Gender, Power and Politics in Bangladesh

*a study for the Upazila Support Project*

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by

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UNDP Bangladesh
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Executive summary

This report presents an analysis of the situation with respect to gender, power and politics at the local level in Bangladesh, two years after local governance reforms introduced a new political quota for women within the directly elected Upazila (sub-district) Parishad or Council. The report aims to provide an analytical ‘baseline’ that will equip stakeholders in the Upazila Support Project with a power-based analysis of the key gender issues which affect progress towards gender equity in representation, decision-making and resource allocation at that level. It also identifies some opportunities to address existing power relations to advance wider goals of gender equity. The limitations of the evidence base available for this study mean that it should be read as illustrative but by no means as exhaustive of the issues that are likely to shape women’s political effectiveness as the upazila system matures.

The report draws on a review of the global literature on quotas and women’s political empowerment as well as of the experience with gender, power and politics at national and local levels within Bangladesh. In addition, key informant and expert interviews as well as a small amount of light-touch primary research with a selection of actors at the Upazila level were undertaken. The study was undertaken in January-March of 2011.

The background to the study was the need to increase understanding about gender issues within local government institutions and between power-holders and constituents, by exploring how existing gender relations are likely to shape and be shaped by power and politics at the Upazila level, specifically in the context of the new gender quota through directly elected seats reserved for women at the upazila level. The focus is on the operation of formal and informal politics and power relations at the Upazila level, and specifically on how women Upazila vice-chairs are situated. The study was motivated by a key research questions about how women can gain political effectiveness in relation to their interactions and relations with citizens and civil society, political and administrative actors, assessed against the objective of strengthening political accountability to women.

The drive towards gender quotas in political systems across the world highlights their significance in light of the MDG 3 on promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment. Yet the global literature on gender quotas has raised questions about the nature of the representation they in fact offer for women, and in particular with respect to whether they deliver a meaningfully substantive form of representation of women’s concerns. This has included attention to who these women are, and which constituencies they represent. In Bangladesh, such debates have taken into account the experience with indirectly elected reserved seats for women in national politics, which has not delivered substantive representation for women, and may have deepened dependence on patronage politics without notably contributing to more gender
equitable party agendas. By contrast, the experience with directly elected reserved seats for women at the Union Parishad level has been more promising recently, suggesting that women are gaining in autonomy and political empowerment at that level. An important explanatory factor here may be close engagement with NGOs and civil society, found to be widespread among women UP members.

Interviews, field visits and analysis were undertaken to explore assumptions about the gender, power and politics scenario drawn from the literature. A conceptual framework was developed which combined questions about the institutional determinants of women’s political effectiveness with explorations of the different levels, forms and spaces in which power is exercised at the upazila level. This drew on the ‘powercube’ tool to guide the examination of power in these relationships. Light touch research was undertaken through focus groups with women constituents, key informant interviews with the main actors (UZP chairs and vice-chairs, UNO and other upazila administrative staff, UP representatives) in four upazilas.

**Key findings**

While even poor women citizens feel empowered to make claims and voice demands of their UZP representatives, and this is in itself an important matter, the main mode of citizen-representative interaction among women remains that of claims for patronage. Not all women UZP vice-chairs are likely to operate within the system of political patronage: we encountered evidence of efforts to mobilise women around local gender equity concerns (notably, around girls’ toilets in schools). Women UZP vice-chairs were frustrated by their lack of resources, which hampered even basic official functions. Despite the lack of official progress in setting out a funded programme of work for women vice-chairs (a common refrain was ‘we have no work’), there remained a powerful hidden assumption that their mandate should come from the top. The idea that the mandate for local government action might come from the constituency seemed unfamiliar to the UZP representatives or other actors in the system.

As expected, women UZP vice-chairs met had considerable experience of civil society organisations, including development NGOs. Evidence suggests that NGO capacity building and other activities with women UP members has contributed to the empowering effects increasingly being seen among those political actors, and this clearly suggests an opportunity. Yet among UZP vice-chairs, it was not clear that civil society engagement was generally recognised as an important opportunity for building a local mandate or programme of work, although some connections continued. Along with most other groups at the local level, civil society actors are not believed to have a good understanding of the UZP system.

Personal political connections clearly matter for how and whether women can be nominated, stand, fund election campaigns, and operate within the local political
environment. While connections to party politics were important, these were because of political systemic factors (the need for finance and faction support to win) and patriarchy (the reputational risks and challenges to personal security that women specifically face in the political marketplace). Gendered risks operate here to ensure that politically-connected women are likely to be at a considerable advantage compared to women without such connections. The limited scope of the present inquiry meant it was unable to make any informed judgements about how significant or systemic party affiliation was as a source of power within the UZP; as noted above, the relations of power are still being contested and the system has yet to ‘bed down’. However, to the extent that party affiliation turns out to matter, ruling party affiliation is likely to predominate, as is the case elsewhere in the system of governance.

Interactions with other local government actors – Union Parishad chairs and members, the other UZP vice-chair (mainly men) and the Chair himself and MPs – contained some deep-seated tensions, as there is competition over constituencies and resources at this level. Whereas the UP members’ and MPs’ roles largely complemented each other in terms of jurisdictions and capabilities, the appearance of this intermediate tier presents potential threats to those above (MPs) and those below (UPs). The UZP actors tend to focus their attention on how to get and distribute resources, apparently viewing themselves as large UP chairs or small MPs.

Partly because of the multiple variations possible and the small scope of this study, no patterns were detected in how the political effectiveness of women UZP vice-chairs was shaped by supportive or conflictual relations among the political and administrative actors. With UPs, relations to date seem fairly amicable; within the UZP and with the MPs there were signs of tension but no overt conflict. A mixture of antagonism, indifference and support were indicated in the four UZPs visited, but overt hostility on the part of UNOs appeared to be rare; this overall pattern was identified in the Ahmed et al 12 Upazila study for UNDP (2011). Any hopes that a ‘critical mass’ of women in the UZP and in particular for upazilas with women UNOs were not supported by the two cases visited for this study. One possibility is that women UNOs particularly depend on strong ties to the centre to protect and facilitate their work, and by implication may lack the inclination or power to act in solidarity with women UZP vice-chairs. There were more encouraging signs of some effective working relationships with other women Upazila departmental staff, particularly the Women’s Issues officers.

In terms of their effectiveness within the UZP itself, UNOs and others confirmed the following main issues:

- Powers not (yet) formally delegated from the centre
- Standing committees that remain unconstituted out of lack of knowledge of the legal provision; resistance to oversight and accountability mechanisms and overlapping responsibilities within the law.
• Lack of authority over departmental activities, whose funds and programmes are delivered directly from the centre, and over which the UZP has little formal power, even when fully operational
• The effective absence of authority among women vice-chairs to place items on the agenda or to convene official meetings.

The main findings about relations with political and administrative actors are mainly generic obstacles to do with implementing the legal provisions through the formal rules of business. These generic issues have specifically gendered consequences, however, because of their direct contribution to preventing accountability to women and other less powerful groups.

Yet women remain quite visibly marginalised from some of the main spaces of power at this level. The physical space of the UZP illustrates this: women representatives’ offices are not likely to be centrally located, and the facilities for women constituents and others visitors signal the marginal nature of women’s roles and concerns. Women vice-chairs’ complaints about the control of the UZP vehicle and computer by the (all-male) Chairs similarly reflect their exclusion from the resources of the UZP. Their exclusion from key policy spaces is also plain. There are no strong interests in support of enabling women UZP vice-chairs to constitute the standing committees and convene other groups it is in their power to do; on the other hand, there are strong interlocking interests at several levels set against their doing so, and against effective accountability measures in general. Those interests are found within the administration, political party actors, among local government representatives themselves, and in the relative indifference of many citizens towards action on accountability instead of more tangible traditional politics (this may not hold in more affluent, educated areas with strong local business interests).

Opportunities for engaging with gender politics in the UZP

There remain significant gaps across the board in terms of knowledge of how the system is supposed to work; note that the election of the women UP members will add an additional group with new needs. There remains considerable scope for capacity development and strengthened communications work such as:

• Accessible public awareness campaigns to widen and deepen awareness and provide information to the public about the new UZP system, with a particular emphasis on the potential role of women UZP representatives.
• Communications with elite groups at the national level, including through roundtable discussions and seminars and media work. This could focus on generating awareness of the system among key opinion formers in the country, and greater impetus for delivering the decentralisation reforms
Communications work across the core actors within the system. This should avoid describing and listing the legally mandated activities of the UZP actors as public administrative training tends to, and instead look at questions of representation and accountability in a more holistic and imaginative way.

- Capacity development of UZP representatives. Lessons from the UP and elsewhere indicate that capacity development needs to beyond initial induction training, and should include peer-to-peer learning, among other actors in areas such as:
  - On-the-job-support to learn practical skills (how to manage meetings, draft resolutions, handle difficult situations), gain technical knowledge, build partnerships and working relationships.
  - Social accountability, such as exposure to accountability tools and techniques used successfully in other contexts (e.g., India), standard-setting and monitoring, using the law to enforce the right to information or sanctions against corruption or other failures.
  - Identification of and tackling of gender issues, e.g., awareness of laws and public policies in relation to dowry, polygamy, violence against women and children, women’s property and marital rights, women’s and girls’ health, education and safety net entitlements.

A second set of opportunities for supporting goals of gender equity involves reconfiguring the physical space of the Upazila complex itself to be more women-friendly and accessible. An example may be ensuring women vice-chairs are not assigned offices in secondary buildings or distant rooms far from the action, or providing facilities (toilets, waiting rooms, drinking water) for women constituents and visitors.

There are also opportunities to work through the UZP system to address the dominant political culture of patronage in ways that create a more gender equitable – and indeed generally more accountable - local politics. The fact that UZP representatives have not, to date, been empowered with resources to distribute in the mode of the UP representatives can be seen as an opportunity rather than a problem. This is so because in the absence of such resources, UZP representatives cannot operate effectively as patrons; if they are to succeed in demonstrating their value to their electorate, they will clearly need to do so in other ways and through other activities. The most likely strategy is to monitor local government finances and activities to increase accountability to citizens. Demonstrating that through monitoring and other accountability measures, they can improve public resource allocations, efficiency of public spending and ensure better local infrastructure and public services should earn popular political capital.

