Non-governmental, non-profit, charitable and volunteer organisations have successfully acquired central roles in the international system, and now participate in the process of decision-making and development in nearly all parts of the world. These organisations are referred to as the Third Sector of the economy and are recognized as important players along with the institutions in the public and the private sectors. The organisational structures of the EU and the UN clearly reflect this development: both take measures to include the participation of NGOs through various forums and committees. As a consequence, Third Sector organizations frequently influence the actions and decisions of institutions such as governments and multinational corporations through direct consultations, indirect pressure or lobbying. Power to influence and promote change is no longer centred only among those with economic and political power, but is increasingly in the hands of the organised "masses". This new allocation of power has had a significant effect on society and has attracted large amounts of interest and research. Literature on the subject is often focused on the positive effects this phenomenon has had on the spread of democracy, third world social development, and the empowerment of civil society and marginalized groups.

Women, as a group, are often empowered through the Third Sector. Not only are they targeted to be the beneficiaries of aid from NGOs, but they are also frequently employees in the organisations per se. According to a recent survey by the British Equal Opportunities Commission, women make up more than seventy percent of the work force in the sector, a rather high proportion when compared to the public and private ones. From a global perspective, this could be because women’s involvement is enhanced as states become more democratic and extend civil liberties to all groups of society. Also, their ability to pressure and influence more prosperous and powerful actors increases as women are given more freedom to congregate and express their opinions. Furthermore, the advancements in communication technology have undoubtedly accelerated this process. In this case, the term empowerment refers to the fact that women today, more than before, are able to affect the outcome of bureaucratic and non-transparent political and social processes on the local, national and international level.

This does not shed light on why so many women – compared to men – choose to work in the Third Sector, especially since they are still under-represented in the private sector. If women are given equal opportunities to men by law, why isn’t the division of labour more even across the sectors in practice? One would assume a more balanced distribution in the developed world, but this is not the case. It may be because women find the Third Sector more in line with their interests and ambitions than men do. Some scholars maintain that women are more naturally focused on "soft" issues such as education, environment, health, children and poverty relief, and would therefore prefer the less competitive and aggressive surroundings of non-profit work. Or, it could be that women would be just as content to work in the private sector, but still find themselves somewhat excluded from it due to high competitiveness.

It would be interesting to discover the reasons that contribute to the concentrated involvement of females in the Third Sector, which relates to the question of whether it really is a sign of deliberate empowerment or rather, if it is an indication that women are still not considered to be equally capable as men when it comes to working in the other sectors. Most likely it is a combination of both factors. Certainly, women have on several occasions had to venture into the Third Sector to reach their goals in absence of alternate channels of influence and, by doing so, have ended up increasing their knowledge, skills and power. After the fall of the Soviet regime the processes of...
democratisation and privatisation led to a social marginali-
sation of women in the former communist republics. Poli-
tics and business became relatively riddled with corruption
and patriarchy, which not only reduced female participa-
tion but also shifted the focus away from the “soft” issues.
To counter this, women formed groups based on volunteer
participation, and as they became more numerous and
stronger, they were again able to put pressure on the public
and private sectors to increase the rights of women and
children. Today NGOs in these countries have, to a large
extent, become a part of the political system and women
have gained more credibility as capable participants in the
areas of business and politics as well.
This suggests that women do perhaps have more of an
interest in soft issues than men. But also that social exclu-
sion forces them to make use of Third Sector
methods of influence
even though they could
just as well reach their
goals in the public and
private sectors if these
were more accessible. It is
reasonable to assume that
women could achieve as
much – if not more –
progress on the soft
issues by aiming for high
profile positions in poli-
tics and business. Never-
theless, it seems that the
traditional gender roles of
men and women enhance
the likelihood of women
ending up in the Third
Sector. To some degree,
even women in the mod-
ernised world are still
expected to take care of
home and family, while
men are supposed to be
the main breadwinners.
This means the competi-
tive and high paid jobs
of the private sector
which demand long hours over many years are more
accessible to men, while the Third Sector, which offers
volunteer work and more flexible positions fit better with
the “traditional” role of the female. Such a view does not
take into account individual traits or ambitions, but many
employers still tend to base their hiring decisions on this
type of reasoning.
In part, this could explain why women are frequently
unable to break through the “glass ceiling” which is sepa-
rating them from the top managerial positions. According
to the survey mentioned above, even in the Third Sector,
where women make up the majority, men hold more than
half of the leadership positions. One would think that if
women chose to work in the Third Sector simply because
it better suits their interest areas and abilities, the proportion
of female leaders would match the total percentage of
women in the sector. The skewed gender distribution can-
ot be attributed solely to the employers. Women seem to
be more reluctant than men to join the competition for
the higher paying jobs. It has been claimed that this stems
from genetic differences between men and women, refer-
ing to the assumption that men are naturally more aggres-
sive and ambitious than women. This does not automati-
cally make them more capable of managing organizations
in the private sector, but it seems to make them more
comfortable with receiving praise for their efforts and also
with praising themselves. Women, on the other hand, are
more likely to understake their talents and experiences.
Another theory is that women still conform to traditional
social gender roles. Whichever is more accurate, the out-
come is just the same; women in general tend to stay in
lower level jobs with lower wages regardless of
which sector they work in.
If seen over a period of
time, however, the situa-
tion today differs greatly
from only a few decades
ago. Women are increas-
ingly striving for leader-
ship positions in all sec-
tors, and the female ratio
in the private sector and
in politics is rising. The
expansion of the Third
sector has undoubtedly
contributed to this devel-
opment. Whether it is
due to necessity or inter-
est, women use the avail-
able resources to establish
new organizations or join
others, and then use their
acquired skills to further
enhance the importance
and influence of the sector.
Hence, women are em-
powered by the Third
Sector, but at the same
time they help empower the sector as a whole. Furthermore,
women with backgrounds from non-profit work also move
on to positions in the other sectors and thereby attain more
political and economic power. The higher female ratio in
the Third Sector could simply be a necessary step on the
way to more recognition and equality in society in general;
a step that women need to make use of actively.