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THE GENDER DIMENSION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

Bangladesh has adopted policies to increase women's participation in local government, but women continue to face significant obstacles to full enjoyment of their political rights. This paper reports original research that assesses women's experience in local government. Survey research, focus groups, and elite interviews have yielded data showing that structural, cultural and gender bias barriers prevent women from participating in local government as equals to men. The paper outlines the constitutional framework for women's role in local government, presents the results of field research, and concludes with recommendations for improving women's participation.

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Women's empowerment is essential to the development of stable democracies and good governance practices. Recent years have seen a vast expansion of research and debate relating to women and empowerment in general. Very little work has been done, however, on women's political empowerment *per se*. In correspondence with the Vienna Conference on Human Rights (1993) and the Beijing conference (1995), different international and regional organizations have undertaken projects concerning issues of women's equal participation in decision-making and their access to power. For instance, the country reports of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP) on women's political empowerment, the Asia Foundation's Women in Politics (WIP) program, and the United States (USAID's) Global Women in Politics (GWIP) program have generally concluded that women must participate in decision-making at all levels.[1]

Empowerment is critical to development for marginalized people, including women, who want to overturn systems of oppression and for women with low self-esteem [Friedman, 1992; Rowlands, 1997]. The empowerment approach endeavors to increase women's life choices, attain certain long-term changes, such as the alteration of the subordinate relationship of women to men, and trigger a change of consciousness among women [Anderson and Baud, 1987]. Empowerment enhances women's control over decision-making processes at every level of society [Longwe, 1991]. Therefore, empowerment has an important bearing on women's lives by providing them with alternatives to improve their daily existence, elevating women's self-worth and their sense of command over their lives, and by promoting gender equity.

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[1]   Refer   to   http://www.logotri.net/download/sow.htm   and
http://www.usaid.gov/democracy/techpubs/dialogue/96sp4.html for further
information on these projects.

Obviously, the notion of power is closely linked to the concept of empowerment [Hamid, 1996: 135]. Power in this context means participating in decision-making in all spheres of life and being recognized accordingly. Women's empowerment includes the social, political, economic, cultural and legal spheres, with each displaying a distinct form of power [Rahman and Rahim, 2001: 121]. These different kinds of empowerment are interlinked. For instance, economic and social empowerment is necessary to promote women's political participation and leadership. Political empowerment involves increased participation in relevant decision-making processes [Friedmann, 1992]. The rate and level of women's participation in national politics, including the responsibility and authority they command both at the state level and within their respective political parties, help gauge their political empowerment [Hamid, 1996:168]. *The Human Development Report of 1995* noted that, while gender gaps in basic human capabilities were halved over the last two decades, women still lack access to power in economic and political decision- making.[2]

This paper will focus on women's political participation in Bangladesh, especially women as local leaders. Democratic governance in Bangladesh has not been fully consolidated although the current structure of parliamentary democracy was established in 1991. Women comprise half of the population of Bangladesh. They are active contributors to the country's economic, political and social

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[2] Of the 190 heads of state and heads of government, only 9 are women. Women occupy only 14% of ministerial-level positions, 9% of judiciary positions and 13.8% of parliament seats worldwide. Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union (www.ipu.org), Women's Environment and Development Organization (www.wedo.org), UN Division for the Advancement of Women (www.un.org/daw/public/percent.html), Center for Legislative Development (www.cld.org), WomanKind (www.womankind.org.uk).

development.   Empowering women is key to foster democratic development in Bangladesh. The government has adopted measures to involve women in local government.   The main unit of local government,   the   Union   Parishad   (Council),   is   an   age-old organization for social change and development.   This local government institution can play an important role in democratic practice and women's empowerment. Systematic research into the experiences of women in the Union Parishad will help evaluate the success of efforts to enhance women's political participation.

A few works have been done on the female representatives of the Union Parishad.   One micro level study concluded that the women members might play effective roles in village development once they receive training on socio-economic, political and development issues [Qadir, 1978: 29]. Another study emphasized designing appropriate training programs to better equip the UP female members, and highlighted the need to carry out further research on these women's effective participation in the affairs of the local bodies [Alam, 1984: 51].   Other   research   revealed   limited   participation   of   female members with regard to deliberations and decisions. While lack of special training was identified as an obstacle, the women members mentioned   socio-economic   constraints   and   attitudes   of   male members as impediments to their full political participation [Qadir and Islam, 1987]. Female UP members have the potential to be the change agents of development. But that is possible, prior research shows, only by providing them with education, training and management skills [Qadir, 1993: 32].

Women and politics

The UN Study (1992) entitled *Women in Politics and Decision-making in the Late Twentieth Century* observes that women have had the franchise, on average, for over 50 years and they often vote in the same proportion as men. Most countries have accepted international

legal norms advocating the participation of women in decision-making. Despite this, women have minimal participation in public decision-making. While their numbers have been increasing slowly in many countries, in most there has been little qualitative change in the situation. Traditionally, women have been given responsibility for social areas but not economic or political, which creates a sexual division of labor [UN Study, 1992: 116-117].

Women throughout the world are underrepresented in governments, machineries that are dominated by men (Chapman, 1993). Men who create bureaucracies run them too, echoes Winslow (1995). According to Chapman, we should consider the occasional appearance of a personally dominant female head of government, such as Mrs. Thatcher, in the context of the whole population of rulers. She cites the case of Scandinavia where the highest female representation is to be found in national legislatures, still lagging considerably behind that of men [Chapman, 1993: 4].

Sapiro (1983) illustrates how women's political roles are evaluated and shaped by the values of femininity and the traditional female roles of wifehood, motherhood, and home making. "Politics is man's business, government is a men's club," she writes [Sapiro, 1983:30]. She refers to a public opinion poll (Table 2:3, p. 24) showing that even two and one-half generations after women gained their right to enter all forms of political activity, a substantial portion of the public still finds women unsuited to the world of politics.