One way of working to shift the political culture of patronage which drives failures of accountability to women may be for UZP vice-chairs to engage more with civil society (in the broader sense, not meaning just NGOs). There is a noticeable tendency to view civil society as somehow separate from or outside of local politics and the administration, and if anything, as more of a problem than a partner. Yet UZP representatives and
particularly the women vice-chairs, could be greatly empowered through more effective engagement with citizens and broadly, with civil society. More regular engagement with citizens and civil society groups (media, business and trades associations, women’s groups) could enable them to develop a popular mandate and a higher public profile through regular meetings with citizens whose views are typically neglected. It would also give them an opportunity for feedback, to hear about what they are doing well and where the public feel they are failing.

It is clear that there remain many issues regarding gender, power and politics in local government on which we still lack adequate evidence, and also that the situation on the ground is evolving rapidly. In order to judge the effectiveness of and learn from the UZP gender quota, it will be necessary to continue to explore questions of gender and power at the level of local politics in Bangladesh. The opportunity here is to develop a small action research agenda involving regular, light-touch engagement on the issues explored in this study. This could involve, for example, regular rounds of interaction (for example, every six months) through interviews, focus groups and observation with UZP representatives, Upazila administrative officials, and citizens and civil society representatives in a small number of carefully selected locations. This could take place, for example, in a sub-set of the 12 upazilas in the Ahmed et al study (2010), about which a considerable body of baseline knowledge is available.

Such an action research project would enable stakeholders in local governance in Bangladesh to build up a picture of how the system is evolving over time, as well as enabling them to identify any emerging concerns or issues that require immediate attention or intervention. The findings from the action research project could be validated through expert interviews and LGRD officials, which will both enable the strengthening of the findings, and ensure a regular feeding of information upward to Government about the operation of the system.
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1. Introduction

This report presents an analysis of the situation with respect to gender, power and politics in Bangladesh, two years after local governance reforms introduced a new political quota for women within the directly elected Upazila Parishad or Council. The report aims to provide an analytical ‘baseline’ that will help stakeholders in the Upazila Support Project identify opportunities to address existing power relations to advance wider goals of gender equity. Specifically, the study aimed to:

- provide the Upazila Support Project stakeholders with a power-based analysis of the key gender issues which affect progress towards gender equity in representation, decision-making and resource allocation at Upazila level
- identify potential openings and opportunities which the Upazila Support Project could build on in its objective to address existing power relations and the principle of gender equity.

The report draws on a literature review and a small amount of light-touch primary research with a selection of actors at the Upazila level, as well as interviews with some key informants on the operation of governance and politics in Bangladesh. The research was undertaken in January-March of 2011.

The background to the study was the need to increase understanding about gender issues within local government institutions and between power-holders and constituents, by exploring how existing gender relations are likely to shape and be shaped by power and politics at the Upazila level. The focus is on the operation of politics at the Upazila level, both formal and informal, as well as on the dynamics of achieving higher priority for gender equitable representation, decision-making and resource allocation. The study draws on a literature review of gender, power and politics in Bangladesh and key informant interviews. It is motivated by key research questions about women’s political effectiveness in relation to their interactions and relations in key institutional domains, assessed against the objective of strengthening political accountability to women.

The report is organised into six sections. Section 2 situates the issues within the wider scholarly and policy debates about gender, power and politics, with a focus on lessons emerging about the impacts of quotas for women designed to promote women’s political empowerment around the world. Section 3 provides some background to women’s political participation in Bangladesh, situating these debates in the context of the new Upazila Parishad system. It then draws out lessons from the evidence on the effects on women’s political empowerment of reserved seats for women at the Union Parishad level since 1997. These lessons are used to identify some key research
questions and assumptions for the investigation of gender, power and politics at the Upazila level. Section 4 outlines the conceptual and methodological approach taken to exploring the questions identified. Section 5 details the findings of the research. Section 6 discusses the implications in terms of opportunities and ways forward arising from the research.

2. Gender, power and politics: global debates about quotas and women’s political empowerment

Bangladesh’s recent innovations with gender quotas in the Upazila system is part of a wider global move towards using quotas to kick-start processes of women’s political empowerment by increasing accountability to women through the creation of a critical mass of women political representatives. The central argument behind the promotion of women’s political participation through quotas is that ‘stronger political participation leads to better representation and accountability, and gradually to a transformation and deepening of democratic politics’ (UNIFEM 2008: 18; see figure 1).

Figure 1. The cycle of political accountability

For the present study, we are interested in how gender, power and politics shape women’s political effectiveness and so increase accountability to women at the local. This could include by:
Mobilising public opinion to secure a mandate for actions that promote gender equity through policy and implementation changes. For example, through establishing regular, sustained and institutionalised contact with local women that enables women UZP representatives to ensure women’s voice is routinely heard at the Upazila Parishad level.

Establishing locally relevant standards for the implementation of policies of relevance to the promotion of gender equity. For example, through ensuring that women’s concerns about infrastructure projects or beneficiary selection procedures are systematically aired in UZP meetings, or that women are involved in setting standards through citizens’ charters for the provision of health, education and social protection services.

Monitoring local services that matter to women and gender equity. For example by ensuring women are made aware of and involved in audits of local budgets and spending plans, in beneficiary selection procedures and reviews of final lists for the VGD, VGF, widows’ and old age allowance, stipend or school feeding schemes.

Sanctioning failures to operate within the law, including by demanding answers from the local political leadership and ensuring punishment, including public shaming, of corrupt and inept officials and politicians (Goetz and Jenkins 2005; UNIFEM 2008).

The critical question for the present study is whether and the extent to which the UZP reforms will empower local women politicians to engage effectively within this cycle of political accountability to generate stronger accountability to women at the local level. In this section we look at some of the lessons from political quotas around the world in order to situate the analysis of the Bangladesh UZP experience within broader global debates.

The driving force behind the new quotas has been the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3 ‘to promote gender equality and empower women’, which has contributed to an increased emphasis on the numbers of women in political office over the 2000s. An additional factor has been the 30 per cent target for representation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The proportion of women in national assemblies increased far more rapidly over the past decade than before this period, rising from only 11.6 per cent in 1995 to 18.4 per cent in 2008. By contrast, there had been a mere 1 per cent increase over the entire two decade period before that (UNIFEM 2008).

The nature of electoral systems and political party competition tend to play crucial roles in structuring how many women enter electoral politics. For example, proportional representation (PR) electoral systems are generally more gender-equitable than simple majority or first past the post (FPTP) systems (such as in the Bangladesh parliamentary system). So while women constituted only 18 per cent of national legislatures in simple majority systems, the figure was 27.5 per cent in countries with PR systems in 2004 (UNDP 2010). However, it has been mainly through legally enforceable quotas that the
most rapid progress has been made towards bringing women into electoral politics (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2003; Tadros 2010; Waylen 2008; UNIFEM 2008). This appears to be true both for national and for sub-national politics. That Bangladesh is in the top three Asian countries in terms of women’s representation in rural and urban councils reflects the presence of quotas in the Union Parishad and pourashava systems (see UNDP 2010).

What have quotas actually meant for gender, power and politics in different contexts? To what extent have they contributed to effective efforts to strengthen accountability to women? While it is still too early to evaluate the full effects of quotas around the world, the emerging debates point to a number of critical areas for research and analysis of direct relevance to the Bangladesh context. Evidence is emerging that the ways in which quotas are implemented and their impacts on gender, power and politics reflect a number of factors, including the motivations of different actors for adopting quotas. For example, authoritarian regimes may institute quotas for reasons that in effect counter a gender equity agenda. In Bangladesh, the Upazila Parishad reforms were introduced under a non-party Caretaker Government, in a context in which both major parties had previously resisted decentralisation to this level because of the potential for undermining the power of Members of Parliament (Ahmed et al 2010). Other factors that matter include the effectiveness of sanctions against non-compliance with quotas, as well as with the wider political reforms with which they are associated (for instance, around campaigning and political violence), the significance of women’s mobilising (women’s positions in political parties, the strength of the women’s movement, NGOs) in growing women’s capacities for political representation, and the effectiveness of capacity support and training for women representatives. It is also clear that which women come to power also matters, including how representative they are of women in the wider society, and whether they bring a gender equity agenda to the table, or merely act as proxies for other party or group agendas (Tadros 2010).

Leading authorities on the new political quotas for women have identified debates around three dimensions of the effects of quotas which raise key questions for the present inquiry. The first is questions of descriptive representation: do quotas in fact increase women’s representation, with enough women willing and qualified to participate to represent society in a more diverse way? Or will women feel unwilling or unqualified to stand, or reluctant to be selected as ‘women’? The second is substantive representation: will quotas lead to a more women-friendly way of doing politics, enabling new and more gender-sensitive policy concerns to arise on the agenda? Or will the political effectiveness of women politicians be limited because they only represent women, are stigmatised as ‘quota women’, or stand as proxies or token women without clear mandates of their own? The third is symbolic representation: will quotas contribute to the democratisation of politics by widening nomination processes and increasing the legitimacy of electoral systems from the perspective of including women? Or will quotas be merely symbolic and lead to demands for quotas among other social groups (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2010)?
The issues identified by Tadros, Dahlerup and Freidenvall and others give rise to some fundamental questions about the institutional determinants of women’s political effectiveness at the UZP level (Goetz 2003; Goetz and Hassim 2003). These include the nature of their interactions and relations with:

- Citizens and civil society, including whether citizens more broadly and the women’s movement and civil society organisations in particular have the power to mobilise to create a mandate to promote gender equity concerns at the Upazila level
- Political actors and political society. How effectively women political actors engage with these actors to promote gender equity concerns will depend on the nature and distribution of political power and patterns of political competition at different levels
- The administration. Interactions and relationships with the administration will depend on its nature and power, including whether the civil service and officials have internalised commitments to gender equity and have the willingness, resources and capacities to promote gender equity at this level.

