

V NORMS, DECISION MAKING AND PARTICIPATION

Summary

- *There have been far-reaching changes in gender norms in Bangladesh over the last decade and more. Younger women have more liberal attitudes than older women on preference, divorce and marriage, equality between spouses and violence.*
- *But serious constraints to women's decision-making remain.*
- *Women's domains revolve most effectively around the care of children but only half of all women are regularly consulted in matters relating to their children's welfare. In areas to do with their own relationship with their external environment their influence shrinks even more.*
- *Property ownership by women is still a distant goal. Less than 10 percent of all women and less than 3 percent of younger women have their names on marital property although fewer younger women voluntarily give up their parental inheritance.*
- *There have been changes in the functioning of informal systems of decision-making in the community but the role of women and youth has remained small and poor women are largely excluded.*
- *While reservation of seats for women in Union Parishads has given the opportunity to women to be visible in the public domain, rules and procedures still do not give women members equal rights compared to those elected from non-reserved seats.*
- *Women in elected office have much greater voice and visibility in community level decision-making compared to other women.*
- *Education and experience are key factors in women's voice in decision-making both in the household and community.*

5.1 Too much is too often made the impact of South Asia's constraining gender norms on gender inequality. Some believe that the culture in the region is so constraining that many outcomes cannot be influenced easily. Others believe that if opportunities exist, women use various strategies, agency and resistance to access them and over time norms change as well. The intellectual tussle between norms and opportunities sometimes seems irreconcilable. The evidence on how women renegotiate norms to access opportunity has been documented in the literature¹¹⁴ and it would be safe to say that opportunities and norms are mutually interdependent.

5.2 Bangladesh has had a history of programs that have changed norms and behaviors through their delivery system and inbuilt incentives. The successful education and micro credit programs are the greatest testimony to this. The culturally sensitive delivery of the family planning program was an important determinant of fertility decline. Availability of garment work allowed young girls to leave their homes and migrate for market work. The successful sanitation program changed the face of Bangladeshi villages through an incentive to change behaviors. The inroad of television and the reach of the sometimes retrogressive entertainment industry in South Asia have nonetheless also introduced greater choice and acceptance of new forms of dress for young women. There are other examples of how policy, programs and structural change have changed norms and behaviors. Therefore, as Amartya Sen puts it – culture and norms *influence* gender relations but do not *determine* them¹¹⁵.

5.3 Norms are also related to women's place in the household and in the community and are tied up with how much autonomy women have. Again, autonomy is not easy to measure and there is no easy correlation between norms and autonomy since households are diverse and heterogeneous as are women's roles within them. That being so, the literature on women's autonomy and decision making at the household level is rich and much of the work on South Asia has been based largely on data from Bangladesh and India. Both quantitative and qualitative methods have been widely used, and

¹¹⁴ See for instance, Kabeer (2000)

¹¹⁵ Sen, 2006.

methodologies are being constantly refined. In Bangladesh in particular, research has been based on the impact of micro-credit and of fertility decline in determining women's autonomy, where education is frequently a control variable. The literature on "empowerment" in Bangladesh points to its multidimensional, seemingly contradictory and generally complex nature¹¹⁶. If we were to generalize, based on existing literature, then age, education, employment, and control over assets would be some of the indicators of autonomy.

5.4 One of the contributions of this report is that it measures norms and attitudes related to gender equality through a nationally representative survey and through qualitative field work. Part A of this chapter takes forward the understanding of changes in gender norms and practices. Comparison of two cohorts of women (ages 15-25 and 45-60) is interpreted as symptomatic of changes that have occurred over time. As we have pointed out elsewhere, while younger women in the survey tend to show more liberal attitudes to gender equality, this could well be a function of age and not cohort. Thus, women as they get older may become more conservative in their thinking and we need to be able to follow this cohort into their 30s, 40s and beyond to see the real effect of the change in norms.

5.5 Part B analyzes the determinants of women's involvement in household level decision-making. The chapter proceeds from the assumption that while women's autonomy and participation in household and community decision-making are important for many welfare outcomes they also have intrinsic value. While many studies consider women's role in the household important only if they have leadership (for instance, as evidenced by the survey question in the DHS "final say"), we consider "equal say" or "always consulted" to be a step forward and a good indicator of gender equality in decision-making. This approach acknowledges that household decision-making is a complex process and decisions are often made through a process of consultation. Part C and D use results of micro studies and focus groups to understand women's role in community level voice and decision making, in both formal and informal structures and processes.

5.6 **Regional variations:** As we have noted earlier, the WBSGN 2006 has questions on attitudes denoting gender equality and is also nationally representative, and allows therefore, for a more detailed analysis of determinants and correlates of norms and attitudes representative at the regional level. This perhaps is one of the more important contributions of this chapter. Other chapters in this report, notably on marriage and violence and safety also focus on the interplay between norms and opportunities in a number of spheres.