In *Learning About Women Gender, Politics, and Power* (1989), Conway, Bourque, and Scott asked two prominent women political figures, Shirley Williams in London and Elizabeth Holtzman in New York, to reflect on women and politics in democratic societies. Although having differences at times, the commentary of the two politicians serves to emphasize certain major congruities. Both see that women have not made the political strides that early advocates

of universal suffrage anticipated. Holtzman suggests there is still a
strong popular sentiment that political office is 'man's work', that
senior–level executive positions generally call for qualities that
women are unlikely to possess [Conway, Bourque, and Scott,
1989:25-26]. Williams implies that the problem is really one of
image, of what a woman is expected to be, and how enormously
difficult it is for a woman in politics to conform to that image
[Conway, Bourque, and Scott, 1989:26-27]. According to Williams,
until there is a revolution in childcare and in childrearing, only a
small number of British women will opt for a career in politics
[Conway, Bourque, and Scott, 1989:30]. Holtzman speaks of the
difficulties American women experience in securing adequate funds
for their political campaigns [Conway, Bourque, and Scott, 1989:30].
Any study on women and politics should discuss women's socio-
economic conditions. This is what Nelson and Chowdhury eds.
Women and Politics Worldwide (1994) did. Focusing on women's
political activism in 43 countries, the study used economic,
educational and demographic indicators to complement the analysis
of the social and political processes. The general finding of this
comprehensive study is that women all over the world have
secondary political status to that of men. Most of the case studies
cover the period from early1960s to early 1990s, showing how
policies of macro-economic stabilization and structural adjustment
introduced by the World Bank and IMF, the changing nature of
nationalism challenged by the rise of ethnic, communal and regional
forces, and the rise of many forms of religious fundamentalism have
affected women's status. All this coincided with a wave of women's
political organizing, both at the local and the international levels
[Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994: 4-10].

The country chapters demonstrate the marginalization of women
in formal political organizations across political systems. As
illustrated by Randall, women's political participation cannot be

simply explained by their personality, situational constraints, and socialization (Randall, 1987: 50-94). Rather, she stresses political institutions as a significant determinant of women's political participation (Randall, 1987: 131-145). Accordingly, *Women and Politics Worldwide* concentrates on how political institutions shape women's political engagement. It finds male culture and processes of formal political institutions, especially parties: 'patriarchy' (politics is defined in terms of patron-client relationship that reiterate patriarchal father-son family structures); and 'fraternalism' (the brotherhood of men) to be the major barriers to women's equal participation in institutional politics [Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994:15-17].

The study detects women's political engagement mostly in the politics of everyday life - 'the terrain between the state and family'. The example of example of Bolivia is cited, where "...rural women fight to make the politically dominant mining union recognize their simultaneous roles as mothers, workers, and citizens" [Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994:18]. Rendel, however, argues political science has failed to deal with women in the political system as a whole by neglecting the political importance of the family [Rendel, 1981: 15-21].

To quote the 'message' of the country chapters of *Women and Politics Worldwide*, "...women's political engagement occurs against long odds" [Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994:15-17]. Yet, that does not deter women from demonstrating their ability as politicians as well as feminists, challenging centuries of tradition and custom that keep them inferior to men [Winslow, 1995: 179]. Sapiro (1983) notes an increase in women's roles as part of politics and government than in the past. W*omen Transforming Politics Worldwide Strategies for Empowerment* documents the far-reaching involvement of women in politics by defining politics not only in terms of participation in the public sphere of government but also in

such less traditional activities as involvement in social movements, local development projects, networking and informal coalition building, protesting and demonstrating, as well as the conventionally 'female' activities, e.g. cooking, sewing, and taking care of others, for the attainment of empowerment [Bystydzienski,1992:203]. It focuses on strategies developed by women in different countries to become empowered. Based on the findings of thirteen case studies it appears that women's empowerment is subject to certain strategies in combination with particular societal conditions. The Norwegian case exemplifies that the strategy of getting more women into political bodies can make a difference where access to public offices is relatively open, and cultural values of equality and group rights are firmly embedded [Bystydzienski, 1992:11-23]. Bystydzienski concedes that once in public office, women can be especially effective if they have support of other female elected officials and of women's groups outside government.

Chapman (1993) opines the theory and findings of political participation research are inadequate to explain the gender outcomes. She mentions Almond and Verba, who identified education as the crucial determinant of 'civic' or participatory political orientation [Chapman, 1993: 6-8]. Yet, the spread of education has not closed the gender gap in political elites. Chapman notes that some of the worst levels of female representation in national legislature are recorded in the US, where women have better access to higher education. Gender gaps are also evident at the level of grass-roots participation. "...gender difference is intrinsically linked with the drive of men for dominance and the profoundly gendered basis of the public sphere", she affirms [Chapman, 1993: 268].

Sapiro thinks the problem of political integration for women is one of simple legality of their participation, of norms, values, perception, expectation, and the relationship of these with political behavior. To cite her, "There is, therefore, an uneasy fit between

women and politics, because 'privatized' women remain anomalies in the public world of politics" [Sapiro, 1983:32]. The connection between women's private and public life does not disconnect women from politics rather 'privatization' of women breed political marginality, she argues. Starting off with historical and cultural explanations and turning to an empirical investigation of the relationship among women's public and private life and activity, Sapiro finds that while private roles have only moderate, sometimes marginal effects on women's political behavior at the mass level, increasing restrictions are seen in the form of governance posed mainly by men [Sapiro, 1983:170-93]. As pointed out by the UN Study (1992), *Women in Politics and Decision-making in the Late Twentieth Century*, decisions on public policies that affect women's equality are still in the hands of men, who may not sensitize women's concerns on the same level as women.

The UN Study (1992) observes a close reciprocal relationship between the general advancement (social, economic, legal, and cultural conditions) of women and their participation in decision-making. It concludes, women's political participation can be enhanced by establishing social and economic support structures, eliminating legal discrimination, and banishing negative stereotypes from education and the media [UN Study, 1992:118]. According to Randall, ways to increase women's political participation include-quota systems, adoption of the party-list system of proportional representation, and women's caucuses [Randall, 1987: 145-151]. Winslow (1995) emphasizes the UN to function as a platform for integrating politics and women's rights. Member states must pledge to hire and promote more women and be willing to propose qualified women to fill their national quotas, she suggests [Winslow, 1995: 182]. The study, *Women and Politics Worldwide*, argues that women's increased participation in formal politics and in the politics of everyday life will depend on the gender construction of the

family, civil society, economy, and official political institutions [Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994: 21]. In conclusion Bystydzienski maintains that women in public office can be successful provided they receive support from peers as well as from various women's organizations. She adds, in case of restricted access to formal governance, women's movements may transform official agendas and policies by influencing public opinion through mass media [Bystydzienski, 1992:211].