Keeping in mind concerns about which women come to power through quotas, and about the possibility that quotas may encourage the nomination of women proxies, we also need to bear in mind that women may be politically effective for themselves or their political masters without necessarily being political effective with respect to the promotion of gender equity concerns.

With these questions and concerns in mind, we turn now to a discussion of the experience with women and politics in Bangladesh.

3. Analysing gender and power in Bangladeshi politics

3.1 Gender and national politics

The role of women in Bangladeshi national politics could be said to be symptomatic of the nature of gender and power in politics more broadly. First, women have been active in the national political arena from the anti-colonial struggles through to the language movement, the liberation war that led to national self-determination in 1971, and beyond, into the efforts to restore and deepen democracy in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet while these struggles were formative for the women’s movement, the role of women in these struggles has rarely received much recognition. Policy and legislative gains for gender equity from these struggles have been hard-won and often reversed, as in the
case of the fate of the National Women’s Policy in the 2000s (see Jahan 1982; Nazneen and Sultan 2010). Despite the strong and sustained efforts of the women’s movement, the gains in gender equity that have resulted from the past two decades of policy shifts and development activity have arguably occurred despite women’s relative political weakness, rather than because their political mobilization has resulted in generally stronger political accountability to women. None of the major political parties has demonstrated strong commitment to gender equity or women’s empowerment, and it has largely been through instrumental efforts to improve development outcomes that women have gained access to public resources and opportunities (see Nazneen 2009; Nazneen et al forthcoming; Hossain 2011).

Second, the prominence of female political leadership at the national level has arguably reflected the dynastic and patronage-dominated nature of party politics more than the women-friendly nature of the polity. As is the case with other Asian countries in which women have held political leadership roles, the two women political leaders inherited their positions, and can be regarded, at least in their initial assumption of these roles, as proxies for their families’ men. The dominance of the women leaders of the Awami League and the BNP over the past two decades can be said to reflect the dominance of patriarchal ideologies and their association with popular political ‘brands’, the significance of political martyrdom in political culture and ideology, the advantages of their social class, and the first past the post electoral system, rather than with any innate gender equity within the political system (see Richter 1990-91; Halder 2004). However, while neither of the two women political leaders have presided over female-friendly politics, it has been under the tenure of the two women Prime Ministers that Bangladeshi women have seen the most rapid progress in terms of social, economic and human development indicators (see World Bank 2008; Nazneen et al forthcoming). This may suggest that while under neither party has there been a strong emphasis on gender equity, nor has there been the space for wholesale reversal of gender equity gains.

Third, women’s national political representation has depended ultimately on a combination of patronage politics and the operation of patriarchy in the political system, underpinned by the simple majority system within the electoral process. This has meant that women’s parliamentary representation has depended ultimately on reserved seats for women in the national parliament, which have in turn ensured dependence on the national party structures for women’s nominations. Political patronage at the highest levels remains the critical determinant of women’s national political representation. Many women in parliament are proxies for male family members who were previously themselves politically active, but whom for a variety of reasons (typically, imprisonment or corruption charges) are disqualified from electoral competition. While it is generally known that individual women MPs have sought to pursue gender equity policies at this level, the system in which they are embedded mitigates strongly against independent caucuses that cut across party lines. This also means, as is widely known but generally not discussed, women in politics at all levels
face additional threats to their persons and personal reputations from the violence characteristic to Bangladeshi politics (see Halder 2004).

Fourth, quotas have been deployed in efforts to raise the level of women’s political representation. At the national level, women’s political representation is principally ensured through the 30 reserved parliamentary seats, which are in effect in the gift of the majority parties, who divide them between them. As Chowdhury notes, these reserved seats effectively operate as votebanks for the ruling parties; there is little evidence that they have contributed to strengthening women’s substantive representation in parliament (2002). Women’s parliamentary representation had peaked in 1996, with 13 per cent of seats, only to fall in the 2001 election, when the reserved seat provision was suspended (Ahmed 2008). Since the 2008 election, there have been 45 seats reserved for women, bringing the total number of women MPs to 65 or 18.8 per cent of seats in the present parliament (NDI 2009). Of the 20 women elected directly by constituents (representing a paltry 7 per cent of seats), a significant proportion are understood to be party nominees acting as proxies for husbands who were facing criminal charges or for other reasons unable to stand themselves. The overall impression of gender in national power and politics is as Chowdhury describes it, one in which efforts to strengthen women’s political representation have been coopted by the systems of patronage and patriarchal dependency that shape women’s political capacities.

3.2 Gender and local government institutions in Bangladesh

Women in the Union Parishad, 1997-

While the gender, power and politics scenario at the local level is similarly shaped by patronage politics, patriarchy and women’s dependence, an emerging consensus is that the experience with gender quotas at the local level has been somewhat more promising with respect to strengthening women’s political effectiveness than at the national level. Since 1997 women Union Parishad members have been directly elected on the basis of men’s and women’s votes from constituencies representing three wards; the other nine members of the Union Parishad council (mostly men though women can stand) are elected from the nine single wards; the chairman (mostly men though women can stand) is elected from all nine wards. Almost 13,000 women were elected in that year and again in 2003.¹

It is on local government that many of the hopes of deepening democracy and strengthening accountability to poor people, women and other groups whose interests

¹ At the time of writing this report (April 2011), the delayed Union Parishad elections have started in the southern districts of the country. This will be the third time that women will have competed through direct elections to reserved seats.
tend to be marginalized through mainstream politics are generally pinned. Strong local government is generally understood to be indispensable for ensuring sustainable development, achieving the targets of poverty alleviation, attaining the MDGs, and increasing democratic accountability in the country. Bangladesh has a long history of local government and the post–independence constitution provides for the creation of local government bodies at every administrative level. Articles 59 and 60 provide the main foundation for the role, structure and functions of local government. Rural local government is in effect a two-tier system in Bangladesh: Union Parishad (Union Council) and Upazila Parishad (Upazila Council). In reality, the only representative local government institution that has had a continuous existence since the 1880s is the Union Parishad (UP) (Ahmed 2010). There are 4,451 Union Parishads and 482 Upazila Parishads, as well as 225 municipalities or pourashava.

All of this suggests that the total numbers of women who have been brought into local politics and governance should be seen as significant in their own right. However, as Table 1 indicates, progress has been limited in the seats of rural political power: while women have occupied the seats that only women could hold, it is more striking how few women have been elected as chairs, an almost negligible 0.2 per cent, only 22 women, of an adult female population of around 30 million.

**Table 1 Women’s representation in rural local government in Bangladesh and comparators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women elected representatives (%)</th>
<th>Women chairs (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNDP Women in Local Government Status Report 2010; latest available figures as of 2010

Initial feedback from the UP experiment with gender quotas was not all promising. Studies showed that UP women representatives typically came from better off families, with above average levels of education, although a significant minority (estimated at around 40 per cent) were also believed to come from poor households. A significant proportion were encouraged to enter local politics by their families, particularly where there was already a tradition of political activity. In their 2008 survey, Khan and Mohsin found that some 40 per cent of women UP members had family members who were themselves UP members or chairs, and that 93 per cent had family support with election expenses (2009). Studies showed how some women UP members acted as proxies for their husbands, to the extent that some even attended council meetings in place of their wives.
Yet there were other sources of support and nomination in the rural areas than party-backed local political society. NGOs seem to have been particularly prominent in working with women UP members, including nominating. Siddiquee (n. d.) noted RETA inception survey findings that 41 per cent of UP women were NGO members, while Gani and Sattar find that around half of women members reported linkages with NGOs to support poor women in their areas (2004). An optimistic reading of the evidence suggested that successive UP elections were gradually bringing to life a generation of women local politicians who were learning how to lead through a focus on issues often dismissed as conventionally ‘feminine’, which are yet also vital for promoting gender equity within the poverty and patriarchy of rural Bangladesh. These included issues such as social welfare (extreme poverty and vulnerability, e.g., women household heads with small children), safety nets and sanitation.

However for many women, basic council operations proved a challenge: the general picture was one of exclusion from meetings and information, treated rudely and dismissively, and excluded from crucial resource distribution decisions (see for example Siddiquee n. d.; Gani and Sattar 2004; Frankl 2004; Panday 2008). Around one quarter of women UP members interviewed by Siddiquee had been involved in various public activities such as committees and welfare work prior to their election, yet fully 93 per cent described their occupation as household-based, with other occupations mainly described as ‘service’. For the Gani and Sattar sample that included new members elected in 2003, the proportion of women defining themselves as home-makers (a slightly different description) was around 60 per cent (2004), possibly suggesting a more professional and independent profile in the second round of UP women members; some 15 per cent of the Khan and Mohsin sample were unmarried, which they noted signaled a political cultural shift in the gradual entry of young, educated, unmarried women into the political field. On the basis of their sample survey of UP women members, Gani and Sattar concluded that in 2004,

- Women UP members were typically young (mid 30s – old enough to have school-aged as opposed to infant children); educated to an above average standard; and as more than half had been re-elected, had considerable familiarity with the functions of the UP
- Older women UP members tended to be those from better off families, to have greater involvement in council activities, and to be more likely to have be re-elected
- There was uneven involvement in various public and social activities, but their engagement was principally through informal channels; they tend to be excluded from or marginalised within formal committees and decision-making spaces
- There was a clear sense of inadequate capacity, knowledge and technical skill with respect to the overall functions of the UP, their roles and responsibilities, government resources and allocation of social safety nets and health and agriculture facilities at the union level.
Many felt they were fairly effective in dealing with social safety nets, sanitation and related issues, but there was also a clear sense of frustration and weak capacity from the earlier generations of women UP members.

