries, what expectations do they have regarding the long-term impact and sustainability of the socio-economic empowerment initiatives facilitated by NGOs?</p>	<p>of specific projects, and what steps are taken to promote long-term impact?</p> <p>1.10. From the perspective of women beneficiaries, can you describe any tangible examples or instances where NGO interventions have positively influenced their economic empowerment?</p> <p>1.12. According to the women you've interacted with, what are the primary challenges they face in achieving socio-economic empowerment, and how do they perceive the role of NGOs in addressing these challenges?</p>
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Module 2: Programs conducted by NGOs

2.1. To explore the impact of skills training and economic empowerment programs conducted by NGOs to empower women.		
Indicator	Follow-up questions	Specifying questions
Programs conducted by NGOs	<p>2.2. Can you provide an overview of the skills training and economic empowerment programs that your NGO conducts specifically for women?</p> <p>2.5. In your assessment, what impact have you observed in terms of skill development among women who have participated in these programs?</p> <p>2.8. For women who pursue entrepreneurial activities after participating in the programs, how does your NGO provide ongoing support, and what success stories or challenges have emerged?</p> <p>2.10. How does your NGO collect feedback from women participants, and how has this feedback influenced the design or improvement of the skills training and economic empowerment initiatives?</p>	<p>2.3. What are the primary objectives of the skills training and economic empowerment programs for women, and what outcomes do you aim to achieve through these initiatives?</p> <p>2.4. How does your NGO select women participants for these programs, and how do you ensure inclusivity and representation from diverse backgrounds?</p> <p>2.6. How does your organization measure the economic empowerment of women who have completed the skills training programs, and what indicators or benchmarks are used?</p> <p>2.7. Can you describe the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place to track the progress and impact of women who have undergone skills training and economic empowerment programs?</p> <p>2.9. Does your organization collaborate with local businesses or industries to facilitate job placements or business</p>

		<p>opportunities for women who complete the skills training programs?</p> <p>Concluding: From your perspective, what is the long-term impact of these programs on the lives of women, and how does your NGO ensure the sustainability of the economic empowerment initiatives beyond the training period?</p>
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Module 3: Contextual Factors		
3.1. To investigate the contextual factors (Cultural, economic, and social) that influence the effectiveness of development initiatives by NGOs targeting women's empowerment.		
Indicator	Follow-up questions	Specifying questions
Contextual Factors	<p>3.2. How does your NGO ensure that its women's empowerment initiatives are culturally relevant and sensitive to the local context in the areas where they are implemented?</p> <p>From your experience, what cultural, economic, or social barriers and challenges do women often face in the targeted</p>	<p>3.3. In what ways does your organization actively engage with the local community, particularly considering cultural norms and values, to enhance the effectiveness of women's empowerment programs?</p> <p>3.4. How do economic factors, such as the local economic landscape and employment opportunities, influence the design and implementation of</p>

	<p>communities, and how do these factors impact the success of your development initiatives?</p> <p>To what extent does your NGO collaborate with local partners or organizations to better understand and address the unique cultural and economic aspects of the communities you work with?</p> <p>Can you describe the mechanisms in place for gathering feedback from the community regarding the cultural and social appropriateness of your women's empowerment initiatives?</p> <p>Considering the varied cultural and economic contexts, how does your NGO ensure the sustainability of women's empowerment initiatives beyond the initial implementation phase?</p>	<p>women's empowerment initiatives by your NGO?</p> <p>How does your organization adapt its women's empowerment programs to the specific economic and social conditions of different regions or communities?</p> <p>How do social dynamics, including gender roles and relationships within communities, influence the participation and outcomes of women in your empowerment programs?</p> <p>How does your organization conduct impact assessments that take into account the diversity of cultural, economic, and social contexts in which your women's empowerment programs are implemented?</p>
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APPENDIX 2

Guide for Focus Group Discussions on Empowering Afghan women in rural communities: The impact of NGOs on capacity building and gender inclusion

This study will convene twenty focus group discussions evenly distributed in the two districts to cover a number of salient topics as indicated below:

Note:

This is merely an indicative guideline since sufficient opportunity will be accorded to participants who want to discuss an issue in more depth to do so.

The discussion will begin with:

Introduction of the facilitator/researcher.

Explanation of the purpose of the meeting.

Agreeing on procedure of the meeting.

Open discussion

Please introduce yourselves briefly, and share a little about your experiences and background.

To start, could each of you share your thoughts on the concept of socio-economic empowerment?

RO	Prompts
To investigate how women in Nangarhar, Afghanistan perceive and experience the contribution of NGOs in enhancing their socio-economic empowerment.	Have you heard about NGOs (the groups that help people) in Nangarhar? Can you tell me which ones you know?
	How do you think these groups help women like us in Nangarhar? What kind of help have you received?
	Can you talk about any good changes you've noticed in your life or your community because of the help from NGOs?
To explore the impact of skills training and economic empowerment programs conducted by NGOs to empower women.	What difficulties do you and other women face when trying to get this help? Are there things that could be better?
	Have any of you taken part in training programs from NGOs?
	What was it like, and what did you learn? For those who started businesses or jobs after the training, can you share how it happened? Any challenges or good things you want to talk about?

<p>To investigate the contextual factors (Cultural, economic, and social) that influence the effectiveness of development initiatives by NGOs targeting women's empowerment.</p>	<p>How does the life here in Nangarhar affect the help you get? Are there things about our life that the groups helping us should understand better?</p> <p>How actively do you feel engaged with the local community in the development initiatives led by NGOs?</p> <p>Are there opportunities for community involvement in decision-making processes?</p> <p>How do social dynamics, such as gender roles and relationships within the community, influence the effectiveness of women's empowerment programs?</p> <p>Can you share any personal experiences related to social dynamics and women's empowerment?</p> <p>Have any of you participated in skills training programs provided by NGOs? If so, could you share your experience?</p> <p>What skills or knowledge did you gain, and how has it impacted your daily life or livelihood?</p>
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