Now, let us turn to the regional picture beginning with Howard Handleman's *Women and Development* (2000). This chapter deals with gender issues that often divide developing nations [Handleman, 2000: 78-98]. The author explains how the focus of research on gender in the developing world has moved from the study of oppression to the study of empowerment. He offers a general overview of the political and socio-economic status of Third World women. In most of the developing countries the status of women remains considerably inferior to that of men. In spite of their enormous contribution to human development women are widely discriminated against and exploited disgracefully. There are continuing disparities between men and women in life expectancy, health status, income opportunities, control over assets and personal security. Under these circumstances, the focus of attention is now towards women's empowerment and their role in development.

Handleman argues the political and socio-economic status of Third World women is not uniform. Within individual countries their position varies according to social class and ethnicity. He surveys cultural values, the level of socio-economic modernization and the type of political regime as three important contributing factors in this regard. The evidence presented to support this argument consists of examples drawn from more than 140 disparate, developing countries. Social classes and gender lead to the structure of differences in the condition of Third World Women. Internal

factors linked with cultural orientation, motives, values attitudes and individual disposition determine to a large extent women's decision to participate in employment. The patriarchal system is deeply rooted in the lower middle class families of the societies in the most Third World countries.

Accordingly, modernization has affected women of different social status in distinct ways. Experiences reveal that while economic growth has created opportunities for very substantial numbers of people it has also created new inequalities or reinforced existing ones. Most economic policies pay no explicit attention to gender relations. Women's issues in economic sphere are narrowly construed in terms of discrimination against women in public sector firms. Gender desegregation is deeply rooted in the labor market. In the case of export-oriented industrialization, a wide gender-gap remains both in wage rates and other benefits.

In his discussion of political participation, the author shows that women's grass-roots political and social movements played an important role in mobilizing women. Still, women's visibility in the public service has been negligible. Women's participation in institutional development and decision-making is minimal. The social values that politics and administration are exclusive domains of man still influence behavior despite having women in the leadership role in many of the third World countries. An important finding is that notwithstanding political ability or leadership qualities, some upper-class Third World women have achieved considerable political success as successors to their fathers or husbands. Nonetheless social class influences limit women's participation in the political system. The glass ceiling does exist for most Third World women in politics.

Handleman recognizes a trend towards increased participation of Third World women in various economic activities, professional

pursuits and women's movements although there is insecurity and uncertainty. He asserts failure to address cultural, economic, socio-demographic, political and psychological factors effectively will segregate and marginalize women in both public and private life.

Thompson (2002-2003) highlights how mass movements headed by female leaders in Asia have successfully overthrown dictators and paved the way for democracy. He uses the anti-dictatorship struggles of Corazon C. Aquino in the Philippines (1986), Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan (1988), Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed in Bangladesh (1990) and Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia (1998) to analyze the role of dynastic female leadership in recent Asian democratic revolutions [Thompson, 2002-2003: 535-555]. In these cases gender stereotyping proved to be of political advantage. Female leaders were perceived to be weak, making them less threatening to potential rivals that helped the opposition to unite. Their non-violent protests and election campaigns, and moral high ground enabled them to lead victorious democratic revolutions. Unfortunately, the same qualities impeded democratic consolidation in those countries. Their male rivals claimed 'women should reign, not rule'. They accused the female leaders of using high political office to wreak familial revenge, of corruption, and of governing in the interests of their family dynasties [Thompson, 2002-2003: 555].

Tambiah (2002) notes having female heads of state in some of the South Asian countries does not ensure women's empowerment because of their insignificant representation in national administration. South Asia is not an exception to the formal pattern of a male dominated 'public' realm and female occupied 'private' realm. This arbitrary division impedes women's political participation, interceding with factors such as class, caste, ethnicity, religion, and the rural urban location [Tambiah, 2002: 7-10].

Education, mobility, financial capacity, the sexual division of labor, familial and community support or constraints, and hostile political systems, namely male control of party organizations and political processes, function as determinants of women's entry to politics and governance. Tambiah argues, state intervention to create an environment and opportunities to promote women's political participation is usually guided by the interests of state and political actors in securing or maintaining power [Tambiah, 2002: 18-24]. Women's situation gets complicated with the realities faced by developing countries in the contemporary international arena. As Tambiah illustrates it is predominantly women who are affected first and most by the shifts in state commitments because of their subordinate status [Tambiah, 2002: 33].

Tambiah observes that while women's movements in South Asia often suffer setbacks from the state, NGOs play important roles in cultivating women's political awareness, supporting women's interventions, and providing them with leadership opportunities [Tambiah, 2002: 25-27]. She summarizes the recommendations emerging from the case studies for promoting women in politics, which emphasize, among others, reserved seats, quota system, proactive party roles, training, political education for women, gender sensitization, formation of nonpartisan women's party and networks between women in political structures and women's activists and groups [Tambiah, 2002: 34].

Dahlerup (2001) asserts that new waves of feminism in the developing countries might be complementary to the declining feminist pressure in the West since the1990s. In her view, the lesson learnt from USA and Western Europe is that "...without a strong feminist pressure and widespread feminist grassroots activities, an increasing number of women in political decision-making cannot be expected fundamentally to change the content and form of policy-making" [Dahlerup, 2001: 120].

Finally, we will look at the case of Bangladesh. Bangladesh presents a paradoxical picture to be the first democratic government with women occupying the position of both head of the state, and the leader of the opposition, while the overall (socio-economic, and legal) status of women is inferior to that of men (Hamid, 1996), (Ain O Salish Kendra, 2002), (Chowdhury, 1994). Although women make up fifty percent of the population, and the fact the Constitution of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh provides equal citizenship rights to all regardless of gender, race, and religion, the terrain of politics is controlled by men. The principle of special representation instead of encouraging women's political participation turned the reserved seats into a tool to gain absolute majority for the ruling party through nomination [Hamid, 1996: 93], [Ain O Salish Kendra, 2002: 139]. Hamid (1996) also holds the kinship process through which women gained political leadership in Bangladesh responsible for marginalizing their political participation. But this should not undermine the potential of other prominent women activists who prove that women without kinship to the powerful male political leaders can still advance their political careers by virtue of commitment to political involvement [Chowdhury, 1994:100].

