

## The Impact of Non-formal Education Programs on Women's Empowerment in Rural Bangladesh

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**ABSTRACT :** The results of this study were derived from a mixed-method investigation into non-formal education initiatives related to women's empowerment in Bangladesh's rural areas. Fifty rural women were chosen at random to participate in the study from the target population, which consisted of rural women who had completed non-formal education programs like TVET in Bangladesh. A structured questionnaire was used to get quantitative data, and semi-structured interviewing techniques were used to gather qualitative data from the respondents. The same subjects participated in both the questionnaire survey and the interviews, which allowed for a deeper comprehension of the research problem. Descriptive statistics were used to measure quantitative data, whereas thematic content analysis was used to measure qualitative information. The findings pointed to the fact that non-formal Education improved women's economic status and employment, self-esteem and involvement in community affairs. However, in the cultural sense and as regards access to a few resources, women were still not fully empowered. From the results, it can be noted that extension of non-formal education programs and community mobilization should be effective in enhancing women's employment. These findings have important implications for future program planning and practice for the policymakers, NGO and educators, interrelated to women's education and learning.

**Keywords-** Women's Empowerment, Non-Formal Education, Rural Development, Gender Equality, Economic Independence

### I. INTRODUCTION

An educational strategy that has been positively adopted in advancing the course of sustainable development of the women, particularly in rural areas, has been termed as non-formal education in this study. Non-formal education refers to organized educational activities that take place outside the formal school system. These activities can happen in various settings such as community centers, workplaces, cultural institutions, or even online. Non-formal education is often more flexible and learner-centered compared to formal education, focusing

on specific skills, competencies, or knowledge areas. It is typically voluntary and does not necessarily lead to formal qualifications or degrees, though it can be an important supplement to formal education. Self-employed women are key beneficiaries of education; this kind of learning has become a significant way of empowering women, mainly through non-formal education (NFE) to attain economic literacy, improve on the process of decision-making and enhance social buy-in and participation (UNESCO, 2021). Banu and Kabeer (2002) and Hossain and Hussain (2010) reported that not only poor economy but also early marriage and culture hampers to get formal education in rural women of Bangladesh. These factors restrict possibilities of their enhancement and mechanisms to achieve economic independence. Non-formal education programs provide an opportunity other than formal schooling for women since the programs can easily fit into women's busy schedule (Basu & Basu, 2020). These programs normally concern the literacy, vocational training and personal development to ensure that women become active participants in societies and economies (Hossain & Tisdell, 2017). Even with the expansion in terms of enrolment for NFE programs in Bangladesh, there has been a controversy on the extent to which such education has empowered rural women (Rahman, 2020). Women educational programs with non-formal education benefits have the potentiality towards the empowerment of women in Bangladesh; however, rural women in Bangladesh confront cultural barrier and restriction and lack of resources to empower them in their entirety (Kabear, 2015). Surprisingly, there are few far-reaching investigations that can assess the effects of such programs on women's employment in rural areas. Therefore, this research seeks to examine the impact of non-formal education in empowering rural women in Bangladesh in an effort to fit the existing literature gaps and help understand the challenges and opportunities implied in such environments.

## **II. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The importance of the study is as follows this work will be useful to understand the issues of the non-formal education programs as the factor of empowering women in the rural area of Bangladesh. Thus, the research fulfills important gaps in literature by evaluating the effects on economic independence, decision-making, and social participation of such programs. The findings provide a useful contribution to policy makers, NGOs and educators as to how to improve program efficacy, circumnavigate culture, and advance gender equity. Also, the study contributes to an understanding of the more significant function of education in raising awareness of marginalized women, which plays a significant role in sustainable rural development and community improvement in the context of the integrated development of Bangladesh.

## **III. OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY**

The objective of this study was to examine the impact of non-formal education programs on women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh, focusing on economic independence and social participation.

