

Work for Afghan Women under SDG 8: Critical Analysis of NGO Project's Impact on Decent Work

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Abstract. This research examines the role of non-governmental organizations in empowering Afghan women between 2010 and 2025 within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 8. This study examines the extent to which these efforts have been successful, using the concept of 'decent work' as defined by the International Labor Organization. through qualitative analysis and a review of existing documents, the findings show that although these projects tried to provide employment opportunities and promote women's economic participation, most of them failed in practice. The lack of alignment of these projects with the real needs of Afghan society and its social and cultural conditions has prevented the creation of sustainable economic independence for women. Despite various efforts, the high dependence of NGOs on external funding sources and the short-term nature of many projects have become a major obstacle to the real economic empowerment of Afghan women. This article argues that for development initiatives to have a real and lasting impact, they must be rethought and tailored to Afghanistan's specific social and cultural realities. Only by aligning programs with the actual needs of society can they create meaningful change and genuinely move the country closer to achieving its sustainable development goals.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Decent Work, Women's Empowerment.

1 Introduction

After 20 years since the Taliban's first government, their return faced Afghanistan with a deep crisis more serious than the past. According to the United Nations' report to the Security Council in December 2024, imposing systematic and structural restrictions on human rights is one of the new government's prominent features. Women's deprivation of education, job, and social participation rights not only made them isolated and oppressed but also led to severe economic consequences, effectively removing a significant portion of the country's human capital from the human process[1]. The World Bank's report shows that girls' educational deprivation has deep negative impacts on Afghanistan's economic development and leads to a decrease in its GDP. According to this report, in 2024, Afghanistan experienced only 2.7% economic growth primarily due to private consumption. Long-term consequences of this situation include: an active workforce shortage, the

intensification cycle of poverty, and increasing dependency on international aid, which leads to Afghanistan's vulnerability in the face of economic crisis in the future[2]. According to UNDP's report, in 2021, limiting women's work conditions led to a 5% decrease in Gross Domestic Product, which is not acceptable in Afghanistan's fragile economic conditions[3].

In response, NGOs provided a wide range of services to Afghans. After the fall of the Taliban in 2011, nongovernmental institutions returned to Afghanistan and started their activities in humanitarian aid, but expanded their activities gradually in peacemaking, human rights, and women's support. These institutions used communication strategies to promote women's rights more effectively and to develop Afghanistan[4]. They have been active in providing food, clothing, and other necessities, and created job opportunities for women. For example, in the year 2006, the United States Army launched a project named "First Afghan" to encourage purchases from Afghan sellers to support Afghanistan; following that, other international organizations joined the process[5].

However, the exact examination of the effects of these projects within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 8 can lead to a more precise examination of the positive aspects or limitations of these activities. The Sustainable Development Goal 8 of the UN, which particularly emphasizes the concept of "Decent Work", introduces productive and sustainable employment with fair wages as one of the key elements of economic development[6]. This concept, particularly in the context of women's employment, can be considered an important criterion for evaluating the work of NGOs in Afghanistan. In this regard, the main question is whether NGOs could provide sustainable and suitable jobs for women in alignment with the fulfillment of Sustainable Development Goal 8

2 Problem Formulation

This study aims to explore the role of NGOs in advancing resilient development with emphasis on women's employment in Afghanistan. The following questions guide the research:

1. To what extent have NGOs contributed to creating sustainable employment for women in Afghanistan?
2. What challenges did NGOs' projects face in facilitating sustainable development?

3 Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach, relying on a library method to analyze secondary data. To collect data, scientific articles, international reports, and books were used, which provided useful information for this research. The purpose of this research is to examine the impact of NGO projects on women's employment in Afghanistan and to what extent these projects have succeeded in achieving their goals. One of the challenges I faced in this research was the lack of detailed information about the specific outcomes of many NGO projects. To overcome this problem, I

relied on international reports to obtain more reliable information about the effectiveness of these projects.

4 Result and Discussion

4.1 Definition of Decent Work and the Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals, first designed by the United Nations in 2015, aim to eradicate poverty, ensure human rights, protect the environment, and achieve sustainable global development by 2030. These goals include 17 overall goals that emphasize different areas of development. In this article, the eighth goal of this plan, which is to "promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all,[6]" will be examined. In line with this goal, paying attention to "decent work," which is in line with international labor principles, is particularly important. According to the ILO definition, decent work means providing work where people enjoy fair wages, job security, stability, and a satisfactory balance between work and personal life. These conditions allow people to earn a living in peace and enjoy social protection. The concept also seeks to provide equal opportunities for all people, regardless of gender or other differences (ILO, 1999)[7].