In its study, Ain O Salish Kendra (2002) makes it clear that gender issues do not figure prominently in the mainstream political discourse. The project defines the state of Bangladesh to be a patriarchy where gender relations are based on gender discrimination. The state and its institutions tend to maintain gender discrimination, rather than address it, to secure the power of the male ruling class [Ain O Salish Kendra, 2002:108-111].

The study argues that women's entry to politics has been full of obstacles. The respondents opine that discriminatory access to personal, economic, sexual, social, educational, and cultural spheres inhibit their political participation in the public sphere - parliament, political parties, local government - and the spheres of development

and social justice, as well as decision-making in the private sphere [Ain O Salish Kendra, 2002: 120-129]. Hamid presents similar reasoning for women's absence from formal politics [Hamid, 1996: 93]. Local and national level women politicians indicated that 'politics is not a routine work'. A working woman not only has to struggle with her quadruple burden - as workers, mothers, homemakers and wives — but also has to gain social acceptance for her new role [Ain O Salish Kendra, 2002: 140]. Chowdhury (1994) notes that the male dominated electoral, legislative and party process further excludes, or marginalizes women's political participation.

Although the women's movement in Bangladesh has a long heritage, since the last decade or so it has contributed to, and been strengthened by, the parallel movements for democracy, secularism and civic rights in the country. Conscious women and women's organizations feel the urge to fight for their demand for gender equality [Ain O Salish Kendra, 2002: 112-113]. The various women's voluntary groups provide women an important venue for making their demands known and transforming women's concerns into matters of public policy [Chowdhury, 1994: 102-106].

Khan (1993) documents government measures to enable women to participate in the mainstream of national activities [Khan, 1993: 22-25]. She stresses the importance of bringing more women in the high level management and policy-making posts and cites some positive steps taken by the government in this respect, which include setting quotas for women in public jobs, relaxing the age limit for entry in the public service, employing women in special agencies, filling up the posts of primary teachers, wherever possible, by female candidates. Khan, however, admits improved educational standards of women are not matched by the quality of work available to them, an outcome of the traditional attitude of the employers as opposed to unavailability of qualified women.

Locating women within the existing social and political structures, the Ain O Salish Kendra study argues "…that women demanding access to resources in a system that gives power to men would still mean the submission of women to existing discriminatory processes" [Ain O Salish Kendra, 2002:106].   Chowdhury (1994) does not find the state or the civil society in Bangladesh to be gender-neutral.   Weak institutional capacities, regime changes, including periods of authoritarian rules stood in the way of favorable political climate, especially for women [Chowdhury, 1994: 96-97]. The Ain O Salish Kendra study suggests women's perspectives of state, government, and politics should be incorporated into mainstream thinking.

The Ain O Salish Kendra study refers to two significant events creating a new dimension to women's political participation — the Bangladesh government enactment of a new constitutional law, which allows direct election for women to the three seats at the local level; and the massive turnout of women voters in the last two elections [Ain O Salish Kendra, 2002: 140].

Socio-economic and constitutional context

Bangladesh is a developing country that is undergoing significant change. According to the United Nations Human Development Index, Bangladesh ranks 132 out of 162 countries. Basic services are lacking or unreliable in much of the country. Illiteracy runs close to fifty percent of the adult population. Medical care is inaccessible for many. Economic development has occurred but GDP growth will have to be much faster to lift a substantial share of the people out of poverty, and the income gains that have occurred tend to go toward the wealthier citizens. Besides these social and economic woes, Bangladesh also suffers from frequent natural disasters. Floods and hurricanes can leave millions in this low-lying country homeless and destitute. The difficulties of rural life and

opportunity in the urban areas has led to significant migration within the country to the cities.

The population depends heavily on the agricultural sector. Although agriculture provides only twenty percent of GDP, about eighty percent of the people live in rural areas. Basic services, educational opportunities, electrical power, telephone, and the like are all harder to obtain in rural Bangladesh than in the cities. Rural people also suffer from income insecurity, as their jobs tend to be seasonal. These disadvantages hinder political participation. "Poverty, unemployment, poor health, sanitation, and nutrition, and lack of literacy and numeracy skills are some of the barriers that hinder the lower economic classes from participating in local decision making processes and rural power structures."[3]

Bangladesh's rural areas are highly traditional in values and outlook. Yet, the changes brought about by growing population and limited opportunities in rural areas have resulted in many women becoming the head of household and main income-earner. Women are seeking a larger role in policy making commensurate with their changing social status. The law provides for expanding women's roles, but it remains difficult to translate legal opportunity into actual practice. Although there are Constitutional provisions and explicit government policy to address poverty and gender inequality, the reality is that disadvantaged groups continue to lack access to the resources needed to influence authority, and they often suffer injustice as a result. Legal opportunity has not altered the values and worldviews that relegate women to subordinate roles, despite changes in social structure. The desire to enhance women's political status has drawn attention to the potential of local government.

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[3] The Asia Foundation, *Responsive and Accountable Governance: Best Practices Under the Democracy Partnership* (Dhaka: The Asia Foundation, 2002) p. 1.

Bangladesh achieved independence in 1971 after a bloody civil war. The country had been known as East Pakistan. Pakistan emerged from the partition of India in 1947 which created a separate nation for predominantly Muslim parts of the country. (The river delta area making up current-day Bangladesh is about 85 percent Muslim.) The Pakistani government was dominated by West Pakistan, and it alienated the Bengali speakers of East Pakistan by declaring Urdu the official national language. In 1970, the central government chose to hold national elections, which East Pakistan's Awami League won. But the AL was not allowed to take power, and civil war erupted. India intervened, halting a massacre perpetrated by the Pakistan army. India's intervention and heroic efforts by Bangladesh's freedom fighters liberated the country, and Bangladesh was born. Awami League leader Sheikh Mujib came home from a prison in West Pakistan to assume the post of Prime Minister. [4]Yet, the country faced severe problems, and a difficult political history ensued. Mujib was assassinated, as was the country's next strong leader, Ziaur Rahman. Although Bangladesh had made several attempts to restore democracy, General Muhammed Ershad established a military government that lasted until 1991.