## **IV. LITERATURE REVIEW OF THIS STUDY**

NFE has received much attention for its potential to promote education and skill development to the socially excluded groups especially women in the rural areas. This systematic literature review focuses on NFE program effects on women's learning in rural Bangladesh where culture and gendered poverty limits education. Literatures show that NFE contributes towards improvement of women's knowledge, skills and self- efficacy. These programs provide

convenient education option for women characterized by poverty, early marriages, and other cultural restrictions and practice (Basu & Basu, 2020). Being able to read, write, count, and learn basic vocational skills the NFE prepares woman to contribute more towards the well-being of their homes and societies. According to Hossain and Tisdell (2017), NFE not only enhances women's income generating aptitude, but also raises their autonomy to decide in their domestic as well as community life. Another important effect of NFE programs for rural women is economic enfranchisement. Many NFE programs entail vocational education making graduates employable or makes them acquire entrepreneurial skills, hence achieving better financial positions (Rahman, 2020). Largely in rural Bangladesh, where employment options for women are scarce, NFE provides important sources of income. Chowdhury (2019) analyzes that women who engaged NFE programs showed improved income levels and improved control over household finances, and also showed that NFE can bring about substantial change in the area of economic independence.

Non formal education also enhances social participation among the rural women. Kabeer (2015) identified that women's participation in NFE program empowers them to be active and be leaders in certain community duties. This is so the case since women in rural Bangladesh are socially marginalized and their participation in social activities is limited. Employing the voices of Ali and Hossain (2018), the authors stated the findings on women's NFE participation to local governance and decisions making draw them towards a more participatory society. But nevertheless there are some cultural barriers, which affect rural women in Bangladesh even when having a positive experience in NFE. Early marriage, upbringing within the cultural norms that dictate most women's social roles, and traditional gender roles reduce women's chances of fully applying the knowledge and skills they received through NFE programs (Kabeer, 2015). Nonetheless, NFE may further empower women economically and socially these cultural barriers may pull women down in perceived level of control by limiting them in mobility and decisions making (Hossain & Tisdell, 2017). There is need to deliberate with cultural considerations in order to have a lasting NFE programs.

Furthermore, a study reveals that NFE programs are associated with health enhancement knowledge among rural women. A lot of programs offer some form of health promotion, for instance, teaching on diet and health, birth control, and the health of women of child bearing age (Ahmed, 2018). Such health education is very vital in improving health of women and the member of the family as well. In addition, some constraints like shortages of funds, poor facilities and few resources negatively affect the implementation of NFE programs (Rahman, 2020). It is imperative that such programs offer a high quality need to be made available to as many people as possible. Because the support of NFE initiatives requires long term commitments, coordination between different governmental departments and NGOs becomes crucial. This paper supports the works of Basu and Basu (2020) who have opined that only when NFE programs are sustainable and flexible enough to respond to changes in the social and economic realities of the country, can education empower those rural women of Bangladesh. Informal education programs are important procreative force helping women in rural Bangladesh to become economically independent, socially active, and health conscious. But it is necessary to indicate that with supply increasing, measures should be taken to eliminate the cultural factors which hinder the utilization of the program resources; in this regard, the continuation of governmental aid and NGO participation is crucial to the program's sustainable continuation and effective implementation.

## V. RESEARCH GAPS

However, literature review presented certain research gaps about the impact of non-formal education (NFE) program in enhancing the empowerment of women in rural Bangladesh. First, although prior research emphasizes economic, social, and health benefits, future work indicates the scarcity of the extant literature on the enduring nature of those effects, especially with regard to eradicating cultural norms, including gender dynamics and early marriage. Another area where the impact of NFE has been previously examined is the effectiveness of the method in enhancing women's political participation including the leadership in local governments of the country, yet the role of NFE in the development of women leadership and policy advocacy has not been researched well. Additionally, while the majority of the articles are based on outcomes, a few pay attention to the barriers, including insufficient funding, poor physical environment, and inexperienced instructors that hinder the program from achieving maximum results. Last, the future development and expansion of NFE programs involves the utilization of government-NGO partnership more deeply in terms of policy mainstreaming and resource mobilization as key perspectives for community enhancement.