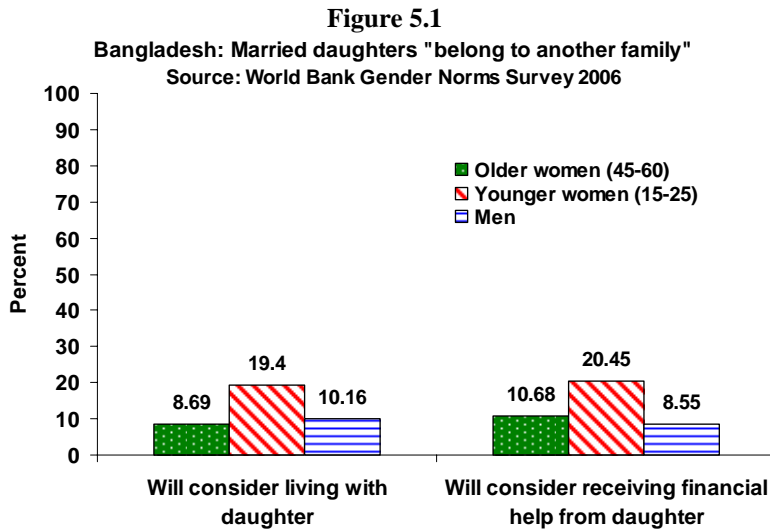
A Gender Norms – Not Cast in Stone

Earlier girls and women working in different institutions could not ride bicycles or motor cycles, but now most of the women working in NGOs especially know how to ride bicycles and motor cycles. (School boys in Dinajpur during FGD)

5.7 This section draws on the WBSGN 2006 to understand whether norms may be changing and which norms are the most resistant to change. As pointed out in various places, South Asia's gender ideology rests on a set of norms which many agree are at the crux of women's low status. But these are not cast in stone and women either circumvent them or through their actions and incentives from the external environment, succeed in changing them. External factors like education, market opportunities, exposure to the media and contacts with other areas are some of the factors that change norms and behavior – what was normative two decades ago is not any more. For instance, elite men in Dinajpur had the following to say about girls in their village:

¹¹⁶ See for instance Kabear, 2000

“In the old days, girls were not allowed to talk to boys who were not family members, and guardians never allowed them to go outside or gossip or spend time with anyone who was an outsider. There were even restrictions on cousins spending time together. But now parents and guardians have become more lenient about this.”

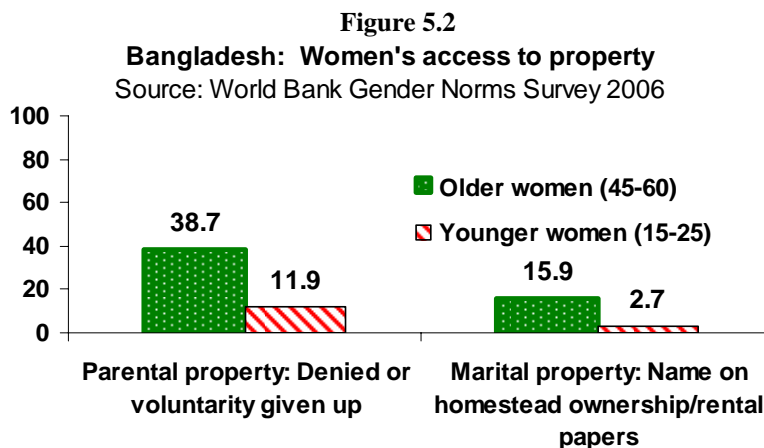


group discussions that the majority of the participants felt that daughters should only live with their parents if there were no sons or as a last resort.

“The parents of a woman should not stay with her after she gets married. Parents should instead live with their son’s family. If they have no son to look after them, only in such circumstances they may live with their daughter’s family.” Young men in Dinajpur during focus group discussions

“If a married girl does not have brothers to look after her old parents, then her parents should stay at her house” Young women in Satkhira during focus group discussions

“Daughters would like their parents to stay with them in their old age but the community and most sons-in-law do not” Fathers of young girls in Dinajpur during focus group discussions



5.8 Son preference is still strong, but younger women display greater resistance to it. Son preference in South Asia is at the core of a number of negative outcomes for girls. The basis for this the norm is that daughters only “belong” to their natal family until they are married and parents should not live with their married daughters or accept financial help from them. This has led to the widely accepted notion that parental investments in girl children are determined by their low expected returns in the parents’ old age. We also find from focus

5.9 The quantitative data (Figure 5.2) show that while the notion that parents should not depend on their daughters is still strong (less than 15 percent of those interviewed would consider living with or receiving financial help from a daughter), this may be changing. In contrast to older women and men, younger women are most likely to accept help from their daughters in their old age. This change is also borne out in the focus group discussions

with adolescent girls, and may be one of the most important changes in the Bangladeshi social landscape in the coming years.

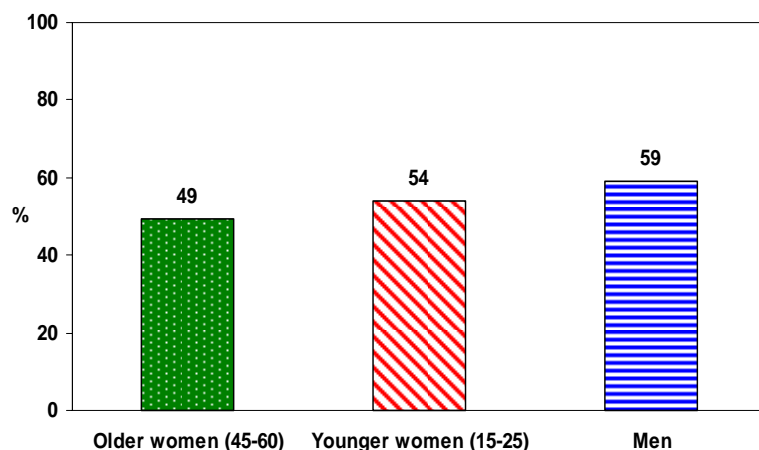
5.10 **Access to property for women is still a distant goal.** Another South Asia’s norm relates to women’s lack of control over property and their exclusion from ownership of property – both in their marital home and access to their parents’ inheritance. Although equal access to property is enshrined in the legal system, according to the BBS agricultural census of 1996 out of 17.8 million agricultural holdings only 3.5 percent (0.62 million) were female owned. The share of female owned holdings declined with declining size of the holding. While ownership of agricultural land by women has been quite rare, women’s ownership of homestead was only slightly higher. In fact women are more likely to own the homestead if a household has only the homestead than if the household also has cultivable land. In an attempt to create conditions for more ownership by women, some NGOs that give housing loans impose the condition of joint ownership but the impact on women’s ownership is not known¹¹⁷.