Since 1991, Bangladesh has been a parliamentary democracy. In 1990, popular agitation forced Ershad to arrange for competitive elections. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (heir to Ziaur Rahman's legacy) won the majority of seats in the new parliament and selected Begum Khaleda Zia as Prime Minister. Five years later, the other major party, the Awami League, secured a majority in parliament, and Sheikh Hasina, Mujib's surviving daughter, took office as Prime Minister. In the next national election, BNP regained its majority and returned Khaleda Zia as PM. Thus, Bangladesh, after a rocky

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[4] A Union consists of 10-15 villages. A UP comprises about 10-12 square miles and includes about 15,000-20,000 people.

political history marked by military governments and assassinations of top leaders, has made strides toward consolidating representative democracy, as shown by peaceful transfers of power to elected leaders. Remarkably, the country's two prime ministers since democratic restoration have been women.

Local Government in Bangladesh

The constitution provides for several levels of government. By constitutional mandate, direct elections occur in local governments in rural and urban areas, and for Parliament. The national government appoints officials at the intermediate levels. The Union Parishad is the lowest tier of the rural local government system in Bangladesh.[5] It plays an important role in the civic affairs, law and order, and development issues of the rural areas. Currently, there are 4492 UPs under the administrative control of the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (LGRD) [Rehman, 2003]. A Union Parishad consists of a chairperson and twelve members, including three female members. The Chairperson is the administrative head and the Parishad needs her/his approval and consent in all activities. Under the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance 1983, the responsibilities of the Chairperson have been specified, which include- administrative, public relations, revenue collection and budget, development, and trial related activities. The Ordinance has not specified the duties and functions of the UP members though. Nevertheless, as the representatives of the UP they are required to participate in all the meetings of the Parishad; help the village police in maintaining law and order in her/his ward; prepare the development plan for her/his ward; take part in preparing the budget; supervise the development work in

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[5] The Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance 1983, Bangladesh Jatio Sangsad.

her/his ward; perform duties as member of the Standing Committee; and help the chair of the Village Court as a nominated member to resolve judicial procedure. Aside from these, the women members are expected to take care of women's issues in their respective areas, which involve looking after the violation of women and child rights; taking various development initiatives for women and child for her area; and encouraging village women for cottage industries, health care, sanitation, family planning and other development issues.

The urban local government comprises Pourashava (Municipality) and City Corporation. Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi, the four largest cities of Bangladesh, are City Corporations and the rest (203 as of Sept. 1999)[6] are known as *Pourashavas*. The Pourashavas and City Corporations carry out various socio-economic and civic functions that are categorized as compulsory and optional. These include - construction and maintenance of roads, bridges and culverts; removal, collection and disposal of refuse; establishment and maintenance of public markets; maintenance and regulation of graveyards and burning places; maintenance of slaughter houses, street lighting; registrations of birth, deaths and marriages; control over private markets; maintenance of parks and gardens; naming of roads and numbering of houses; provision of nominal stipends to primary education institutions, water supply; and slum improvement [Local Government in Asia and the Pacific]:

Apart form the formal functions described above, the *Pourashavas* and City Corporations perform some additional functions such as issuance of certificates and settlement of petty disputes (over ownership/control of land, houses and markets) through discussions with concerned parties and with the help of commissioners and other functionaries. Some of the more important

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[6] Selected Basic Facts About Bangladesh
www.sdnpbd.org/sdi/statisticapocketbook/Chap01/0101.htm

certificates are character, nationality, birth, death, and succession certificates. Character and nationality certificates are required for job applications and admission to educational institutions. Birth, death, and succession certificates are issued to the legal heirs on request and are also necessary for mutation of land ownership [Local Government in Asia and the Pacific]. This study focuses on the elective offices at the local level, primarily in the Union Parishads, Pourashavas, and City Corporations. During PM Sheikh Hasina's term, four laws were enacted from 1999 to 2001 that reformed subnational government and provided for greater women's representation in local government. The most significant change for this study was the creation of seats designated for women (Figure 1). These reserve seats equal one-third of the total general seats. In Union Parishads, this means that nine general seats are augmented by three women's reserved seats. The nine general seats represent nine wards in each UP, and each reserved seat is assigned to three wards. These seats existed prior to the Awami League reforms, but they were appointive, now elected directly by the people.

Figure 1: Union Parishad Organization
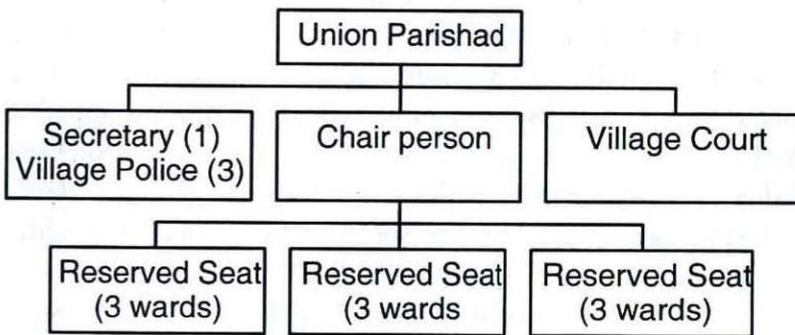
The functions of the UP governments include civic, police, defense, revenue, development, general administration, and those delegated by the central government. Revenues come from taxes, fees, and government grants, with local real property taxes providing

the main source of revenue. Yet, the central government retains considerable authority; it can halt or mandate action, investigate local government affairs, dismiss the Chair, and even dissolve the unit if it is found corrupt or unable to carry out its duties. UP budgets must be submitted and approved at higher levels.