## VI. THEORY APPLIED IN THIS STUDY

The empowerment theory underpins this study, as it holds that education fulfills the means-through which individuals especially the rural section of the population has the opportunity to take control of their lives (Rappaport, 1987). A Bangladesh NFE-A aims at empowering rural women via transferring appropriate knowledge and skills necessary for economic status and social visibility. This empowerment process clearly does not entail the learning of skills only but also defying cultures and enhancing voice for women in the community (Kabeer, 2015). Therefore, the theory involves detailing of the complexity of how NFE brings a positive change to women and that this change comes in many aspects like economic, social, and health.

## VII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

In Bangladesh, non-formal education (NFE) plays a vital role in addressing the educational needs of marginalized populations, particularly those who have missed out on formal education or need skill development. Several government initiatives, as well as programs run by NGOs and international organizations, focus on non-formal education to enhance literacy, vocational skills, and overall community development. This research work used a mixed-method research design to assess the various factors of non-formal education programs affecting the women empowerment in rural Bangladesh. 50 women were randomly selected from the rural women who completed non-formal educational training from the 'Bureau of Non-Formal Education' under the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education that is responsible for organizing and implementing non-formal educational programs across Bangladesh and from the BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) that runs one of the most extensive non-formal education programs in Bangladesh providing flexible, community-based learning opportunities to children and adults, especially those from poor and marginalized communities. Carefully conducted interviews provided the qualitative data, while closed-ended questionnaire was used to generate the quantitative data. During field visits to the chosen rural villages, survey questionnaires and open-ended interviews were carried out. While the qualitative data was analyzed using thematic content analysis to uncover new patterns and stories or narratives, the quantitative data was examined using descriptive statistics to determine objective outcomes of the research problem. Through the use of statistics and narratives this triangulation technique made it simple to comprehend how and in what ways non-formal education affected women's empowerment.

### VIII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section deals with interpretation and discussion of the results from the data analysis. The results are presented in two main sections. One section deals with the theoretical results collected by the questionnaire and interview. Another section is about the in-depth discussion of the findings with referencing and cross-referencing.

**Table 1. Participation in non-formal education programs has significantly improved my economic opportunities.**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	20	40%
Agree	15	30%
Neutral	5	10%
Disagree	7	14%
Strongly Disagree	3	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

The responses in Table 1 show that seventy percent of the participants have positive attitudes toward the effects of non-formal education programs on their economic future, 40 percent strongly and 30 percent agree. 10% of participants are neutral, 20% reported negative emotions, which comprise of 14% who disagreed, and 6% who strongly disagreed. This suggest a rather high level of general confidence in such programs, which is surprisingly a growing trend in terms of accepting the social value of such programs as a means of creating better opportunities for the participants economically.

**Table 2. The skills I have gained from non-formal education programs have boosted my self-confidence.**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	22	44%
Agree	16	32%
Neutral	6	12%
Disagree	4	8%
Strongly Disagree	2	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2 paints a positive picture on the self-confidence that participants of the non-formal education programs have on their perception. The benefit reaches 76 per cent: 44 strong benefits and 32 per cent of benefits with skills which increased self-confidence. Nine percent are not sure how they feel, while 4% are indifferent, 8% dislike it and 4% really dislike it. This study reveals a general agreement as to prosperity of such programs in increasing self-esteem among the participants.

**Table 3. I feel more empowered to make decisions regarding my family and finances since attending non-formal education programs.**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	18	36%
Agree	20	40%
Neutral	5	10%
Disagree	5	10%
Strongly Disagree	2	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

As Table 3 shows, all qualitative and quantitative components express a highly positive attitude toward the empowers participants to make decisions after attending non-formal education programs. Overall 76% participants' positive responses have been obtained where as 36% strongly agree and 40% agree with the statement 'These programs have made the decisions regarding family and finance easier for me'. However, 10% are indifferent, and 14% have negative attitude, 10% of them disagree and 4% strongly disagree. In general, these findings suggest that the participants have a tremendous amount fo faith in the efficacy of the programs to foster personal efficacy.