5.11 The WBSGN 2006 finds that less than 10 percent of all women and less than 3 percent of younger women have their names on *marital* property papers (like rental agreement or ownership of land or homestead). However, younger women are more likely to receive *parental* property, unlike their older counterparts who either give up their property to their brothers or never receive it.

5.12 In a somewhat disturbing trend, focus groups with the minority ethnic Garo community in Mymensingh pointed to the fact that while Garos have been traditionally matrilineal, with property passing down the line of women, as they get more “mainstreamed”, this is beginning to change. This is similar to evidence from India where tribal communities are emulating non-tribal norms as they get mainstream education and employment, often to the detriment of women’s status¹¹⁸.

“According to Garo rules sons would not be owners of land and other property, and this was strictly followed. Now Garo mothers are giving land and other property to their sons also.”

Figure 5.3
Husbands and wives should have equal education
Source: World Bank Gender Norms Survey 2006



5.13 **Younger women and men have more liberal attitudes to equality in marriage.** In South Asia, women tend to marry men more educated than them and also marry “up” in terms of family status. It is a widely held notion even among educated families that women should be less qualified than their husbands, in the interests of marital harmony. The value of women’s education is almost universally accepted in focus group discussions as one of the most important changes. But on average, a little over half the sample in the WBGNS 2006 believed that there should be equality in education between

¹¹⁷ Mahmud, 2006.

¹¹⁸ see Gazdar and Dreze, 1996

spouses¹¹⁹. Men's attitudes appeared to be slightly more liberal than women's but there is remarkable coherence among all groups.

5.14 In the chapter on education we saw that almost 75 percent of those interviewed believed that sons and daughters should have equal education but this does not translate into the same notions of equality in marriage. Just over half the sample believes that husbands and wives should have equal education.

5.15 While there is little change in the incidence of divorce (under one percent women are divorced) younger women also tend to report more liberal attitudes to divorce compared to the older generation.

5.16 ***Purdah* is universally regarded as a positive value but what it signifies differs across groups in society:** The discourse around *purdah* in Bangladesh is a highly contested one with feminist scholars and activists sharply divided on its role and what the increasing use of *purdah* signifies. Even in its outward form it could mean anything from head covering with sari or “*dopatta*” “*orhna*”, to a more modern “*chador*” to the body-covering South Asian *borka*, to the new “Arabic” *borka*, which covers all but the eyes. Interpretations by feminists and social analysts range from its role as a marker of increasing conservatism and “Islamization” to its role as “protection” in an unsafe environment or a strategy by which women can access new opportunities without directly questioning norms of modesty and seclusion, or a sign of status and class. This and an even wider range of interpretations are mirrored in focus group discussions, which discuss the meaning of *purdah*.

5.17 Interestingly, men and women even differ in their perception of whether the wife practiced *purdah* before marriage. In this report, we have tried to understand whether *purdah* has an effect on a range of outcomes for women and for gender equality. Rather than interpret the practice of *purdah* and assign a value to it, or consider it in other words the dependent variable, we have used it throughout the report, as an independent variable. For the most part we do not find strong links between *purdah* and women's welfare across several outcome variables after controlling for other background characteristics.

B Household Level Decision Making

5.18 Women's influence over decision-making is typically confined to aspects of household functioning. In particular, women are consulted in areas that have to do with children. Even so, only half of all women are regularly consulted in matters such as discipline of children, decisions regarding a sick child's treatment and their schooling. While there is a difference between younger and older women, it is small. However, in areas to do with their own relationship with their external environment, their influence shrinks considerably (Figure 5.4).

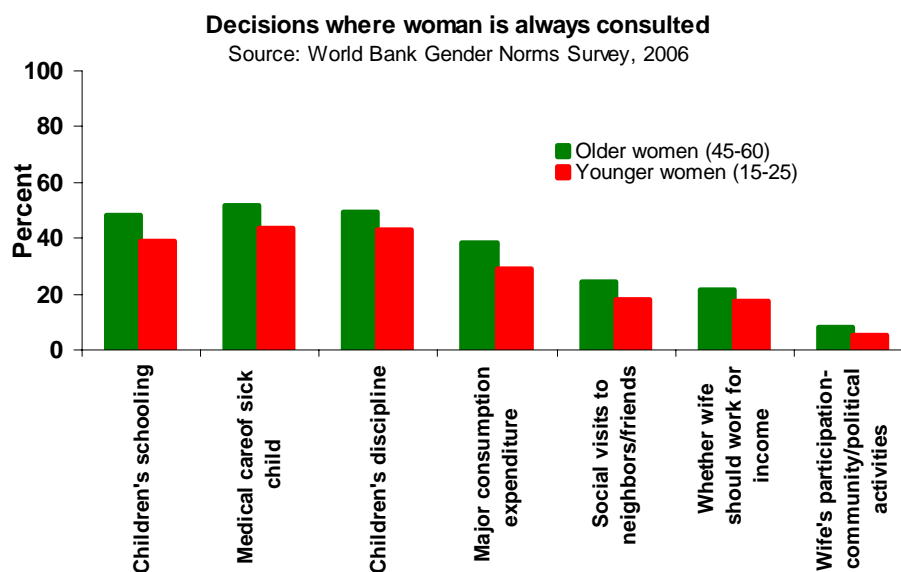
5.19 **Education is an important predictor of women's decision-making.** We addressed the impact of education on decision-making in two ways – actual education of the respondent and their attitude to educational equality between spouses. We find that post-primary education increases all women's odds of being consulted on major consumption decisions, but it is more important for *older women*. Perhaps the combination of age and education gives them this advantage. On the other hand, egalitarian views on education are positively correlated with *younger women's* decision-making in the household¹²⁰. Younger women who espouse egalitarian attitudes also probably have higher status in various other respects – leading to their enhanced role in the family. Focus group discussions on what education has done for the