The *Pourashava* and City Corporation *Parishads* are formed through direct election by the people. A *Pourashava Parishad* consists of a Chairman and a Commissioner for each Ward, while a City Corporation is composed of a Mayor as head of the *Parishad* and a Commissioner for each Ward. The number of Wards depends on the size of the city. Like in Union Parishads, women have reserved seats in the Pourashava and City Corporation Parishads. Yet, they can contest for direct election too [Local Government in Asia and the Pacific].

The Constitution of Bangladesh includes several articles that bear on women's equal rights. It recognizes basic and fundamental rights of citizens irrespective of gender, creed, caste, religion, and race, and it calls for measures to advance backward sections of the population. Article Nine states that "special representation shall be given, as far as possible, to peasants, workers, and women." Article Ten asserts further that "Steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life." Article Nineteen establishes the commitment to equality of opportunity for all citizens and to taking measures to remove social and economic inequality. Article Twenty-eight details rights to non-discrimination, and says, "Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life." Moreover, the state is empowered to make special provision in favor of women and children. In short, the Constitution of Bangladesh leaves no ambiguity about equal rights for all citizens, explicitly forbidding discrimination on gender.

Indeed, women's right to vote has been guaranteed since 1956, when the country was still part of Pakistan.

Various efforts to put these guarantees into effect showed little progress in bringing women into politics.   Although the Union Parishad Ordinance of 1976 and Pourashava Ordinance of 1997 for the first time included women members in the local government institutions, they were still nominated by the government. It was not until 1993 when through an amendment, women members were indirectly elected.   The Union Parishad Ordinance of 1983 was further amended in 1997 creating a provision for direct election of one-third members of Union Parishads in the reserve seats for women.   These combined reserved-seat wards immediately gave women 12,828 seats in local government. This contrasts starkly with 1977, when only nine women achieved office in local government (Table 1). Despite gaps in available data, it is clear that the reserved seats have made a significant difference in the number of women serving in local government.

Table 1: Women's Participation in the Union Parishad Elections (1973-2003)

	Women Candidates		Elected Chairs and Members	
Election Year	Chair	Member	Chair	Member
1973	NA	-	1	-
1977	19	19	2	7
1982-83	79	863	6	NA
1988	NA	-	-	-
1992	115	1135	8	NA
1997	102	43,969/456*	20	12,882/110*
2003		43,764/617*	22	12,882/232*

*Women contesting and elected in general seats.

Women in Local government

The study presents summarized and condensed information on the role of women in local government gathered by the Nari Uddug Kendra (NUK) through a variety of means.[7] Under the auspices of NUK, men elected members and women elected members, and Union Parishad Chair (men and women) were surveyed in 27 districts, encompassing over 250 Union Parsihads. Women's experience as elected officials was solicited and the opinions of citizens regarding women elected members were explored. Focus group discussions were conducted with six different groups in seven different settings including chairpersons, ward members, women members in reserve seats, and other Union and district level officials. Open-ended interviews were done with ministers, members of parliaments, other high officials, and local government experts.

Women's Experience in Union Parishads

Findings of the research conducted for this study show that, despite the increase in women's participation due to the creation of reserved seats, women representatives have felt deep frustration regarding the treatment they have received during their terms. They took on their new roles with enthusiasm, but they were not given sufficient responsibility, resources, or equal status with which to discharge their duties.

Socio-Economic Background of Women and Their Families

Socio-economic profiles of women in local government shows heavy dependence on agriculture, poverty, little prior work

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experience outside the home, nuclear families, married, higher than average educational attainment, and significant involvement with other organizations.[8] Almost twenty percent reported another family member in politics.

About ninety percent of women elected members of local government surveyed were from twenty-six to forty years of age, and the same proportion is married. Most were Muslims, with Hindus and Buddhists also represented. Most respondents reported high school attendance, while less than one percent was illiterate and over three percent had college degrees (Table 2).

Table 2: **Educational Attainment of Elected Women in Local Government**

Attainment	Frequency	Percent
No answer	1	0.2
MA	2	0.3
BA	21	3.2
HSC	39	6.0
SSC	184	28.3
High School	306	47.1
Primary school	91	14.0
Illiterate	6	0.9
TOTAL	**650**	**100.0**

Regarding economic status, most of the women reported incomes below 20,000 taka per year, less than $350 dollars (Table

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[8] Data on family type, age distribution, educational attainment, occupation, income, sources of income, land ownership, social status, religious identification, and participation in other organizations were gathered from a national survey commissioned by Nari Uddug Kendra, conducted under the leadership of Professor Masuda M. Rashid Chowdhury.

3). Their primary occupation is to work in the home. About one-third reported that their families owned land. Many had never before participated in public life or decision making, although about half reported involvement in at least two other organizations, primarily educational institutions. Membership in political parties is low, especially for elected representatives; only forty-seven of the 650 respondents reported participation in a party. Yet, about two-thirds reported membership in one of the two major parties, BNP and Awami League, and eight percent reported membership in one of the smaller parties.

Table 3: Reported annual income of women elected to local government

Annual Income	Frequency	Percent
Up to 20,000 taka	425	65.4
20,001-30,000	134	20.6
30,001-40,000	23	3.5
40,001-50,000	23	3.5
50,001-60,000	13	2.0
60,000+	10	1.5
Total	650	100.0

The families of women respondents included the following characteristics.

- Most families were in the rural peasant class, relying on agriculture and domestic animal production.
- Their children had above-average educational attainment.
- About thirty percent of their husbands had high school education or higher.
- About two-thirds of their husbands were in farming or small business.

Experiences of Running for Office

In 1997, almost 45,000 women ran for seats in 4,298 Union Parishads. Of the total 13,409 women elected, 581 won general seats, while the rest won reserved seats. They reported being motivated by such concerns as desire to do something for their community, to work for women's empowerment, to further village development, and to become personally involved in development activities. Only a handful responded that family encouragement, or their own or their family's reputation was the main concern. No one reported the political party as an important motivation. Many of the women did not contest for the general seats because they did not realize they could. About half went for reserved seats because they thought them preferable in terms of responsibility and influence. Men reported believing that women should not contest the general seats as they had the reserved seats available to them.

The main sources of campaign funds were the women's own savings, and their husband's funds. These sources accounted for about 75 percent of their most important funding sources. About thirty percent reported no second source, and sixty percent reported no third source. Due to the need to cover three wards for a reserved seat, women tended to spend more than men on their campaigns, 30,000 taka to 20,000 taka for men.