**Table 4. Non-formal education programs have encouraged me to participate more actively in community activities.**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	18	36%
Agree	20	40%
Neutral	5	10%
Disagree	5	10%
Strongly Disagree	2	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

In table 4 the responses of participants are hugely positive when it comes to the influence and effectiveness of non-formal education programs in enhancing community participation. On whether the participants have been encouraged to participate more in facilitating the community activities, 76% agreed of which 36% strongly agreed while 40% agreed. None of the respondents are indifferent, 14% stand in-between as they either disagree or strongly disagree. Based on these findings it can be predicted that the programs are having a positive effect on the participants' positive intentions to become more engaged in their communities.

**Table 5. After completing non-formal education programs, I have better access to resources.**

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	20	40%
Agree	15	30%
Neutral	5	10%



Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Disagree	7	14%
Strongly Disagree	3	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

With reference to the perception of receiving resource after attending non-formal education programs Table 5 has shown a positive perception. A total of seventy percent participants say that they have better access, of which, 40 percent respondents have strongly agreed while 30 percent agreed with them. 10% are in the middle, 20% have negative attitude inclined to 14% disagreement and 6% strong disagreement. Altogether, these outcomes point to the fact that the respondents' general impression of the programs is that they have improving the respondents' access to resources in their daily lives in a very noticeable way.

**Table 6. The health education components of the non-formal education programs have improved my understanding of health and nutrition.**

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	25	50%
Agree	15	30%
Neutral	5	10%
Disagree	3	6%
Strongly Disagree	2	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 6 shows a very positive perception on health education elements of non-formal education which include awareness, knowledge, and communication. An enormously high percentage of 80% of participants have expressed agreement that the programs have in some way improved their knowledge of health/nutrition with 50% expressing strongly agree and 30% agreeing. 7% are indifferent and 3% give an unclear answer, simultaneously, both 3% agree and 3% strongly agree, 2% are unsure, 2% disagree, and 2% strongly disagree. Thus, these findings show that the health education components of the programs have adequately supported this area of knowledge and information among the participants.

**Table 7. Participation in non-formal education programs has helped me challenge cultural barriers.**

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	18	36%
Agree	20	40%
Neutral	7	14%
Disagree	4	8%
Strongly Disagree	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Notably, attitudes depicted to non-formal education programs show a positive disposition towards dealing with a cultural barrier as shown in Table 7. 76% of participants have reported that they are empowered while 36% strongly agree and 40% agree that their participation has enhanced this issue. Fewer respondents, 14 percent, select the neutral attitude, while 8 percent selected the disagree attitude and only 2 percent selected the strongly disagree attitude. The results of the study point to the fact that the programs affect these parameters and help the participants to meet cultural challenges effectively; therefore the programs are useful to enhance the personal development and cultural sensitivity among people.

**Table 8. Through non-formal education programs, I have developed social support networks.**

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	22	44%
Agree	18	36%
Neutral	5	10%
Disagree	4	8%
Strongly Disagree	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

The response recorded in table 8 is highly positive concerning development of social support networks through non-formal education programs. When it comes to this aspect, 80% of participants affirm that such programs have been useful in creating such networks, where 44% affirms strongly and the rest (36%) affirms, agreeing partially. A ten percent of respondents are neutral while the remaining ten percent present negative sentiments, 8% disagree and 2% strongly disagree. From these findings, it can be inferred that the programs strengthen social relationship and support noting that they serve to conquer social relation and support structures.