¹¹⁹ Overall almost three-fourths of those interviewed believe that girls and boys should have equal education. Clearly, this does not translate into the belief that spouses should have equal education.

¹²⁰ In the case of women's odds of experiencing violence we found having more egalitarian views to have a negative effect. Some of this is puzzling but could be related to the fact that when a husband has violent characteristics, this egalitarian view by his wife would be perceived as a threat.

lives of young women indicate that enhanced “voice” in the family to be one of the big gains of education for them.

Figure 5.4



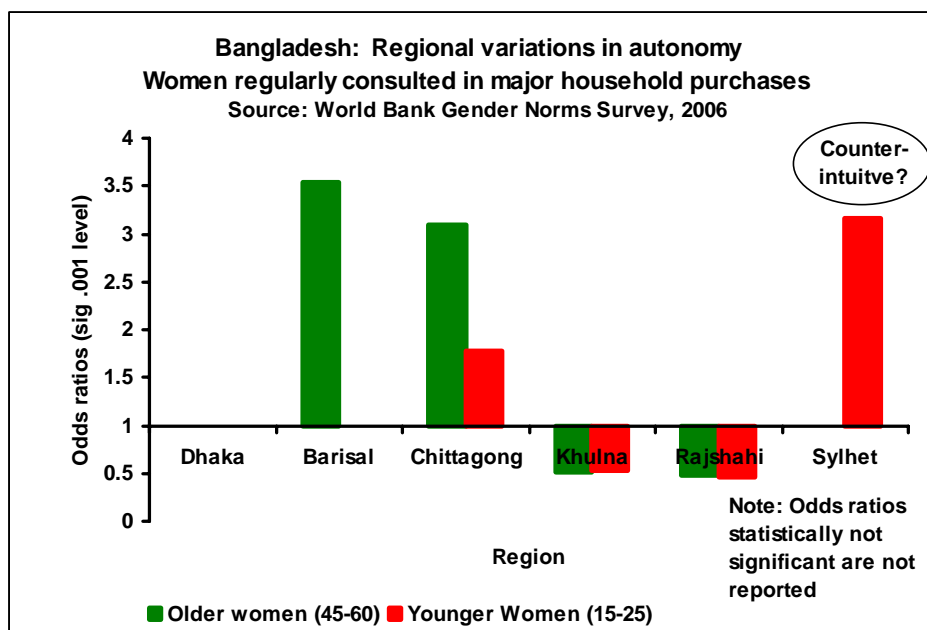
5.20 There are important differences by region. In keeping with other results in this report, region plays out as an important determinant of women’s decision-making even at the multivariate level (Figure 5.5). Some regional variations seem counterintuitive to what we know about regional norms. Sylhet and Chittagong are commonly regarded to be conservative while Rajshahi is regarded as being open¹²¹. Our analysis shows that women from Khulna and Rajshahi are only half as likely as their counterparts from Dhaka to be consulted on major purchases. Older women in Barisal and younger women from Sylhet are each much more likely to be so consulted. The results from Sylhet seem particularly counterintuitive, but perhaps it displays an intergenerational change in norms in that region. Similarly, Chittagong seems to display more open attitudes compared to Dhaka. As pointed out elsewhere, region is often considered synonymous with culture but in fact it also signals to structures of opportunity. A more detailed understanding is needed of regional norms and structures of opportunity for us to really make the links between these findings and policy specific interventions.

5.21 Nature of the marital relationship is correlated with women’s decision-making. That more equal marital relationships and women’s say in different aspects of marriage would be associated with their decision-making role is not surprising. This equality is borne out for instance in eating order. South Asia is notorious for household hierarchies being played out in who eats first. It is widely accepted that men and children eat first, followed by senior and junior women, respectively¹²². Much of this is changing and in the WBSGN, 2006 close to 60 percent women say they eat together with their husbands (this is not corroborated by men's responses, of whom a much lower proportion say they eat together with their wives). But despite this change, eating order still remains a marker of women’s place in the intra-household power equation. Our analysis shows that it significantly influences whether or not women are routinely consulted in major household purchases – women who say they eat with their husbands are also more likely to report greater consultation on major household purchases.

¹²¹ Amin and Suran, 2005

¹²² See De Rose et al , 2000

Figure 5.5



5.22 Other norms such as going out alone with husbands, earlier regarded as inappropriate behavior on the part of a young married couple, are also changing and this has a significant bearing - on *younger women's decision-making*. Similarly, in keeping with the literature on the effects of domestic violence and its disempowering effects, we find that regardless of age, women who have experienced violence are on average 60 percent less likely be consulted in large household purchases.