Women reported the following problems related to their electoral efforts.

- Management of household affairs was difficult during their absences as candidates and elected officials.
- Men elected members showed negligence and discrimination against the women, hindering their ability to carry out normal duties of office.
- Family members complained about the expenses associated with campaigning and carrying out local government

activities, and the women shared this dislike of the added financial burden.

- Women elected to office could not move freely, due to security considerations. They had to rely on husbands or other family members to accompany them, especially in the evenings.
- Conservative social norms in rural areas further restricted free movement. The elderly and men in society seemed to lack respect for women elected to local government posts.

Working in Local Government

Although women now serve in elected seats and have many more representatives on local government, they still face barriers to full participation in the operations of government. Focus group discussions were conducted in several sites around Bangladesh to assess women's experiences as elected officials. A nationwide survey yielded further data, which is reported here.

One focus group discussion was made up of individuals elected to the chair's position. This is the only group to express satisfaction with service in local government. The participants did suggest areas in need of improvement, but the other five focus groups expressed dissatisfaction with the way Union Parishads are governed. Ward members who hold general seats (rather than reserve) felt all the UP's accomplishments were credited to the Chair. They felt that they were entirely dependent on the discretion of the Chair for getting projects or any resources.

The frustration of women members in reserve seats was so deep that many said being a reserve seat member was a matter of great humiliation. Two precise complaints expressed were:

- Lack of respect and fellow feeling from male colleagues in local government;

- Lack of equal treatment in getting projects under Food for Work and Annual Development Plans.

Officials in higher levels of government that deal with Union Parishads noted a lack of morale and the dominance of the Chair.

By contrast, women members in focus groups did say they felt that their personal status in society had been uplifted. They receive more invitations to social functions, and the political parties approach them, which would not have happened before. They are more likely to be addressed by their own names rather than by their husbands'. Still, even family members that supported the woman's candidacy might harbor resentments about the time spent outside the home.

Union Parishad financial compensation is very low. This leads women and their families to feel they are spending too much of their own funds, which means an additional burden on their families. Focus group participants said they thought men elected members received more from the UPs, partly due to a perception that women could not perform the needed physical labor.

Survey research shows the same tendencies as the focus groups. Once elected, women reported a variety of hindrances and barriers to full participation as members of UP government. They reported the same limitations on freedom of movement as they experienced as candidates for office. They perceived a lack of respect from men elected officials. Their families resented their absences and the expenditures associated with duties as a UP member. As elected officials, new problems arose. Almost seventy percent of women respondents reported not having separate office space and almost 87 percent lacked adequate transportation. They felt the UP chairs did not allocate resources to them, and women reported a lack of knowledge about how to fulfill their duties properly. They also lacked understanding of the UP's external and legal relations. In part, these problems arise from lack of clear delineation in law of the functions and duties of women holding reserve seats.

Gender roles present in Bangladeshi society tend to be reproduced in local government activities. Women members are generally given assignments related to family planning, cottage crafts, education, and women's and children's welfare. They are also expected to deal with the women in the community, not the men. Most women had no committee assignment at all. Only about twenty percent of women respondents who were on committees reported holding chair positions on UP committees. Men were more likely to propose new initiatives for local government, although women took a greater interest in such areas as women's development; men had proposed no initiatives for women's development.

As in the focus groups, the survey showed that women perceived men to have a bad attitude toward them. They said they feel they are not given an equal share of the opportunities or the work, and that men disrespect them. Of the men responding, sixteen percent said women are not capable of working on their own. Yet, some women did report cultivating good relations with the men elected members and the chairs, and thus having an equal share in UP activities.

Many women felt they lacked sufficient training to do their jobs. Although seventy percent reported receiving some kind of training, much of it did not relate to UP duties. Activities conducted by the UP were largely ceremonial. Training on local government was done by NGOs, and it reached only one-third of women respondents.

Table 4:   Difficulty Faced by Women Members of Union Parishad

Difficulty	Percent
Understanding the nature of the work	24
Problems measuring wheat allocations	17
Lack of cooperation from Chair, men	19
Lack of guidance	15
Family problems	7
No responsibilities assigned	7
No difficulties	2
No response	3

Asked differently, women responded to questions about physical and mental assault faced while performing duties. Over eighty percent said they had experienced no physical assault, while over fifty-five percent said they experienced no mental disturbances. Most of the remainder refused to discuss the questions, with only six reporting physical abuse and seventy-six reporting mental abuse. Women did try to consult with other women in the community. About two-thirds reported calling meetings. But there seemed to be resistance in the community to such meetings, especially among older women who felt they were not appropriate to a good family woman.

Women's Experience in City Corporations

Focus group discussions were conducted with women in City Corporations. The findings show that women's experiences in urban settings are similar to those in rural settings, despite significant social and economic differences. The focus groups were conducted with two sets of city corporation commissioners. Findings are summarized below:

- The women commissioners in three of four cities surveyed showed their anger, frustration, and feelings of helplessness regarding their position, status, and functions. They reported that they did not get a place to sit, or staff to assist, or nominal allowances to meet daily expenses. Later it was reported that they were allowed to have an office space at community centers. Where there are no community centers, they are reportedly to be paid office rent. In one city, the problem was not present.

- The women commissioners were not sure about their duties and authority. Women commissioners from one city had written a letter to the government minister in charge of local government about the matter.

- Women commissioners reported they are avoided and by-passed when the city corporation conducts programs.
- Women reported that officers and staff of different city departments did not listen to them. The officials working under the mayor seemed to have more influence than elected members.
- Women commissioners reported not having clearly defined responsibilities or any specific work.
- As the city corporation women with reserved seats represent three wards, they must spend a significant amount of money for transport, entertaining visitors, attending social functions, and running for office. This creates problems in family life.