4.2 Challenges in Implementing Decent Work in Afghanistan

Despite extensive efforts to improve the economic situation globally, the full implementation of the decent work agenda in some developing countries, especially Afghanistan, has faced various challenges. Budget constraints, trade imbalances, limited capacity for public investments, and even the country's specific geographical characteristics are among the reasons for these challenges[2], which have affected the effectiveness of NGO activities. Among these, one of the groups that suffers the most due to cultural, social, economic, and even political restrictions and has the least access to suitable job opportunities is women. In Afghanistan, women have experienced varying levels of labor market participation depending on their geographical location. For example, more women have entered the labor market in the western and northern regions of the country. In 2002, women accounted for about 17 percent of non-agricultural jobs, with handicrafts, weaving, sewing, and embroidery being the most important areas of women's employment.

However, women's earnings in these sectors were almost 50 percent lower than men's. In 2007, some women in urban areas managed to start businesses in the education and health sectors. This trend indicated small improvements in women's economic participation. In 2011, women's labor force participation reached 15.8 percent, which is an improvement from 2000[8]. Of course, it should be noted that the statistics presented are not necessarily the direct result of NGO's activities but rather provide a general picture of the status of women's economic participation in Afghanistan; a situation that NGO projects have also attempted to improve in some cases.

4.3 Key Challenges for NGO Projects in Afghanistan

The challenges of implementing decent work in NGO projects indicate the obstacles that affect the capacity and effectiveness of these projects. One of the main challenges is financial constraints. Although part of the problem is due to limited domestic budgets, which were particularly exacerbated in 2024 due to declining GDP and limited employment opportunities for women[9]. A more significant part of the crisis is related to dwindling international resources. While dependence on foreign aid remains, the Taliban's resurgence has led many international organizations to suspend or limit their aid, which has had a direct impact on the performance of NGOs, especially around women's economic empowerment.

According to AP news, 3.5 million children in Afghanistan will face acute malnutrition by 2025 due to the US aid cut[10]. The Norwegian Refugee Council has warned that the reduction in funding is the biggest threat to helping Afghan women. The organization assisted 772,484 Afghans in 2022, a number that fell to 491,435 in 2023 and 216,501 last year, half of whom were women. This reduction in funding has caused many job creation and skills training projects to either be halted or implemented on a smaller scale[11]. In addition to financial constraints, legal and cultural barriers can also make it difficult to implement decent work in Afghanistan, especially for women who have less access to employment opportunities.

4.4 Challenges in Achieving Decent Work through NGO's Projects

After the first Taliban presence in Afghanistan in 2011, NGO activities expanded more than ever in various fields, especially the economy. Many of these projects were implemented to support and rely on international women's aid, and their lives remained dependent on these resources. As a result, these programs are not only heavily influenced by the implementation level but also by international economic law. Rules that were not taken seriously even among lawyers until a few decades ago. As Faundez points out, "IEL rules were not even recognized as real laws for a long time until this area reached a central position in international law and many developed countries began to support developing countries more seriously, which were formed in the form of economic programs within the framework of these international rules. These rules were well applicable to developed countries and led to an upward trend in their economies, but for developing countries, the economic development process remained a challenge despite the emergence of economies such as China, which affected the development process, even despite international aid.

The reason for this challenge in the first stage is that developing countries had no room for maneuver when international economic rules were being set, and their specific circumstances were not taken into account in any way[12]. As a result, despite NGOs being influenced by international economic rules, financial and support projects did not lead to achieving long-term economic goals, namely decent work for all, and despite NGOs' efforts to support Afghan women, they were unable to make

women sufficiently self-sufficient.

For example, according to a report by the International Labor Organization, the labor market in Afghanistan has faced a sharp decline in employment since the return of the Taliban in 2021. In 2022, employment was estimated to be 450,000 fewer than in 2021, before the change of government, representing a 25 percent decline, of which only 7 percent was for men. This clear gap highlights the economic vulnerability of Afghan women[13].

In such circumstances, home-based employment and self-employment remain the only avenues for economic participation for many women, which do not offer comparable job security and decent pay to other occupations, and working conditions have created vulnerability for women. According to the World Bank, 92.1% of Afghan women are in such working conditions[14]. This situation is not only a result of the political crisis, but also a sign that previous employment generation programs, including NGO projects, had failed to create a real and sustainable economic infrastructure that collapsed with the first political crisis.

4.5 Lack of Localization of Projects

One of the reasons why NGO projects did not lead to decent work for Afghan women was the lack of attention to and implementation of these projects. In other words, the use of successful examples of Western projects in the specific culture of Afghanistan was the main factor in this process. In different decades, colonial countries transferred legal and economic systems from their own countries to the colonies to structure the economies of their colonies and adapted them to local conditions. This helped them create a more efficient economy[15]. In a contrasting example, we can point to the thinking of developing countries after World War II, which turned to technology transfer from Western countries to compete with global markets and achieve economic development. However, this process, without taking into account the specific cultural, social, and economic conditions of these countries, not only failed to help their economic goals but also led to further losses and economic backwardness of these countries due to a lack of preparation[16].