Table 5.1: Significant correlates (other than region) of being consulted on major household consumption purchases

Source: World Bank Gender Norms Survey, 2006

Note: Based on logistic regression controlling for background characteristics

	Older women (45-60)	Younger Women (15-25)
Odds Ratios		
Post-primary educated	2.74***	1.48*
Ever experienced violence by husband	0.59***	0.63***
Currently employed	2.14***	1.21
Believes in equal edu for girls and boys	0.99	1.37**
Currently practices purdah	1.45*	0.89
Goes out with husband alone	1.22	1.48**
Age at first marriage	1.04	0.84***
Eats together with husband	2.58***	2.69***

5.23 Some other aspects of marriage seem to be puzzling. For instance, age at marriage appears to have a counterintuitive effect on younger women's decision-making: Higher age at marriage seems to be associated with lower decision-making and though this effect is small, it is statistically significant.

5.24 **Effect of purdah and women's employment:** As we have noted earlier, the effect of *purdah* on women's autonomy can be hypothesized to occur in two ways – women practicing *purdah* are more

oppressed and so less likely to be consulted; or women practicing *purdah* conform to norms and are given higher status. We find that while older women are slightly more likely than younger women to be consulted on decisions of major purchases if they use *purdah* its use has no statistically significant effect on younger women. The low effect of *purdah* may be due to the fact that it means different things to different people and what it signifies differs as well. Older women, who are employed however, are twice as likely to be consulted, indicating that both own income and status conferred by a mix of seniority and employment affect decision-making. While the literature on the empowering effects of employment is far from conclusive, it seems to matter in having a say in household purchases.

Box 5.1: Insights into women’s decision-making – complex and heterogeneous

Young women in Dinajpur:

“Father does not give his opinion in cooking; it is mother who always takes that decision.”

“In many houses, the family is run by both the decision of husband and wife together.”

“Why should women be called during the construction of roads and streets?”

“When mother orders, cattle are sold, as mothers rears cattle.”

“Construction of mosque and madrasahs is not women’s business, so women are not called.”

Young men in Sunamgonj on women’s decision-making in the home:

“Women’s views are considered while deciding the marriage of their children or making a gift to someone.”

“Women have more say in a single (nuclear) family not in combined (extended) family”.

Young boys in school in Mymensingh speaking of the Garo matriarchal family: “Garo men accept women leadership in the following fields: Hiring of day-labour/other labour, cooking, building houses, marriage of boys and girls, leadership in community meeting lead by church (mandoli meeting)

Young men in Mymensingh

“To take any decision women are consulted but their decisions are not (always) accepted.”

“Acceptance of women leadership depends on their education and wisdom.”

(Male) UP Chairman in Sunamgonj: “I do not ask my wife when I decide to stand for elections. I take advice from my brothers and cousins living in London. My wife respects my decision”.

Schoolgoing boy Dinajpur: “During the construction of our house, my father decided to build it on the other side of the land than where it is built now. But my mother had a different opinion. She explained to him why it would be better if he built the house on this side of the land. And my father complied with the decision of my mother.”

Poor women in Sunamgonj did not comment on whether they were consulted about the construction of new roads and street, school and madrasa etc., saying they did not understand these issues. One participant said “Women’s leadership is accepted in respect of cooking, but the husband interacts with the outside world. So naturally husbands possess more intelligence and they can take decisions.” Another participant said “My decision is accepted in cooking only.”

C Voice in the Community and Beyond - Constraints Are Not Just Cultural

*“We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs”
Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (From Sultana’s Dream 1905)¹²³*

5.25 Just as too much is often made of gender norms and their influence on women’s status, so also are the public and household domains regarded as mutually exclusive. In fact, most women tend to see these

¹²³ Originally published in The Indian Ladies Magazine, Madras, India, 1905, in English. This quote is from Begum Rokeya Rochonaboli, Bangla Academy, 1993 accessed on February 27, 2007 from <http://home.earthlink.net/~twoeyesmagazine/issue2/sultana.htm>

as a continuum¹²⁴ and each domain is made up of heterogeneous structures and processes. As we see in the chapter on violence, attitudes to and participation in the external environment are constrained not merely by norms but by education, reproductive responsibilities, place in the life cycle and perception of safety and security. Moreover, enabling legislation such as reserved quotas, information and training campaigns help in motivating women and facilitating their participation. Unfortunately, empirical evidence on women's voice in community structures and processes of decision-making is limited to micro-studies. This chapter uses information from such studies and reports of NGOs and focus group discussions to construct a picture of women's participation in decision making at the community level.

5.26 While there is no comprehensive analysis of contemporary structures of decision-making, various studies of local power structures have documented the main structures and processes of decision-making at the village level to be both informal and formal¹²⁵. Informal structures and processes include the *somaj* (a collection of village elders) and the *shalish* (an alternate dispute resolution mechanism). In addition, *gusthis* or patrilineal kinship based groups also exercise considerable influence over ordinary citizens' lives, as do *matobbars* or informal leaders, who are variously regarded as traditional headmen or elite leaders or elders. Mosque and temple committees and their heads (*imams*, *moulvis*, priests), village development committees, health and school management committees, NGOs and social welfare committees are other village levels structures and processes¹²⁶.

5.27 NGOs have fostered the formation of women's groups that provide both support systems as well as collective pressure on members. The type of issues they decide upon range from village development, creation of infrastructure, demands to be made to upper tiers of government, and a host of social issues that serve to maintain village order. There is often conflict between rival groups and there is recent concern regarding the rise of "masthanocracy" or the rule of hoodlums who extort, blackmail, and engage in other criminal activity¹²⁷.