Women's Experience in Pourashava

Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted also with women from the Pourashava. All the participants expressed their goal to be a commissioner with a view to establish women's rights in the society, alleviate poverty, ensure education for the poor, and to establish peace in the society. However, when talking about rules, acts, ordinances and manuals of Pourashavas they offered the following remarks :

- The acts, rules and manuals do not provide any precise definition of their roles and responsibilities.
- Women Commissioners' area of jurisdiction is not clearly specified in the regulations.
- In most of the cases, the Pourashava tend not to follow its rules and acts.
- Understanding the rules, acts, and ordinances require explanation and clarification.
- There is lack of any system to get these acts, rules, and ordinances in a regular fashion.

Regarding the Pourashava's implementation process, the FGD participants articulated the following-

- They get support for one ward only even though they represent three wards.
- Typically, men commissioners work against women. They tend to portray women as unfit to deal with people.
- Women are confined to specific works, such as mother and health care, sanitation, family planning by men commissioners.
- Men commissioners become upset if women attempt to get involved in development works.
- Usually, women's issues receive less in the Pourashava's budget.

Views of Men and Chairs

Regarding the views of other elected members, again we see that focus group and survey findings run parallel. None of the general members or chairs in the focus groups made any adverse or negative comments about women members. They mentioned only some general limitations on women endemic to the rural political culture of the society. When asked to specify with examples those limitations, they mentioned that women:

- Lack experience with the activities of local government
- Cannot given enough time to public affairs
- Cannot spend money from their personal accounts to get tasks done
- Lack skill, time, and experience in conflict and crisis management
- Cannot stay outside home for long hours and attend to people in the odd hours
- Do not try to understand the administrative, procedural, social, and political complexities
- Do not represent a definite constituency
- Do not have to respond to many of the problems that men members and chairmen must handle

- Make serious complaints to outsiders and NGOs about their UP colleagues, which is attributed to women's habits
- Often do not complete their projects on time.

Some of the men praised women members, saying they are sincere and willing to contribute and participate, but that they are limited by the prevailing social norms. It could take time, they said, for education, training, and cultural change to afford them the opportunity to be effective and efficient.

Discussions in focus groups brought up some more general points about the situation of women in local government. For one, the UP governments have been developing a distinct political culture of patron-client relationships, in which elites in the central government direct rural politics through a 'remote control' system. The traditional patron-client relationship is predominantly a male domain in which for the last twenty years violence and corruption have played major roles. Women are generally kept outside the patron-client political culture. Further, the present resource allocation system has a well-organized network in place. Women have limited access to this network of public officials and private sector actors. In addition, the committee system of local government does not function well. Even if women were given more prominent roles in committees, they would gain little from the poorly functioning system.

Attitudes of Community Members

Most of the respondents from the communities surveyed are family and neighbors of the women elected members, due to the small size of most villages. Not all have personal acquaintance with the women officials. The women appear to have increased their interactions with community members after election. Most

community members reported meeting with the women elected members.

About two-thirds of women in the community felt that the elected women were knowledgeable and could do something about women's issues. By contrast, only eighteen percent of men felt the women public officials could make a difference. Men and women also differed on their assessment of whether women's presence on the UP helped women, with women far more likely to give a positive answer.

Community members suggested a number of ways in which women elected to local government could help solve social problems. Men and women agreed that motivation for family planning was important. Women were more likely to favor more government and NGO programs for women. In general, the men seemed to have reservations about giving authority and resources to women. Men were more likely to attribute failures to the shortcomings of women, while the women in the community were more likely to blame the system.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The constitution of Bangladesh calls for equal rights for women, and it calls for measures to include women more fully in the political process. One of the barriers to using local government to achieve this end is the weakness of local government in Bangladesh. The constitution is not clear on the role of local government or its relationship to the national government. No provisions specify how many tiers of government should exist. In regard to women's rights, no clear guidelines exist on how to enact the constitution's call for greater participation in local government. The law in particular does not specify what the reserve seats roles and responsibilities are. The nine wards are more obviously represented by the individual general members, and it is not clear how the women with reserve seats are to deal with their overlapping constituencies. Legal reform to clarify

the role of local government and women in local government is needed.

Women in Bangladesh face educational and social hindrances to political participation. They suffer higher illiteracy rates. As noted, women also have little training and preparation for the role of elected official. Even if these barriers were surmounted, the social prejudices against women in government remain. Traditional views that women should stay in the home lead to resistance to their participation and resentment when their official duties conflict with home. This can result in strong pressure, even domestic violence. Public education should work to correct these attitudes. In particular, men officials could be targeted for training programs to help them accept and work with women in government. The national government must emphasize its commitment to implement the constitutional rights guaranteed to women.

Women candidates and elected officials need more resources to be effective. Lack of transportation, expense money, and facilities have hurt their ability to perform their tasks. Compensation for serving in local government should be high enough so that service does not burden the family budget. The special needs of women for security and appropriate transportation, especially for night travel, should be met. Child care is essential to allow women to travel in performance of their duties. Women voters also need more assistance. They must be fully informed, and they must have access to the ballot box. The norm of voting entirely in conformity with the preferences of the men in the family should be addressed.

Lack of knowledge continues to hinder efforts to improve the status of women in Bangladesh's politics and society. More research is needed on women's voting behavior, political awareness, motivation, and access to political parties. Such studies should strive to identify barriers and opportunities for increasing women's political participation. The role of parties is critical in Bangladesh,

and it is important to identify how gender bias limits women's access to influential positions, and nominations to offices.

More broadly, economic progress is essential. It is widely recognized that development fosters equality between men and women. Social change is not entirely dependent on higher national and per capita income, but they strongly relate. Bangladesh must redouble its efforts to develop the nation's economy and distribute the benefits of development more widely. In pursuing this end, the country must also recognize that the costs of development often fall more heavily on women than men. Affirmative efforts must be made to ensure that women and their families are benefited as the nation transitions from a largely rural and agricultural economy to urban and industrial. This means particular attention to women's health needs, income maintenance, child care, protection against violence, education, and more.

Fostering women's participation in public life ought not to end with local government. Local government can serve as a valuable training ground for women who wish to pursue public service. But Bangladesh has a centralized political system. For women to have real impact, they must move into higher offices in the national government. They must also gain access to the civil service, the ministries, and the corporate boardroom. Local government can make important contribution to empowering women for public life, but equality in all spheres is essential to democracy in Bangladesh

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