There has been such a significant investment of NGO and donor effort in building capacities and trying to strengthen women UP members that it is encouraging to note that more recent assessments suggest that they are beginning to benefit from their political apprenticeship. This is showing in terms of greater capacities to engage more with local women’s concerns, articulate local gender equity concerns and policies, and operate more effectively within the often unclean politics of the UP council. Khan and Mohsin note, for instance over 78 per cent of women reported participating in budget discussions, with 52 per cent reporting having suggested changes, and 73 per cent of these claiming that their suggestions were accepted. Khan also notes that in technical domains, as well as in terms of their confidence and capacities to develop effective working relationships, interventions like the Local Government Strengthening Programme (LGSP) were bearing fruit. While none of the authors imply that the struggle is over, at the least women are forging their own paths in their struggles for political effectiveness:

*It is notable here that very few women have recorded their notes of dissent; ... perhaps a culture of dissent among rural women members is yet to emerge, which puts in question the notions of emergent voices and spaces. But in the case studies of women members some of them acknowledged that it is their lack of knowledge and the socialization process that bars them from dissenting. Many of them drew lines between protest and dissent and argued that when they manage to argue out their positions those are often accepted. It was observed that most of the women members talked of reconciliation, but a few having political backgrounds were more demanding and assertive. In a few instances women coming from lower income groups and no familial linkages with the system were able to fight out the challenges posed by the Chairmen through bringing about false allegations and also asking them to go out with them. They used legal as well societal means to fight these out. These women want to be re elected. These indeed are cases of empowerment as well (Khan and Mohsin 2009: 18-9).*

Khan and Mohsin summarise the situation as: ‘in the sphere of voice creation, one thus observes the emergence of voices, some effective and some still wavering but conscious of this limitation’ (2009: 17). Other authors also note the louder voice of women UP members. In this quotation below from video interviews with women UP members, Nazneen and Tasneem show how what was once seen as the weakness of the women’s mandate (an electorate spread across three wards), has now been turned on its head and made into the strength of numbers:

*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 (UP member cited in Nazneen and Tasneem 2009: 37).*
The reintroduction of the Upazila Parishad in 2009

With the reestablishment of the Upazila Parishads (UZP) and elections to the 481 among 482 Parishes in 2009, Bangladesh took a crucial step forward in its democratic development. After a break of 20 years, powers have again been vested in democratically elected institutions at the level of government which manages the bulk of development services needed to achieve the MDGs and meet the wider development challenges. The Reinstating Act of 2009 reenacted an updated Upazila Parishad Act, assigning clear roles, functions and powers to elected Parishads or councils in 13 main areas. Through the Act, the UZPs have been empowered to play a major role in the management of the Upazila health complexes and public health engineering, social services and family welfare, women and youth development, primary and mass education, agricultural extension, infrastructure development, livestock protection, fishery and disaster management. The representational arrangement of the Parishads as laid out with the Act in theory has the potential to provide for more inclusive local democracy.

The traditional bias of indirect representation at higher tiers towards women (the one representative from each Parishad at local level more often than not being a man from a dominant group) has been alleviated by the representation of 30 percent women in the Upazila Parishads and one of two vice-chair positions being reserved for a woman. Women UP members will also be represented on the council, once elected. While there is no perfect system, the mix of indirectly elected members each representing a Union and directly elected chair and vice-chairs each representing the entire Upazila has the potential to provide the basis for both strong citizen-Parishad relations while ensuring capacity to address development changes across the entire Upazila (reducing the tendency across South Asia for Parishadors at the second tier to merely split available funding for use in their own constituencies) (Upazila Parishad Support Programme. UZPSP, Draft Programme Document, June 18th 2010). Upazila Parishads could mark a major step forward bringing sound democratic processes to the arguably most important level of government for most poor women and men in the country. The Upazila, as an administrative unit and spatial location, occupies a strategic political and administrative position in Bangladesh and is equally important from a service delivery perspective as most public service providers have physical presence at the Upazila level. Indeed, most government departments stop at the Upazila level in terms of their delivery and reach. The only missing link at the Upazila level remains the representative structure and character that can integrate the disjointed and numerous social, political, and administrative functions within a single body. The Upazila Parishad Ordinance 2008, and later the Upazila Parishad Act 2009 are designed to fill this long-existing gap (ibid).

The challenges for women UZP vice-chairs are considerable, not least because other women members from the UP and pourashava are yet to be elected (their term expired in late 2006, and elections are being held in 2010-11). As Ahmed et al correctly point out, ‘a single woman vice chair playing a proactive role in a meeting of more than 30
men’ is not to be expected (2011: 51). Ahmed et al note further that the overall situation is one of ignorance of the role of women in the UZP, including among NGOs and civil society, the *pourashava* and even among the women UZP representatives themselves (2010: 51).

**Assumptions about gender, power and politics at the Upazila level**

From the review of the literature on the Union Parishad and Upazila Parishad systems, a number of initial assumptions can be drawn about the nature of power in relation to gender and local politics. First, the distribution of administrative and political power over the new UZP is still contested and in flux. It is too early for stable, strong institutional arrangements to have emerged, partly because the system is new and partly because of how the Upazila Association has contested MPs’ efforts to weaken their resource and decision making powers at the centre (Ahmed et al 2010). This has meant that there has been a somewhat varied distribution of political power at the UZP level, and it is not clear that party dominance has been established to date. If there is less party dominance of policy making at these new levels in some UZPs, they may for the time being provide more promising sites for women UZP members in which to pursue gender equity policies and practices. In any case, in many locations, the system is not yet fully functional. This means that it is essential both to recognise the nascent nature of the system, and to avoid assuming that what we witness at this moment in time is in fact the final shape of the system. At the same time, the power of parties and party connections is likely to felt in terms of who receives nominations, support and financing for election campaigns.

Second, the profile of the women who stand and succeed at this level is likely to differ on average from those at the UP. There may be different forms and levels of power operating around class privilege for women at this higher level, sometimes meaning greater access (for example, through the skills and status of higher education), and sometimes meaning new forms of exclusion for other women (through, say, elite social networks, wealth). However, it remains likely that women UZP vice chairs and other women representatives (when their elections occur) will resemble UP women politicians in having close family and other social connections with relatively politically powerful groups. This means that it is important to explore who these women are in order to establish what their mandate as local representatives is likely to be. This involves some closer understanding of how hidden forms of power (for instance, those relating to histories of political party connection) may link women to actors at different levels. At the same time, it is necessary to understand better the operations of the invisible forms of power such as patriarchy in determining which women may stand and succeed.

Third, for UZP women to make a difference, they will need to be more strategic at the policy and practice level and operate less through the ‘charitable’ mode through which patronage politics engages disadvantaged women. Some one-quarter of a million people
live in an Upazila, on average. That means that even if only ten per cent of that population comprised poor women and their families (a considerable under-estimate given that 40 per cent of the overall population is poor), that would be a vast 25,000 individuals to be supported through the patchwork social safety net system. Clearly women UZP members will need to focus their efforts on policies and systems to set benchmarks for fair and effective services, and to monitor and enforce standards to these groups; the UZP women members themselves can only play a limited direct role. This entails that it will be necessary to look for prospects for the new women UZP members to adopt entirely different modes of political engagement, less dependent on the informal spaces of patronage, than have to date been dominant at the UP level. This will require that they depart from local patronage politics to establish new forms of political culture (language, ideas, practices) that distinguish them from other local political actors, but which are also less hierarchical and do not depend on their direct delivery of goods to extremely needy populations.

Fourth, effective political action by UZP women members is likely to challenge the powers of members of parliament and UZ administration officials far more directly than at the UP, and there are still some significant gender inequities within the formal rules of the UZP, just as within the UP and pourashava systems. This means it is probably too soon to take the rules of the directly elected Upazila system for granted this early on. There are likely to be some fairly significant challenges to women’s political effectiveness through the formal operations of power. This will mean that effective political action by UZP women members may need to operate at several levels, including by sidestepping traditional party power bases, claiming or creating new spaces for engagement, and developing an independent mandate for political action.

4. Conceptual framing and methodological approach

Scope of the analysis

This report was intended as a ‘baseline’ study of the key conceptual and programmatic issues shaping gender, power and politics at the upazila level. It was not designed to provide an exhaustive account or profile of the women UZP vice-chairs or of their experiences to date, but to set out key themes and opportunities for further exploration or intervention. The limitations of the study should be clear: it involved a two person team plus administrative, field visit support and information sharing from UNDP and SDC staff in Dhaka, taking place over a two month period, with around one month devoted to literature review, conceptual and methodological development and a second to interviews, field visits, report preparation and dissemination. The study relies considerably on secondary literature, key informant interviews and on the authors’ own knowledge of the issues in rural Bangladesh, in addition to material gathered through
interviews, focus groups and observations during brief field visits to four upazilas. The aim of the field visits was principally to road-test our assumptions about gender, power and politics at the upazila level in light of what we learned in those locations.

The study was thus limited partly by time, but also partly because there is little documentation of women within the UZP to review - and indeed, relatively little experience to date to document. This report is best read as an informed assessment of the broad issues and challenges likely to be faced going forward, in any efforts to achieve gender equitable political outcomes through the new upazila system.

Key questions and concepts

The key question the study asked was: what are the power relations shaping women’s political effectiveness in relation to advancing gender equity at the UZP level? Political effectiveness was understood in terms of the extent to which women politicians were able to bring about stronger accountability to local women, with a focus on building mandates, setting standards for implementation, monitoring and enforcing sanctions against failures to act. To explore the power relations shaping women’s political effectiveness we attempted to understand the relations and interactions between and among women UZP vice-chairs, male vice-chairs, UZP chairs, UP representatives, the UNO and other upazila administrative staff, MPs, women citizens and other parts of political and civil society (parties, NGOs). The analysis put women UZP vice-chairs at the centre of the analysis, as the remit was to explore these issues in light of the new gender quotas at this level. This means that some important issues for how the UZP operates, such as interactions between MPs, UNOs and UZP Chairs are excluded from the present analysis. Detailed descriptions of those relationships and interactions are, however, available elsewhere (see Ahmed et al 2011). To explore these power relations, we drew on the available literature on UP and UZP politics, expert knowledge of the UZP system, and on the small amount of primary data collected through our interviews and focus groups.