5.28 Formal systems of decision-making work in tandem with informal ones and the most important of these is the Union Parishad (UP). The UP itself has a number of committees, of which the Project Implementation Committee (PIC) and committees overseeing purchase and deciding on infrastructure are the most important for the influence they wield. In addition, a "*gram sarkar*" or a group of nominated elite members was introduced as an addition to the UP in 2003, but has been defunct since being challenged in court. Village courts (*gram adalats*) are now being revived and an attempt is also being made to give greater legal standing to the traditional *shalish*, through UP *shalishes* and NGO *shalishes*. This section tries to understand the role of women in these systems and the effect the systems have on women's ability to access available opportunities.

D Local Government

5.29 **Characteristics and constraints of women in Union Parishads:** The local government is the lowest formal structure where citizens can participate in decision-making. The history of women's participation in local government is laid out in box 5.2. The national discourse on gender and political participation has since the election of the first round of women members under the reserved seats, focused a great deal on the constraints to their effective functioning. The women's movement has been lobbying for an amendment to the ordinance that would give women the same electoral privileges as their

¹²⁴ Kabeer, 2001

¹²⁵ Lewis and Hossain, 2005

¹²⁶ It is often difficult to distinguish between structure and process in these collectives.

¹²⁷ GoB, 2005; Sen and Hulme, 2006

counterparts who get elected through the non-reserved seats¹²⁸, clear definition of their roles and responsibilities, so that this is not left to the Chairman to decide. In an important milestone Ain-O-Salish Kendro (ASK) and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) filed and won a writ petition in 2004 challenging a circular of the Ministry of Local Government which sought to exclude female Ward Commissioners from key functions such as serving on Law and Order Committees, issuing certificates relating to succession and nationality, and overseeing infrastructure projects in their area. The Ministry had based its decision on the fact that women Ward Commissioners are elected from reserved seats while their male counterparts are selected from general seats. The High Court declared that the circular was illegal and both male and female ward commissioners should get equal opportunity to perform their duties. As a result of this judgment, male and female ward commissioners have been placed on an equal footing¹²⁹.

Box 5.2: Bangladesh: Women in Local Government

In 1978, for the first time in the history of Bangladesh, two women were included in Union Parishad and Gram Sarker, the lowest stratum of local government institutions as nominated members by the SDO (Subdivision Officer) under the Local Government Ordinance 1976. The inclusion of women members with the local government's activities is in keeping with the national policy as stressed in the Constitutional Article 10 of part II to ensure the participation of women in nation-building activities. In 1983, the number of women members was raised to three under the Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance 1983. The UNO (Upazila Nirbahi Officer) used to nominate the three female members, one each from every ward.

In 1997, women received the mandate to be directly elected to the UP through three reserved seats in each UP. Subsequently the women members faced serious problems in participating in UP functions due to resistance by the chairman and other members. Such resistance resulted from the non-specificity of the role of the members of 'reserved seats' vis a vis the members of "general seats" in the ordinance. In response to the problematic participation following the UP 1997 election, some selected functions have been assigned to the women members through government orders (i.e., membership in PIC, social development committee, RMP selection, Tube-well selection committee etc). However, the legal framework is still unclear as to the role of the female members in the regular functions of the UP.

At present there are 12,828 elected women members in 4,198 Union Parishads throughout the country. To make the role of women members more effective, some initiatives have been taken through amendments to the LG Ordinance and various notifications/circulars/orders of the Government. Some of these relate to:

- Female members of the UP will act as the Chairperson to at least one third of the Project Implementation Committees (PICs) of the UP.
- Female members (reserved) will be encouraged to be involved in five additional standing committees viz., a. Women and Children Welfare, b. Fisheries and Livestock, c. Tree Plantation, d. Union Works Programme, e. Mass Education.
- Take active role in selection process of vulnerable women of the Union.
- Participate actively in the selection of road development projects of the Union.
- Advise and assist the Primary RMP Monitor (UP Secretary) in solving problems related to Rural Maintenance Programme (RMP).
- Report to the UP Monitor in their respective wards (combination of three old wards) for the RMP activities.
- One of the female UP member acts as the Vice-Chairperson of the Old Age Allowance Programme Selection Committee of the Union.
- Introduce various problems of her own-ward in meeting.
- Assess and distribute relief during disaster.
- Prepare the list of aged people of her own area.
- Introduce various problems of women and to give different programmes for their development.
- Assist the Chairman in selecting VGD beneficiaries.

Source: *Democracy Watch*, 2002

¹²⁸ Currently, women members are elected from three wards each, while members from the non-reserved group are elected from one ward each, making it much harder for women especially in larger urban areas

¹²⁹ ASK Annual Report, 2005

5.30 A study based on 28 focus groups by Democracy Watch (2002) casts important light on the background characteristics of female members:

- Most female UP members come from relatively lower income groups. One reason for this could be related to the extensive “social mobilization” that NGOs have done among poor women in Bangladesh¹³⁰.
- Most members were encouraged to participate in UP election by their husbands, fathers and relatives.
- Most of the interviewed members were housewives before they were elected as UP member.
- Most of the female members were elected for the first time. They emphasized the importance of training.
- Most of the female members admitted to a confrontational relationship with their respective Chairman and male members. They also do not get much support or cooperation from their male counter-parts and the Chairman.

5.31 The same study also interviewed women members and asked about the major constraints to their effective functioning. Table 5.2 lays out the suggestions of women members on making their role more substantive in the UP.