**Table 9. The vocational training provided in non-formal education programs has equipped me with the skills needed to start my own business.**

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	24	48%
Agree	15	30%
Neutral	6	12%
Disagree	4	8%
Strongly Disagree	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

In table 9 the interviewees seem to have very high regard to the vocational trainings in non-formal education and skills for business. About Three quarter of the participants agreed that they feel ready to start their own businesses 78%, out of which 48% strongly agreed while 30% agreed. Finally, 12% of students are in the neutral camp, while the rest, 10%, express negative



attitudes toward identity: 8% of students disagree with the statement, and 2% strongly disagree. The results presented here suggest that for participants in the vocational training, the training is highly effective in equipping them with crucial skills hence marking the vocational training programs as instrumental in creating the entrepreneurial capacity among the intended beneficiaries.

**Table 10. I believe that the benefits I have gained from non-formal education programs will have a lasting impact.**

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	26	52%
Agree	15	30%
Neutral	6	12%
Disagree	2	4%
Strongly Disagree	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

As shown in table 10 the belief is strongly expressed about the durability of the benefits acquired from non-formal education programmes. A very high 82% of participants feel this way with 52% strongly and 30% agreeing to these extended considerable benefits. A mere 12% have no opinion while even a negligible 6% have negative perceptions; 4% of them disagree while 2% strongly disagree. These outcomes indicate high degrees of confidence amongst the participants in the benefits of education, and capturing enduring indeed lifelong impacts of these educational programs.

### Findings from Interview

The data gathered from the three participants in the interview sessions that we conducted provided an enlightened understanding of the role of non-formal education programs for women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh. The respondent A was very much elated about the programs as they boosted her self-confidence and decision making skills as she expressed improved effectiveness as far as her contribution to the affairs of the community and family are concerned. Respondent B highlighted the need for skills, she was able to acquire vocation skills that in turn helped her establish a petty business that helps her family. On the other hand, Respondent C was able to express that these programs have created a nurturing environment where women can interact, work together, support each other and create groups with which the impacted women can assist each other. Overall, the findings suggest that non-formal education programs play a crucial role in empowering women by enhancing their skills, confidence, and social connections, ultimately leading to improved economic opportunities and a stronger voice in their communities.

## IX. DISCUSSION ON THE FINDINGS

This paper presents an understanding of the influence of non-formal education (NFE) on 'Empowerment of Women' in the rural area of Bangladesh through a literature review of published and unpublished sources, the administration of a structured questionnaire, and interviews. The literature suggests by promoting women's knowledge, skill development along with their self-efficacy (Basu & Basu, 2020; Hossain & Tisdell, 2017). These are reflected in survey, where 70% of respondents confirmed that there are better economic prospects now

available (Table 1), and 76% of respondents stated that they gained more confidence due to skills learnt (Table 2). Respondents also reported aspects of the self that they had changed: one participant said that he had become better at decision-making which corresponds with Chowdhury's (2019) observation that NFE participants gain more control over their household finances. Moreover, 76 % of women in the survey said that they felt empowered to participate in community activities – a view supported by Kabeer (2015) that NFE promotes such participation and leadership among women (Table 4). Still, the cultural factors are found persistent by both the literature and survey data. However, women are still constrained, in their full utilization of the acquired skills, by traditional gender roles, and prevalent social norms (Hossain & Tisdell, 2017). Interviews also indexed comparable attitudes, respondents agreeing that there remained cultural barriers that have remained an issue for a while. In addition to this, the survey revealed that only 20% of the participants did not benefit from any of the health education components which is very essential in one's wellbeing as proposed by Ahmed, (2018) on the impact of NFE to health awareness. Such a holistic strategy concerns the beneficial role of NFE and existing cultural barriers that should be considered for continuity of female empowering. Therefore, it is important to continue to press for women's rights and rights for NFE programs for women in the rural Bangladesh through the combination of quantitative survey results and qualitative data.

## X. CONCLUSION

This paper also shows that non formal education programs empower the rural Bangladeshi women from the aspects of economic opportunity, self-esteem and participation. The experiences show that these Programs enhance women's decision-making potential and crack the nut of resource to enhance the women's emancipation. However, culture issues remain a challenge and prevent any realization of these gains in their entirety. These challenges can only be eradicated through community education and encouragement of supportive policies to enhance non formal education.

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