We analysed the operations of power and politics within the broad institutional domains that shape women’s political effectiveness, as noted above, through their relations and interactions with citizens and civil society, political actors and political society, and the administration, using the ‘powercube’ tool for power analysis (Gaventa 2006; see Figure 2 and Table 2). The powercube aids the analysis of power by drawing attention to the different forms, levels and spaces in which power is being exercised in any setting. It helps to guide the focus of the analysis beyond the obvious, visible and high level forms of power and to recognise and name the less obvious forms of power that may be hidden from view or entirely invisible because they are ingrained within cultural and social beliefs and practices. It also enables recognition that multiple forms and levels of power may be interacting in any given situation.
The conceptual approach here was to apply the thinking behind the powercube to the analysis of the interactions and relations within which UZP women vice-chairs are likely to operate (see table 2). This involved considering how different levels of actors were connected and how, in which kinds of policy and public spaces, and how different forms of power, from the overt to the unseen, were shaping what happened across those connections and within those spaces that enabled or blocked women from being more politically effective. Table 2 provides a sense of how we approached the analysis by examining the levels, spaces and forms of power in UZP women vice-chairs interactions and relations with citizens and civil society, political actors and administrative officials.

Table 2 Analytical framework for analysing power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame of analysis</th>
<th>At what levels (global, national, district, local, household) is power shaping the Upazila gender equity agenda?</th>
<th>In which spaces (invited, claimed, closed) are policies being formulated? (policy committees, informal meetings, mosques, political party HQ, etc)</th>
<th>What are the different forms of power (visible, hidden, invisible) that prevent or enable women from pursuing gender equity goals on the Upazila agenda?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizens and civil society</td>
<td>e.g., HH: women citizens are unable or unwilling for reasons of purdah to</td>
<td>e.g., CLOSED: women cannot speak in religious gatherings, shalish or</td>
<td>e.g., INVISIBLE: women’s domestic responsibilities prevent them from</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gaventa 2006
visit the UZP complex to air their concerns
e.g., GLOBAL: local women’s organisations draw on international HR frameworks to argue for action on violence against women

other closed spaces seen as sites of male authority, but where public opinion around local policies is formed

attending public meetings
e.g., VISIBLE: lack of toilets or breastfeeding facilities in the UZP mean women do not visit their UZP representatives

Politics and political competition

Politics and political competition

e.g., LOCAL: Women Upazila representatives are mainly proxies for male relatives; it is at the household level that many decisions about gender equity policies get made

e.g. the strength of local party competition unofficially shapes whether or not women’s issues appear on the Upazila agenda (hidden power)

State administration

State administration

e.g., NATIONAL: national legislation shapes the bulk of laws to do with gender; little scope for Upazila-level variation

e.g., INVITED: Government rules require that one-third of committees are headed by women, but it is the committees that women struggle to claim leadership of in which they have most impact

e.g., HIDDEN: UNOs effectively continue to direct Upazila policy and implementation

Research sites and tools

The research team visited Sonargaon upazila (Narayanganj), Chouddagram Upazila (in Comilla, near Feni) Haluaghat upazila (northern Mymensingh), and Gazipur Upazila (Gazipur). In Sonargaon, Chouddagram and Haluaghat UNOs were interviewed in the UNO office in presence of the UZP women vice-chair. In Sonargaon, the UNO, Women’s Officer and the UZP Engineer were female. In Gazipur the UNO was female but we couldn’t interview her as she was attending meeting in the DC office. Only in Sonargaon we met the UZP chair, in other places they were not available during the visit. We met the male vice chair in Gazipur only who is the chair of the association for the UZP vice-chair. In the field places women vice-chair accompanied the team during the FGD with female citizen. The women citizens who participated in the FGD session were mostly poor who were receiving VGD/VGF/ Widow allowance/ Old age allowance and maternity allowance and also who were not covered but were deserving and expecting. The UP selected in the Haluaghat is impoverished Bangali- Garo mixed area. Participants in this area were not included in any of the social safety net programs.
## Table 3 Research tools used in the field visits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sonargaon</th>
<th>Chouddagram</th>
<th>Haluaghat</th>
<th>Gazipur</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UNO</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Vice-chair</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UZP Chair</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UZP male Vice-chair</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Citizens</td>
<td>2 FGDs</td>
<td>1 FGD</td>
<td>1 FGD</td>
<td>Nalua village, Koittapur UP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pirojpur UP</td>
<td>Kalikapur UP</td>
<td>Mograpara UP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UP female member</td>
<td>FGD with women citizens</td>
<td>FGD with women citizens</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UP male member</td>
<td>FGD with women citizens</td>
<td>FGD with women citizens</td>
<td>FGD with women citizens</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UP Chair</td>
<td>FGD with women citizens</td>
<td>FGD with women citizens</td>
<td>FGD with women citizens</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UZP Women officer</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the sites were purposively selected, the research does not treat them as case studies or as examples of a particular type of institutional set-up. The selection was mainly based on ensuring a spread of broad types of areas likely to differ on dimensions relevant to questions of gender and political power (e.g., poverty status, cultural conservatism, ethnic diversity), as well as the possibility of identifying opportunities for intervention. One of the limitations of the study is that the analysis cannot extend into the analysis of the dynamics of each different location in their own right, for example in terms of how party politics plays out in each setting. Instead, the analysis produced a more general set of findings about how power is concentrated and exercised at the upazila level, and what that means for women’s political effectiveness. We turn next to the findings from the analysis of the evidence generated through the field visits, from key informant interviews and from the more comprehensive Ahmed et al. 2010 study.

### 5. Insights from the field visits

#### 5.1 Relations with citizens and civil society

**Interactions with women citizens**

Through the field visits, the team was able to observe the interactions and relationships between women UZP vice-chairs and poor women citizens at firsthand. From this direct observation, four findings relating to the nature of power in the citizen-representative relationship were observed.
First, that many poor women citizens feel a degree of empowerment with respect to their rights with respect to public services, particularly cash and food transfers. Focus groups were conducted with groups of poor women in three of the four sites (two focus groups were conducted in one site), and informal discussions were also conducted with women visitors to the UZP offices in all four sites. In all three areas where focus groups were conducted, the invitation to attend was extended through the UZP vice-chair herself, which gave her the opportunity to decide who would be invited. Other representatives were also present in all cases, including the Upazila chair in two of the focus groups, and Union Parishad members (men or women) in all. The participants were generally poorer women, as we had requested women who would be eligible for the VGD, widows’ allowance or other transfer schemes. However, not all of the focus group participants were recipients, and many expressed discontent either with their exclusion from these schemes (and the inclusion of other, less needy people), or with the type or amount of resources being transferred. Despite their having been invited by their UZP representative, the formal setting (in three of the four FGDs), and the presence of other UP and other officials and the outsider research team, it is notable that many poor women citizens did not feel disempowered to the extent that they were unable to voice their discontent.

This finding confirms what other research has already identified (Hossain 2010), which is that despite their apparent powerlessness, many (not all) poor women citizens feel a degree of entitlement and empowerment to state their claims in invited spaces, perhaps particularly where these relate to vital matters of livelihood and survival. In one case, a woman from an ethnic minority group spoke very articulately about the exclusion of their extremely poor and ethnically diverse village from the benefits distributed by the Union Parishad officials. This was a cause of great discomfort for the UZP vice-chair who attended the meeting, and demonstrates the scope for the use of public meetings for women to exert accountability pressures on representatives to perform their duties fairly and effectively. From the discussions with these groups, it seems that this source of power within the UZP representative-women citizen relationship appears to derive from a combination of knowledge that these resources come from the central government and are intended for the very poor, and a sense of citizenship power arising from the act of electing representatives.

A second observation somewhat counters this first more positive finding. This was that we identified two fairly distinct poles of behaviour by the UZP representatives with respect to their electorates. At one end, the UZP representative presented herself as a powerful patron, requiring her citizens to wait for lengthy periods for the focus group to take place, and showing little interest in meeting or talking to her constituents, even when these were from an area she was not familiar with. The ‘powerful patron’ model of interaction was also illustrated by her lack of interest in the focus group discussions themselves, in which she did not participate, choosing instead to sit behind the desks at the front of the room talking to the UZP Chair (who also attended). At the other extreme
was what can be termed a ‘mobiliser’ model of representation. In this case, the UZP vice-chair participated very actively within the focus group, asking questions of the citizens and raising challenging issues to do with gender inequality such as childcare, menstruation and women’s health, violence and so on. She ended the focus group with a song about the hardship of women’s lives, which women in the FGD appeared to understand and respond to. The ‘mobiliser’ model of UZP vice-chair also showed recognition of the fact that the women FGD participants had given up their valuable time to attend the session, apologised for having taken up their time, thanked them for their attendance, and invited them to come and see her.

These two extremes illustrate very different understandings of where the power of the UZP vice-chair lies. The ‘powerful patron’ situated her role firmly within the existing set of power relations, deferring to the male Chair, viewing her role as that of traditional (albeit female) patron, and that of women citizens as clients and vote-banks. In this model, the vice-chair’s power comes from her capacity to attract and distribute resources from the centre, and will therefore depend on how well she is able to negotiate the hidden forms of party political power as these transfer resources from the centre to the local level. The ‘powerful patron’ vice-chair revealed her great discontent with the failure to date for any ‘work’ to have been delegated from the centre, and seemed to be in effect waiting for instructions to distribute resources rather than taking any other more proactive steps to claim spaces for her own political action.

By contrast, the ‘mobiliser’ vice-chair appeared to identify women citizens as a group with whom it was important to engage directly, and to build their awareness of their rights and her own role with respect to delivering those. She acknowledged that the sources of women’s political weakness derived at least in part from their domestic responsibilities and their secondary status within society. While she too was frustrated by the slow pace of progress with respect to defining her role as a UZP vice-chair, she was organising, apparently effectively, around the issue of toilets for girls in local schools. In doing so, she was in effect claiming spaces for citizen mobilisation and policy action, and uncovering some of the more uncomfortable and invisible constraints to girls’ education.

A third observation supports the findings of the Ahmed et al 2010 study in 12 Upazilas, which is that UZP representatives are generally frustrated in their relationship with citizens by their effective lack of resources, both for distribution (e.g. cash and food transfers) and for effective official work (transport, office staff and equipment). This frustration highlights how the central administration and national politicians have to date stalled on any effective financial delegation to the UZP level.