Specific Suggestions	%
Change laws of representation (ward level)	78.23
More training on roles and responsibilities	78.23
Clear job description	70.12
Transport allowances	67.67
Clear demarcation of roles	67.45
Provide more responsibility to female members	67.32
Involvement in GOB projects	56.38
Links with other UP female members groups / associations	56.34
Ensure that PIC chairmanship is maintained	56.12
Proper monitoring by the UNO	54.23
Opportunities for representing UP in higher bodies	44.32

Source: Democracy Watch, 2002

5.32 While there has been no evaluation of the impact of the reservation on women’s role in decision-making, micro studies and qualitative evidence do not paint a uniformly dismal picture of tokenism. In fact, there are several examples of women taking initiative to enhance their own role in the UP often in the face of resistance from male members, but equally, with their support. Public perception of their role too is not one of weakness but of leadership. NGOs have made a great deal of effort in identifying capacity constraints that prevent women members from functioning in a leadership role. Some of these, identified by the women members themselves, are laid out in table 5.3, and include information gaps, lack of experience in negotiating the bureaucracy and the political system and other core skills. NGOs are also working towards addressing these constraints and the GoB has recently with World Bank support, committed to increase the amount of untied resources going down to the UPs. In order to spend these new resources, there is also a strong component of capacity building, some of which will focus exclusively on women members.

¹³⁰ BRAC, 2006

Table 5.3: Information and Skills Gaps Enumerated by Female UP Members	
Gap	% reporting
Role and activities of UP	76.75
Rules on UP/ Local Government	72.18
Aspects of Women Empowerment	59.90
Scheme/ Project Management/ Development Planning	59.09
Leadership skills	57.56
Income Generating Activities	55.13
Awareness against Dowry, Polygamy, Early marriage	32.59
Violence Against Women	29.44
Environment/ Plantation	25.79

Source: Democracy Watch, 2002

E Participation in Informal and Semi-Formal Structures and Processes

5.33 There is qualitative evidence of increased awareness of local politics and decision-making among citizens and women in particular and some patterns seem to stand out. Poverty and lack of voice are the most potent barriers to participation. Moreover, the structure of the decision-making systems – the traditional emphasis on elders and men - excludes several categories of individuals from these systems. For instance, it has been discussed elsewhere in the report that age and place in the life cycle determine a number of different outcomes. This is true for both men and women and age is one of the most important determinants of hierarchy and participation. Qualitative evidence in box 5.3 shows that younger citizens – both men and women - are often excluded from these decision-making processes.

5.34 **Women with some experience of leadership or those belonging to families of leaders are more likely to participate effectively.** In the course of field work it stands out that women who have family connections in politics are more likely to be effective participants in local decision-making. Concomitantly, the participation of poor and uneducated women still remains marginal. Activities of NGOs such as Nijera Kori (NK) that focus exclusively on the marginalized, are increasingly providing parallel mechanisms and forums for the poorest to participate. One study of NK notes that the poor women report greater voice after being associated with NK’s activities¹³¹. As discussed later in this chapter, such NGO initiatives are responsible for including women and the poor in structures and processes of decision-making.

“My father is the founder of the school in which I have been a member of the SMC (School Management Committee) for 10 years. I attend the SMC meetings and take part in the decisions”. Elite woman in Sunamgonj during focus group discussions

¹³¹Kabeer, 2003

Box 5.3: Youth are excluded from decision-making processes

“We have never participated in any meeting of the UP. But we have heard (about) it. Our guardians have participated.” (In their ward, there were two such open meetings in the past year). Adolescent out-of-school girls in Dinajpur

“We have just observed shalishes through the windows or from behind the wall. The UP member and UP female member played the main roles. We have never participated in any sort of NGO *shalish*.” Adolescent out-of-school girls in Dinajpur during FGD

“We have heard of UP meetings but never attended.” School going adolescent girls in Mymensingh during FGD

“Our guardians prohibit us from going to the shalish.....youngsters should not go to shalish.” School going adolescent girls in Mymensingh during FGD

“We are not allowed to participate in any shalish (since it decides on) love affairs between boys and girls and divorce matters.” School going adolescent girls in Mymensingh during FGD

“They (UP meetings) are a matter for village elders and our parents; they generally attend the village shalish and meetings”. - School going adolescent boy in Sunamgonj during FGD

Source: FGDs conducted for this report

5.35 Nonetheless, there are indications of positive change in the process of local democratization.

Focus groups discussing changes in their communities bring out strongly the increased awareness of political processes and activities. Ordinary women are now much more likely to participate in UP meetings and *shalishes* although the quality of their participation is often called into question.

“Ten years back it was impossible for women to attend a shalish. Now women UP members and a few other women are attending the shalish. Women are also attending school governing bodies meetings. Men also allow them to speak, before men did not allow them to shalish and meetings.” (emphasis added) Elite woman in Sunamgonj during focus group discussions

“Before, people used to cast vote according to the advice of the advice of Matobbar. Mothers and wives did not vote. But, now even the near-death person wants to cast vote. Wives cast their vote on their own; they sometimes disobey husbands’ advice in this connection.” (emphasis added) Elite man in Satkhira during focus group discussions

“Now women are representing us as UP members, they are going to the shalish, they are participating in different meetings, going to college and doing jobs. About twenty years back it was not possible.” Elite man in Sunamgonj during focus group discussions

“We attended the last open meeting organized by UP. The meeting was on building a ‘rubber dam’ in the narrow hilly river passing through the village. To attend the meeting was our responsibility - it was a preparatory meeting about the construction of a dam, so we attended.” Elite woman Mymensingh during focus group discussions

Box 5.4: Change in Women’s Role in the Community

(There is) evidence for changes in the relationships between gender and power at the local level, though at limited levels and in incremental ways. The representation of women on union *parishads*, while frequently tokenistic, does provide a platform for further training and mobilisation. One MP was seen to be advocating a role for female union members on the UDCC. The *shalish* system, while retaining a patriarchal character, has shown itself capable of a measure of flexibility and increased inclusiveness. NGO credit programmes, and efforts to organise women for social action - such as within reforming versions of the *shalish* - have created both limited progress and some local resistance, which perhaps indicates potentially positive change.