This situation is also observed in NGO projects in Afghanistan, where, in many cases, Western models for developing decent work for women are implemented without taking into account the specific characteristics of Afghanistan and have not yielded the desired results. For example, the “Promote” program was implemented by the United States Agency for International Development. With a budget of over \$280 million, it was designed to empower Afghan women economically, creating job opportunities for 75,000 women. However, according to a report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the program promoted only 55 women to better job positions. SIGAR described the program as a waste of American taxpayer funds because it failed to achieve tangible and effective results[17]. But despite projects that did not produce positive results due to insufficient attention to the specific conditions of Afghanistan, programs such as the Project for Promoting Gender Equality and Empowerment in Afghanistan (EGEMA), which aims to empower women economically through training and consulting for the development of this project, have been able to implement their programs well[18].

4.6 The Nature of Educational Skills in Projects

Another aspect of NGO-implemented projects for women that needs to be examined is the nature of the skills being taught. Are these skills selected based on the demand of the labor market and society for training or are they mostly skills that will be relevant for a short time, especially in a country with stable economic conditions. This issue can be explored in the context of what Scott calls "simplified models". According to him, governments and international organizations often try to improve society by relying on an abstract and simplified picture of it. These plans are designed without taking into account local and indigenous complexities, and when coupled with executive power, they can transform existing social structures or at least be ineffective[19]. Many NGO projects in Afghanistan have suffered from the same problem.

So far, many projects with different content have been implemented for Afghan women and girls. Both for those who were illiterate and educated. Professions such as tailoring, hairdressing, carpet weaving, and handicrafts. As well as some modern and technical skills, such as computers and technology, coding, online business management, and entrepreneurship. But what is interesting is that almost all of this training for women did not lead to the creation of decent jobs, and instead of creating sustainable job opportunities, many of these projects led to a kind of dependency, instability, and frustration because the simplified models on which the projects were designed did not match the realities of that society.

According to the Asia Foundation's 2018 annual "Afghanistan People's Survey" report, despite the implementation of various skills training projects for women, serious obstacles such as illiteracy, unemployment, and reduced public support for women's employment outside the home persist, indicating that the projects implemented are not sufficiently effective[20]. Another project that works in the section of teaching modern skills in the field of technology to Afghan girls, such as the "code to inspire" project, based on evaluations, failed to fulfill the career needs of women. Limited access to the labor market, lack of continuity of support, and social and cultural barriers were among the challenges of this project[21]. So, considering the countries' economic, social, and cultural values, performing aid projects can be most useful for success

4.7 The Dependence on Foreign Resources

One of the criticisms of foreign aid is that the project is more about strengthening the government and people than about international aid; as a result, instead of creating economic development, it is bringing economic stagnation. One of the reasons for this, according to Youngman Kim, could be the type of perspective NGOs have on the projects they implement. These aids are often carried out with a humanitarian and short-term perspective, to fulfill human rights, which do not necessarily last long[22]. For example, donating food or meeting the basic needs of a portion of the population may reduce poverty in the short term, but because these aids are temporary, the poverty crisis intensifies again when they end.

According to a United Nations report, due to the cessation of international aid after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, the percentage of people in urgent need in 2021, aid increased by 33 percent compared to the year before[23]. Similarly, many employment generation projects were designed and implemented without assessing their economic sustainability. For example, in some areas, sewing skills training projects were established, and then the project ended with the donation of a sewing machine to each person who completed the course. However, no plans were made to provide financial support, create markets, or link them to existing economic structures to sustain their employment. These experiences, repeated in different narratives from different regions, indicate a serious gap between skills training and actual employment.

5 Conclusion

As a result, a review of projects implemented by NGOs in Afghanistan reveals that despite many efforts to empower women economically, many of these projects have not been successful. The main reason for this failure has been the inability to meet the standards of decent work set by the International Labor Organization, including labor productivity, job security, decent wages, and social protection. Many of the businesses and professions that NGOs introduced and organized failed to achieve significant success due to economic challenges from the government, including a lack of national investment, a shortage of funding to continue projects, and the country's specific geographical problems.

In addition, the factors that sometimes affected the implementation of these projects more than the challenges faced by the government were those that were usually ignored. One of these factors was the lack of localization of the projects; many of the aids were successful models in developed or even developing countries that were expected to be applicable in the same way in Afghanistan, but this did not happen and resulted in a waste of capital. Another factor was the nature of the projects. Most of these projects were not market-oriented and were designed without considering the real demand of the Afghan market. This made the project temporary and vulnerable to any political changes or market fluctuations.

In the end, one of the main reasons for the failure to achieve “decent work” was the reliance on foreign aid. Many NGOs had a humanitarian vision for their temporary projects, such as appeasing their conscience that they could achieve a positive result in a short period by providing pre-prepared aid. While this type of aid not only did not have lasting results, but also created a strong dependence on it, and as a result, with the cessation of that aid, the country's economic progress quickly turned into a poverty crisis. In the end, to achieve decent work in Afghanistan, there is a need to review the methods of designing and implementing development projects based on the country's real conditions.

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