A fourth observation relates to the hidden powers that shape how the mandate of local government representatives is framed. The overall authority enjoyed by the central state delimits what women UZP vice-chairs can even conceive of as their mandate: this is widely expected to be delivered by the relevant administrative authorities within the
central state. Our interviews and expert sources indicate that there is no substantive expectation that women UZP vice-chairs gain their mandate from those who elected them, and should focus their efforts on acting (within the law) on issues of greatest priority to constituents.

Civil society engagement

All of the UZP vice-chairs had some prior involvement with NGOs and other civil society organisations. One vice-chair, a lawyer, had provided legal services through BRAC’s legal aid programme. Two had been involved with the Hunger Project, an experience which had influenced their thinking about their own roles, as well as about poverty and gender issues. However, the scope for involving civil society more fully in their new roles as UZP representatives had not generally been considered. These connections with both small local community groups and large national organisations were a potential source of power for these representatives that they did not appear to have recognised. Such connections could enable representatives to engage with organised groups of citizens, both men and women, to create platforms around particular local and national issues, and to play a more significant supportive role in coordinating resources for development distributed by NGOs. However, it is also worth noting that Ahmed et al found that civil society organisations with the potential to support the role of the women UZP vice chairs were generally unaware of the system and of any possibilities for their engagement with it (2010).

To identify opportunities for drawing civil society into working with the women UZP representatives it may be worth reviewing the experience of NGOs and other organisations with training and mobilising women around the UP system. There is also a global dimension to civil society engagement at this level, as there was some recognition of women’s rights as human rights, and therefore connected to global standards and debates.

5.2 Interactions with political actors and political society

The political connections of women UZP vice-chairs

As was anticipated on the basis of our review of knowledge of gender and politics in Bangladesh, the four women vice-chairs met through the research all had strong personal or family connections to party or local politics. These connections closely reflect the conditions under which women enter politics in Bangladesh, as well as demonstrating the link between quotas, patronage and women’s dependency under patriarchy in this context as identified by Chowdhury (2002; also Ahmed 2008). However, as qualitative studies of UP women representatives have also showed, party political connections do not necessarily mean that women politicians are proxies for
other men. In a patriarchal society in which political violence is common, it may also be the case that women with family histories of politics have better networks, more direct exposure to political activity, and face less domestic opposition than women who lack such connections.

In two cases, the husbands of the woman representatives had been Union Parishad chairmen. While none had prior experience of elected office personally, several had related experiences of standing for election. One had been a student activist for a political party, and remained closely connected and committed to her party activism. Another had extensive experience within what could be called ‘political society’ through membership of school and college managing committees, which are generally recognised as training grounds for political activity. Those whose main knowledge of politics came through their husbands also had a significant amount of insider knowledge of and connections to powerful groups within and associated with political parties at the local level. Because only four upazilas were visited, it was not possible to assess the extent to which party affiliation shaped overall patterns of women’s engagement. Representative surveys and more in-depth longer-term research are likely to be needed to establish the roles of party politics in gender and power relations at this level, not least because the relationships and interests in the UZP remain in flux and contested (see Ahmed et al 2011).

A number of implications arise from the finding of prior political connections. One is that in line with the findings of Ahmed et al (2010), it was not clear how significant party connections were as a source of power at this level: more investigation at a later time will be needed to identify how party politics is playing out within the UZP system, as at this time it is not yet evident that partisan affiliation is having a clear and systematic impact on political action at this level. This may relate to the fact that the system is overall still not operational in many contexts, and so the benefits from the system have yet to attract much interest from political party leaders. At present it is not clear that party affiliation has afforded many advantages to UZP representatives associated with the ruling party. It is possible that affiliation to the ruling party may have facilitated their election in the first instance, but in all cases, the women UZP vice-chairs commented on the high cost of standing for election, indicating that it was their personal resources, and not party coffers, which financed their successful campaigns.

Whether or not the women vice-chairs actually benefit from the power associated with partisan affiliation, it is important to recognise these somewhat concealed political connections. Where they have been directly associated with party politics and local politics through family members or personally, this experience is likely to shape their understandings of how to do politics, and of their roles with respect to citizens. The strong emphasis within UP politics on the distribution of public resources as patronage seems particularly likely to determine the way in which UZP representatives view the potential for their roles. In addition, the likelihood that party political concerns will influence what UZP representatives, including women vice-chairs, can bring to the local
policy agenda remains strong, particularly if there are resources to be allocated or monitored.

A second implication relates to women’s family connections with politics. One of the invisible constraints to women’s political representation in Bangladesh is the threat of sexual violence and/or threats to their personal reputations from association with ‘dirty’ politics (see Jahan 1982; Frankl 2004; Panday 2008). Women with personal connections to political actors may be better placed to avert such threats compared to women who lack such connections. Women who are married into successful political families may also have more inside knowledge of how the system works, and be better able to afford the costs of campaigns and the personal handouts that local politicians regularly make to retain their reputations as caring representatives. These considerations make it unlikely that women UZP representatives will succeed without reasonably strong prior political connections, particularly those from within their own families.

The limited scope of the study meant it was unable to make any informed judgements about how significant or systemic party affiliation was as a source of power within the UZP. Once the system has ‘bedded down’, however, if party affiliation still matters, ruling party affiliation is likely to predominate as is the case elsewhere in the system.

**Interactions between UP and UZP representatives and MPs**

The UZP women vice-chairs do not yet seem to have developed close interactions with the citizens at the village level compared to the UP women members, for a number of reasons such as the lack of accessibility of the women citizens to the UZP because of distance, lack of information and connections, in addition to their far larger constituency size. It is still assumed by many rural citizens that the distribution of the VGD/VGF and other social safety net benefits is the domain of the UP, as the UZP is not yet functional. There are good reasons to believe that UP chairs will not be interested in sharing their power with UZP chairs in this area of work, as the UP is an institutionalised part of the administrative set up in rural Bangladesh, and has been the sole power centre over a long period. On the other hand, UP chairs are more likely to compete for the higher administrative position of the UZP chair, which many clearly view as having potential for political advancement. However at both UP and UZP levels, women members and vice-chairs commonly perceive and experience gender discrimination in the exercise of their power and rights. This discrimination, often very blatant, is an important aspect of the obstacles they jointly face in terms of accessing resources and engaging with citizens.

Relationships with MPs are also perceived by the UZP chair and UZP women vice-chairs as crucial in terms of accessing funds for the UZP’s development programmes and social safety net provision. As the peoples’ representatives in all three tiers - UP, UZP and MP elections - need votes from within the same population, the power to distribute social benefits has become a source of hidden conflict between them. In some cases, UZP
chairs are close to the MP; in others, the situation is the opposite, as the MPs consider the UZP chairs as potential competitors in the next elections. From the limited number of examples reviewed for this study, however, women UZP vice-chairs seemed to benefit neither from the stressful nor from any supportive relations between the MP and the UZP chairs.

That the relationship between the UZP representatives and the MP is an uneasy one is supported by findings of a recent report. The Upazila Parishad Act 2009 spelled out the basic framework of roles and responsibilities of six important stakeholder groups namely the local MP(s), the UZP Chair, the UZP Vice-chairs, the Upazila Nirbhahi Officer (UNO), the UP Chairs and Pourashava/Municipal Mayors and other government officials posted to Upazila level offices. The UZP occupies a unique position in between the District from the upper and the Union from the lower level, in addition to which there are pourashavas within the Upazila. Tensions have already started mounting among the UP and pourashava leadership about whether they are losing power and authority in view of the empowerment of the UZPs. (UZP governance final draft, July 2010).

If the UZP is fully functional, there is a potential for the UZP representatives to develop closer relationships with constituents compared to the MPs, who typically reside in the capital and generally lack regular contact with voters. Thus, neither MPs nor UP representatives may be particularly positive about the prospects of sharing power with the newly established tier, which they may view as disrupting a long-established set of relationships.

Within this complex set of potentially conflicting relationships and interests, however, women UZP vice chairs present new possibilities for addressing social issues with particular relevance for women. Their personal, familial and political connections may make room for them to exercise some decision making power on issues such as combating violence against women, preventing early marriage and polygamy, and in relation to the distribution of social safety net benefits.

Women vice chairs with whom this study engaged took the view that the UZP chair exercised sole authority with respect to UZP monetary and decision-making matters, bypassing not only the women vice chairs, but also sometimes their male counterparts. This opinion was also voiced by the male vice-chairs and UNOs interviewed as part of the study. Some also consider the male vice chairs’ position to be problematic for women vice chairs, as women may be restricted to working on narrowly defined ‘women’s issues’. However, an alternative possibility was that the two vice chairs may be able to be mutually supportive and provide checks and balances against the sole authority of the UZP chair.

However, there were signs of a degree of acceptance of a role for women vice-chairs among many of the elected representatives:
Development is not possible leaving women behind. Women’s representation in local government will encourage women’s advancement in all sectors.

Male vice-chair

UZP women vice-chairs should be nurtured, otherwise parliament will be captured by moneyed and corrupt people.

No political parties have platforms for women. – UZP women vice-chair

5.3 Engagement with the public administration

Interactions with Upazila administrative officials

The small size of the present study meant it was unable to draw any definitive conclusions around the nature of the interactions between women UZP vice-chairs and the Upazila Nirbahi Officers. Our limited observations in this area were, however, in line with the findings of the Ahmed et al study (2010), which found that while relations between the UZP representatives and the UNO were not generally seriously conflictual, there was a mixture of antagonism and cooperation in the relationships observed for this study. No clear patterns emerged, and instead a range of combinations were identified, including close relationships between the UZP chair and the MP, from which the woman UZP vice-chair was excluded; close relationships between the woman UZP vice-chair and the UNO in opposition to a hostile UZP chair; good relationships between the woman vice-chair and the UZP chair in a context of antagonism towards and from the UNO; mutual antipathy between the chair and the two vice-chairs. Relationships between women vice-chairs and the UNO can also be a site for negotiation. In one of the upazilas, women vice-chair is working closely with the UNO to make the social safety net benefits more pro-poor, transparent and being politically unbiased. In the view of one UNO, ‘Women are sincere and less corrupt, so mass people like them’.