Ad verbatim from Lewis and Hossain, 2004, pg 20.

5.36 **Access to and participation in justice systems:** A core element of participation is the ability to seek and obtain justice and resolve conflict through systems and procedures. The limited reach of the formal court systems in providing justice to ordinary citizens especially in rural areas has been well documented¹³². There is a low level of confidence in formal systems due to the cost and time involved and the distance of common people in social and physical terms from formal systems. Informal dispute resolution systems are used much more commonly for local disputes. However, these forums tend to be captured by elites and reinforce traditional norms and status quo. Therefore, the access of women to these systems as well is limited and few women are invited to sit on *shalishes* as mediators or “*shalishkars*”, making other women less likely to approach the *shalish*.

“Nowadays women are going to shalish and meetings, but they are still observers.” Elite woman in Satkhira during focus group discussions

“I attend all shalishes in the community. As a UP member, I should not say women are not in leadership. But we are still fighting with men in this area”. Female UP member in Satkhira during focus group discussions

“We are poor people – we are working all day -we have no time to attend shalish”. Poor man in Dinajpur during focus group discussions

“Women are not invited to the UP shalish – only the women UP members are invited. But sometimes we women are called in as witnesses. And elderly women sometimes attend the shalish as complainants or accused. We resolve our disputes with our neighbors or families within ourselves.” Mothers of adolescent girls in Dinajpur during focus group discussions

5.37 Over the last several years NGOs have taken some of the most innovative initiatives in South Asia to strengthen informal justices systems. Realizing that the capacity and reach of the formal systems are limited for the poor and for women, they have fostered interventions to make informal systems more inclusive and accessible. Focus is on giving informal systems greater legitimacy by strengthening village courts, arbitration councils and UP *shalishes*. Through a program that provides legal aid and training, they have made a real dent access to justice by the poor in general and women in particular. Annex 5 lays out some of the major initiatives. The large numbers of applications NGOs receive are testimony to the demand for conflict resolution mechanisms and while women tend not to want to discuss family issues outside, the large majority of the cases the NGOs deal with are related directly to family matters and are filed by women. This shows with appropriate outreach, awareness-building, and gender-sensitive services, the latent demand among women quickly comes to the fore.

F Summary and Synthesis

5.38 There seems to be an intergenerational change in gender norms exemplified by younger women’s more liberal responses to gender equality. Since the 15-25 cohort is also the one that has graduated from the female stipend program, has lower fertility and greater exposure to NGO activities, we can tentatively conclude that the results we have seen in this chapter are symptomatic of a wider change that we may be able to see clearly in the next five years. Strictly speaking, while younger women in the survey tend show more liberal attitudes to gender equality, this could well be a function of age and not cohort. Thus, women as they get older may become more conservative in their thinking and we need to be able to follow this cohort into their 30s, 40s and beyond to see the real effect of the change in norms.

¹³² Golub, 2003 cited in Hassan, 2006; GOB, 2005

5.39 While younger women's attitudes are more gender equal, their outcomes are not always so. Thus, a lower proportion tends to give up their parental property, but when it comes to joint ownership of marital immovable assets, they are behind their older counterparts. This is an area which can be addressed by policy in "re-titling drives" and other such campaigns to grant women more legal control over property. Multivariate analysis also brings out regional variations in norms and attitudes, and these are sometimes difficult to interpret, since to our knowledge this is the first analysis that breaks these down by region.

5.40 It is also difficult to chart the path of change in norms – do opportunities lead to behavioral change, or does the latter have to precede the former? In the case of Bangladesh, it appears that the early victories gained through the family planning program, the micro credit revolution, the spread and reach of NGOs and finally, secondary education seems to have had an impact on norms and values, with younger women displaying greater need for gender equality. The qualitative evidence also shows the widespread recognition of these positive outcomes and the sense of pride in progress. This however should not detract from the fact that some norms and practices like son preference, property to women, and the household decision-making process are still resistant to change and the role of policy and programs giving incentives for such change is critical.

5.41 In the case of community level decision-making there is a general lack of empirical evidence to draw upon. However, small studies suggest that here too there is a change with the reservation of seats in local governments and the advocacy work of NGOs. Greater awareness among a large majority is clear but poor women and young people are still left out. Informal justice systems are commonly resorted to but there they have a long way to go before they can address the needs of the most marginalized. Some key recommendations that follow from this chapter are:

- **Campaigns for ownership of property by women:** Retitling drives can be successful just as the campaign for registering marriages has been. Instructions to official titling agencies can include monitoring of whether or not marital properties are in joint names.
- **Step up efforts for secondary school education for all:** The analysis underscores the importance of education for women's decision-making both in the household and the community.
- **Undertake an evaluation of the impact of women members in the UPs**
- **Recommendations for enhancing the role of female UP members** (based on women members own responses)
 - Change rules of representation at the ward level, so women members do not have to be elected through a constituency of three wards, while male members get elected from one ward each
 - More training on roles and responsibilities
 - Clear job description and demarcation of roles and responsibilities
 - Networking opportunities and links with other UP female members groups / associations
 - Proper monitoring by the UNO of the substantive role of female members
 - Opportunities for representing UP in higher bodies
- **Provide greater support to reform informal justice systems:** Bangladesh has some very successful and replicable examples but the reach of the efforts is as yet small. Scaling up these efforts will have an impact on women's access to justice.
- **Focus on male decision-makers and community leaders about the importance of changing norms and behaviors**