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# Case Study: Women and Politics in Bangladesh

## Summary

Local Government reforms in Bangladesh in 1997 introduced direct elections to reserved seats for women. This replaced an earlier system of nomination. The change allowed women a direct link with their constituency, helping to increase their legitimacy as representatives. However restrictions on mobility, lack of knowledge about local government functions, male resistance, and the gendered nature of local level politics limit women's effective participation in local politics. Despite these obstacles, research by the Pathways South Asia team at the BRAC Development Institute of BRAC University found that reforms have partially contributed to giving women 'a foot in the door'.

## Research Process

The research team surveyed over 600 women councillors in 13 districts at the Union Parishad (UP) level, following up with focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with female and male UP councillors and chairpersons. The team also held focus group discussions with selected communities and local administrative officers. **The aim of the research was to explore the challenges faced by women councillors, how they deal with these challenges, and how they negotiate within the sphere of local politics.**

*"Oh, they in the parishad say, '[W]hy does a poor woman have such a loud voice? Who is she? And I remind them, I was elected directly by people in three wards. I am there to represent their views. I have as much right to speak as they do"*

Interview, UP member 2, Pathways Digital Story Workshop, 20 November 2009



Local Woman Councillor speaking at a Pathways South Asia Hub Workshop. Photo: Tessa Lewin

## Key Findings

Women councillors reported a high rate of engagement with implementing development projects and involvement with local dispute resolution. About 78 per cent of women surveyed had participated in budget discussions and 52 per cent had suggested changes to proposals. This does not imply that women councillors now have an effective voice, but significantly, they are more secure in voicing their opinions through direct elections.

Women councillors are also more assertive in claiming their rights and wanting greater responsibility in various public fora such as UP association meetings. This is partly because they are now directly elected and the constituency they represent is larger than for general seats, being three wards compared to one. Women are also more aware of their roles.

Both the communities and women councillors value the role they play in implementing safety-net related

## Policy Recommendations

- Implementation of quotas and reserved seats requires careful research to ensure women's legitimacy in representing their communities is enhanced and not undermined.
- Alternative campaign funding can facilitate poor women's participation in political processes.
- Training provided by NGOs and women's organisations positively affects women's confidence and knowledge and must continue to be supported. Training should be context-based and continuous, focusing on female councillors, male councillors and the communities.
- The links with women's organisations and councillor colleagues that emerge through trainings provide useful support to women councillors. The formulation of these networks should be encouraged and strengthened as they serve to raise awareness among councillors and further the gender equity agenda in various forums.
- Findings from this research on different strategies employed by women to overcome challenges could provide new training material for NGOs, women's organisations and government.
- State commitment to the full and effective participation of women councillors has to be made clear to local government officials. This could be supported by the state conducting gender audits on the services provided by councils and looking at women councillors' role within this. The state should also push for the creation of women only sub-committees to oversee the spending of the 30 per cent of the development budget which is assigned to women councillors' use; backing this up with a clear monitoring strategy to ensure the budget cannot be diverted. It is important to include local women in decision-making around the spending of these funds - holding village meetings as is done in Kerala.
- Council officials need to be proactive in ensuring the participation of women representatives in different processes and fora. Greater clarity and demarcation of the roles and responsibilities of women council members is needed to enable them to be more effective, and less likely to be sidelined by their male colleagues.

programmes and development projects, even though women councillors' responsibilities are not fully demarcated from those of men councillors.

Family support and previous family history of participation in politics plays a crucial role in getting women into office and this can marginalise poorer women.

Women gained social legitimacy in dealing with, and deciding on, matters that are perceived as 'women's issues' such as disputes related to dowry, divorce, polygamy etc. Outside these matters they still face strong opposition from male councillors who perceive favouritism being accorded by the government towards women.

## References

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