It was notable that the presence of a woman UNO did not mean a more supportive environment for the women vice-chairs: in the two upazilas where the UNO was a woman visited for this study, there was no evidence that the gender of the UNO contributed to a sense of solidarity between the women officials and representatives. There may be an assumption that women vice-chairs will be more comfortable and active in performing their roles and responsibly, but in these areas women vice-chairs perceived that women UNO are expected to be more in touch with other government high officials and MP to protect their own power. In a context in which women UNOs remain very much in the minority, it seems unlikely that they will feel empowered to support a gender equity agenda being promoted by the woman vice-chair.
However, women vice-chairs did sometimes have effective and close working relationships with other women Upazila officials, in particular the Women’s Officer and some other women departmental staff. In two Upazilas, the study found that the woman vice-chair was working closely with the Upazila Women’s Officer.

The one woman UNO interviewed explained that she considered that within the UZP, the chair and male vice-chairs presented the greatest obstacles to the women vice-chairs’ access to power and in the performance of their roles and responsibilities. Other UNOs took similar views. They nonetheless considered that if the UZP was fully functional, women’s roles and responsibilities as well as those of the UZP chair and male vice-chair’s roles would be more clearly defined, and the scope for effective action by the women vice-chairs would improve. Views among the UNOs included that:

*The concept of UZP and reality is far different.*

*Though official roles and responsibilities are assigned, they have not been put into practice yet.*

*Lack of a specific role is a hindrance to their empowerment and sovereignty.*

*If the UZP chair is not supportive and positive, development work in UZP is not possible.*

*UNO can be unbiased but people’s representatives are biased as being voted by their supporters.*

*UZP is still going through trial and error.*

*Power still lies at central government; Local government is not yet given power.*

One UNO considered that the lack of dedicated Upazila funds were the major problem for the whole system, and explained the lack of power among the UZP representatives as whole. In this view, availability of UZP funds and more clearly defined roles and responsibilities would gradually improve the situation.

The main power relations shaping the effectiveness of women UZP vice-chairs have already been amply documented in Ahmed *et al* 2010. Many of the main deterrents to their effectiveness within the UZP system are visible in the form of:

- Powers not (yet) formally delegated from the centre
- Standing committees that remain unconstituted out of a combination of lack of knowledge and awareness of the legal provision; resistance to the establishment
of committees that may effectively oversee and hold to account Upazila officials and UP members and chairmen; and overlapping responsibilities within the law as currently constituted. This last is particularly relevant in the case of welfare programme beneficiary selection committees, and therefore of critical significance to the roles of women vice-chairs. As one woman vice-chair explained: ‘We and the UZP government administration system are running like parallel systems, no teamwork’.

- The lack of authority over departmental activities, whose funds and programmes are delivered directly from the centre, and over which the UZP has little formal power
- The effective absence of authority among women vice-chairs to place items on the agenda or to convene official meetings (Ahmed et al 2010).

As one woman vice-chair put it:

_UZP should have its own five year budget plan, UZP monthly meeting should have prior agenda in consultation with the UZP women vice-chair, and the suggestions to be incorporated in the resolution and signed by the UZP women vice-chair to ensure their roles in the UZP._

The present study affirms that the findings of the meticulous Ahmed et al study are relevant as explanations of the constraints on the effectiveness of women vice-chairs, as well as for the UZP system as a whole. Very few of these administrative obstacles to their effectiveness appear to have specifically gendered dimensions to date. To a significant degree, the limits on women vice-chairs’ political effectiveness in relation to the administrative system relates closely to the effectiveness of the institution as a whole.

**Spaces of power**

There are, however, some specifically gendered dimensions to the experiences of women vice-chairs. These also often involve highly visible exertions of power, and involve issues on which direct and immediate action is clearly possible. The first of these is how the physical spaces of the UZP are, or are not, women-friendly. In two of the four cases, the women vice-chairs were located far from the Chair’s office, in one instance in another building. While the other vice-chair was also similarly marginalised in terms of physical space in one instance, in another, it was only the woman who had been so excluded. This effectively ensures that the woman vice-chair is located at a distance from the centre of the action, and is likely to be excluded from important discussions and meetings that take place informally or at short notice. In at least one instance, it was clear that this was a deliberate effort to marginalise the woman vice-chair. A related matter is the simple but important matter of toilets: in the more poorly equipped offices, it is only the Chair and the UNO who have attached toilets. As UZP
buildings lack public toilets for women (although these exist for men), there are no facilities available for women, unless they have the status or courage to request use of the facilities belonging to a high ranking male official or representative. This not only makes the UZP building inhospitable for the women staff there, it is also problematic for any women visitors to the UZP. These visible signs of a male space send powerful signals to women about the kind of welcome they can expect to receive and the marginal nature of any role they can expect to play.

Women vice-chairs’ complaints about the control of the UZP vehicle and computer by the (all-male) Chairs similarly reflect their exclusion from the resources of the UZP. While these can easily be dismissed as the complaints of those who expect to benefit personally from public office, there is a gender dimension with respect to transport which needs to be acknowledged. This is that women may be more constrained than men in the use of public transport, particularly at night, for reasons of both personal safety and respectability.

With respect to the specific responsibilities of women vice-chairs in the constitution of standing committees and membership of other official bodies such as budgetary planning processes, it is clear that there are no strong interests in clarifying that role to the women themselves, nor to the rest of the UZP. On the contrary, there are powerful material interests, often working in tandem, to protect against the possibility that new monitoring bodies are set up that may scrutinise and hold to account any unlawful or irregular project implementation activities or public service delivery weaknesses (Ahmed et al 2010). This is reasonably plain, and the sources of power that mitigate against the establishment of standing committees range from the top of the political system, from the MPs through to the Upazila administration, and down through to the Union Parishad members.

In addition to the powerful material interests in opposition to a more direct role for women vice-chairs in local accountability mechanisms, there are two other factors to take into account. The first is that of bureaucratic inertia, and resistance to any reforms that will add further layers of activity and further slow the movement of files through the system. Bureaucrats have no incentives currently to facilitate such changes; in the absence of such incentives, and any direct pressure from the centre to do so, there are no good reasons to believe they will support the establishment of standing committees or budgetary planning processes with more oversight from UZP representatives. The second factor is that the women citizens who form the constituency for the women vice-chairs are generally likely to be unaware of the importance of such accountability mechanisms. Particularly for poorer women, their priorities for action by the women vice-chairs are focused firmly on their access to public resources such as allowances and food and cash transfers. This means that there is little demand from below for women vice-chairs to expend their energies on convening these committees.
While the lack of popular demand for more transparency and accountability within local government may be generally true, it may not be universally so. Some UZP representatives clearly recognised the relative importance of their downward accountability, as distinct from the upward accountability of Upazila administrative officials:

Government officials have upward accountability, but PR have downward accountability to their constituents. They have to satisfy only their boss for their ACR but our ACR is given by our thousands and millions of voters, we have been given viva by the people (UZP women vice-chair).

In Upazilas with more educated, wealthier populations and more active civic engagement and stronger civil society organisations, there may be more scope for initiating more accountability-focused activities. The example of wealthy Gazipur Upazila is instructive in this respect: there, the woman vice-chair and the male chair both viewed their roles as centrally about strengthening local accountability, demonstrating strong commitments as local citizens to demanding better and more transparent planning and project implementation processes. It seemed that this was an area in which there was a clear sense of a right to official information, which seemed to be lacking elsewhere. In none of the focus groups, for example, was reference made to rights to information, suggesting that there is still some way to go in popular dissemination of this legislative development in support of accountability. The Gazipur chair and vice-chair clearly articulated a role for themselves in opposition to non-local Upazila administrative officials whose tenure in the locality was temporary:

Government officials are outsiders, if they do wrong, they get punishment transfers, that doesn’t compensate the harm done by them to the local area due to corruption or negligence. (Interview with UZP male chair).

6. Opportunities and suggested ways forward

In this section, we draw on the analysis of gender, power and politics at the UZP level to identify opportunities for interventions and directions for future action and knowledge activities that will contribute to advancing gender equitable political empowerment at this level.

A general point to make here is that women tend to be among the groups most vulnerable to governance and accountability failures. This means that more accountable local government would be of particular benefit to women, who in general are more dependent than men on free or subsidised public social and health services, and who therefore stand more to gain from better, more responsive service provision. In general,
opportunities to strengthen UZP governance to make it more accountable, efficient and effective are likely to have disproportionately positive impacts on gender equity goals. However, the points below also include discussion of some areas of potential action or inquiry which relate directly to ways of engaging women more effectively in local politics, or of creating a more enabling environment within which women can operate.

6.1 Communications and Capacity development

Starting with the most obvious area for further work, it seems clear that there remain significant gaps across the board in terms of knowledge of how the system is supposed to work, in addition to broader capacities in relation specifically to women UZP vice-chairs and their relations with citizens (to date: the election of the women UP members will add an additional group to this need). This means there remains considerable scope for capacity development and strengthened communications work across the UZP representatives, but also with other groups. This could include work at both elite and mass levels, in addition to working with the core actors within the system, including:

- Public awareness campaigns to widen and deepen awareness and provide information to the public about the new UZP system, with a particular emphasis on the need for and potential role of women UZP representatives. Methodologies and tools will need to be carefully developed to ensure these are sufficiently participatory to enable communication with illiterate or less educated groups, and designed to reach rural women in particular in language and concepts that will have meaning to them within their lives.
- A programme of communications to work with elite groups at the national level, including through roundtable discussions and seminars and media work such as newspaper editorials, television discussion shows and so on. This will focus on generating awareness of the system among MPs and in particular key opinion formers in the country such as media leaders. Again, a focus on the need for women representatives specifically may be a central component of this activity. This programme of communications work could be oriented towards generating demand among key power-holders for greater clarity about and impetus for delivering the decentralisation reforms.
- Communications work across the core actors within the system, including UNOs and UP representatives, in addition to the UZP chairs and vice-chairs, with a specific focus on the roles of the UZP representatives. In this area, it seems clear that the tools and methods for communicating with this group should not focus purely on describing and listing the legally mandated activities of the UZP actors within the Parishad Council meetings and activities themselves. Instead, it should take a broader view of their role, looking at the questions of representation and
accountability in a more holistic and imaginative way than that prescribed by the official manuals sent down from the Ministry.

- Capacity development of UZP representatives. Lessons from the experience with quotas elsewhere and with women UP representatives in Bangladesh has strongly indicated the need for capacity development that goes well beyond initial induction training about official roles and responsibilities within committees and so on. Peer-to-peer training has already shown considerable promise in this area, and should be considered further for this area. For example:
  - There is a clear need for capacity development among women UZP vice-chairs more broadly, which takes into account that many are political novices and are in effect serving an apprenticeship, and will need on-the-job support to i) learn practical skills (how to manage meetings, draft resolutions, handle difficult situations), ii) gain technical knowledge of laws, organisations and policies, and iii) identify ways and strategies for working more effectively with UP representatives, Upazila officials, and with citizen groups and civil society.
  - While UZP representatives may feel their power is constrained by their lack of resources to distribute, there is in fact ample scope for them to work to strengthen accountability at the local level. Capacity development activities for UZP representatives could include exposure to social accountability tools and techniques used successfully in other contexts (e.g., India). It could also involve support in engaging with citizens to build their own mandate for locally relevant action, in setting local standards for public services, and in using the law to enforce demands for information, or sanctions against corrupt or ineffective administrative officials or representatives.
  - A third area in which capacities of women UZP representatives could be developed is in the identification of and tackling of gender issues. This could include awareness of laws and public policies in relation to dowry, polygamy and violence against women and children, women’s property and marital rights, as well as women’s and girls’ health and education entitlements. Such training could include development of case materials for identifying effective strategies for tackling crimes against women and girls, for working with the police, health services or judiciary, as well as the creation of awards and media awareness campaigns around women UZP representatives’ successes in these areas, both to build demand for more action, and to ensure such activities are recognised and rewarded.

6.2 Creating a women-friendly UZP

A second opportunity for supporting goals of gender equity through the Upazila system also involves a tangible set of activities to do with the Upazila complex itself. It seems clear that the physical facilities are currently not women-friendly in a number of obvious
respects. Women’s needs in relation to these premises need to be acknowledged and taken into account more fully in any plans to construct or renovate these facilities. There are some simple matters of offices for women UZP vice-chairs that are in the centre of the action, and not physically marginalised as is sometimes currently the case, as well as acceptable public toilet facilities earmarked for the use of women only within the facility. In addition, there should be attention more generally to creating spaces that women will feel able and willing to visit with comfort and ease. There could, for example, be waiting spaces with seats for the use of women, curtained areas where women can feed children in seclusion, and easily accessible information about women’s rights within the Upazila made available for those seeking information or advice, or other activities. In addition, women could be encouraged as good citizens to visit their Upazila complex to find out about its activities and to get to know their representatives and the work they do.

While such a suggestion may appear to be trivial in a context of intense pressure on public resources and spaces, the importance of creating physical spaces in which women feel able to congregate should not be under-estimated. The symbolic significance of having a critical mass of women regularly visiting the UZP complex is likely both to increase the authority and importance of the women UZP vice-chairs, and to increase the possibilities of stronger demands for accountability by women citizens.

6.3 Addressing a political culture of patronage

Less obviously but more fundamentally, there are opportunities to work through the UZP system to address the dominant political culture of patronage in ways that create a more gender equitable – and indeed generally more accountable - local politics. The fact that UZP representatives have not, to date, been empowered with resources to distribute in the mode of the UP representatives can be seen as an opportunity rather than a problem. This is so because in the absence of such resources, UZP representatives cannot operate effectively as patrons; if they are to succeed in demonstrating their value to their electorate, they will clearly need to do so in other ways and through other activities.

The most obvious opportunity here lies in the area of promoting transparency and good governance, through monitoring of local government finances and activities. The UZP as a whole has already been mandated with this role through the legal provisions, but it appears that the implications for how UZP representatives may actually work have not been taken on board by the actors, who appear to view themselves as playing a role somewhere intermediate between the Union Parishad Chair and the Member of Parliament. UZP representatives need to be oriented towards thinking more strategically and entirely differently about how they can make a difference that will win them local respect and political popularity. Demonstrating that through monitoring and
other accountability measures, they can improve the allocation of public resources, increase efficiency of public spending and thereby improve the local infrastructure and public services should provide clear opportunities to earn political capital, and ensure re-election.

There are at least two potential challenges to such a strategy, in addition to that of persuading UZP representatives that it makes political sense. First, that on the whole, the mass of citizens also tend to view local politics in terms of patronage. We know from this study as well as from other sources that rural people assume that the main value of local politicians lies in whether and which resources they are able to allocate to them. This is partly to do with the sheer scale of the need: the social safety net schemes are woefully inadequate in terms of their coverage of the needy population, particularly in the poorest areas. This creates strong competition for these resources among the poor, and strong disincentives for them to work collectively to address collective concerns around corruption and political bias in beneficiary selection. However, there are reasons to believe that rural citizens will recognise the benefits of local political action which seeks to:

- improve the targeting of such programmes, so that the neediest come first
- root out political bias in beneficiary selection, so that there is a fairer and more predictable process of distribution of scarce resources; this is important because many people who are not themselves extremely poor are angered and outraged by the unfairness of a system which delivers resources to people with good political connections, even if they themselves may not personally benefit from tackling corruption
- campaign for more allocation to the local level, through collective action between the MP, the UZP and the UP officials working together.

In addition, in less poor areas, as was noted above, there may be stronger demand from citizens for good governance. This creates a range of opportunities for UZP representatives to engage in monitoring activities in ways that respond to public demands for more transparency, tackling corruption, and more efficient and locally-responsive project allocations. One challenge will be to develop strategies that are adapted to the different types of areas, so that governance of social safety net programmes may need to be the priority in poorer areas, while governance in relation to public investment and infrastructure development may be the focus in more prosperous and more developed areas.

A second challenge is that efforts to strengthen local public accountability will directly counter the interests of a range of powerful actors, as noted in Section 5. Such a strategy may need to rolled out with careful attention to local context, for example by working in areas with MPs acknowledged to be of higher than average integrity, who make a political virtue of their honesty, and who can be engaged within the process as champions of good governance. Careful work at each level of the system – with the
MPs, UNOs, UZP representatives and UP chair and members will also be needed, in addition to effective communication campaigns with the local public, in which the local media and other civil society groups may also be involved. Such an agenda cannot be the activity of a single sector or set of actors, but will require a broad-based coalition of actors in the local area.

It should be noted that strengthening accountability is an agenda for the whole of the society. Yet it has particular gendered dimensions, as it is typically the most vulnerable groups in society – often women - who are affected most directly by corruption and public service delivery failures.

6.4 Effective engagement of citizens and civil society

Following on from the previous point, another area of opportunity for the UZP representatives is in more effective mobilisation of citizens and civil society (in the broader sense, not meaning just NGOs). There is a noticeable tendency to view civil society as somehow separate from or outside of local politics and the administration, and if anything, as more of a problem than a partner. It should be noted that this perspective comes most strongly from within the bureaucracy, whereas UP councils have evolved a number of strong and enduring partnerships with NGOs and movements such as the Hunger Project, BRAC and others. There are no legal bars on UZP representatives engaging with citizens and organised civil society groups, and many opportunities for gaining local political power from doing so.

UZP representatives, and particularly the women vice-chairs, could be greatly empowered through more effective engagement with citizens and broadly, with civil society. One reason for this is that it could enable them to develop a more popular mandate for action. We currently hear very little from the UZP representatives about how they understand their constituents’ needs and concerns, and it seems that many take it for granted that they know best, and have little need of hearing the voices of their citizens. More regular engagement with citizens could make them see their role from the perspectives of citizens. They could develop a popular mandate through regular meetings and discussions with a wide range of citizens, particularly women and poorer groups whose views are typically neglected as they lack political power and tend to come to the attention of their representatives relatively rarely. Systematic efforts to hear the concerns of people regularly through, for example, weekly meetings across the Upazila, will both raise the profile of women vice-chairs in the communities, and give them greater credibility in their dealings with the other UZP members, as their views will be more closely informed by knowledge of their constituents. It will also give them an opportunity for feedback, to hear about what they are doing well and where the public feel they are failing.
Other forms of engagement with civil society could also empower UZP vice-chairs. For example, meeting regularly with local trade, business and market associations could lead to more informed action to improve the local business environment. Meetings with the local media could lead to publicity for successes in improving local policies and programmes. Local community groups such as youth clubs or school associations can be involved in awareness-raising activities or public service monitoring activities. Engaging women’s organisations and groups more directly through an Upazila women’s committee that involves civil society groups could be a way of monitoring the gender sensitivity of Upazila policies more generally, and drawing in expertise in areas of women’s health, legal services, and rights. By working more closely with service-providing NGOs, UZP vice-chairs may also be in a position to direct the use of foreign aid resources and NGO programmes more in line with the local policy priorities.

6.5 Monitoring gender, power and politics in local governance

It is clear that there remain many issues regarding gender, power and politics in local government on which we still lack adequate evidence, and also that the situation on the ground is evolving rapidly. In order to judge the effectiveness of and learn from the UZP gender quota, it will be necessary to continue to explore questions of gender and power at the level of local politics in Bangladesh.

There are a number of potential strategies for monitoring the situation, but one promising possibility is to develop a small action research programme which involves regular, light-touch engagement on the issues explored in this study. This could involve, for example, regular rounds of interaction (for example, every six months) through interviews, focus groups and observation with UZP representatives, Upazila administrative officials, and citizens and civil society representatives in a small number of carefully selected locations. This could take place, for example, in a sub-set of the 12 upazilas in the Ahmed et al study (2010), about which a considerable body of baseline knowledge is available.

Such an action research project would enable stakeholders in local governance in Bangladesh to build up a picture of how the system is evolving over time, as well as enabling them to identify any emerging concerns or issues that require immediate attention or intervention. The findings from the action research project could be validated through expert interviews and LGRD officials, which will both enable the strengthening of the findings, and ensure a regular feeding of information upward to Government about the operation of the system.

There are several well developed methodologies of this variety already in use within Bangladesh, from which lessons can be learned in designing such a qualitative monitoring strategy.
References


