Women's Political Empowerment in India and Bangladesh: Gender Quotas and Socio-economic Obstructions

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India and Bangladesh have introduced gender quotas to increase women's presence in politics and bring the desired substantive inclusionary effects at the level of emergent policy outcomes. This qualitative study analyzes the socio-economic barriers that quota-elected women representatives encounter in affecting policies regarding their political empowerment at the local council level—in the Gram Panchayat in India and the Union Parishad in Bangladesh. I contribute to the comparative literature on gender quotas and policy outcomes. Results reveal that women members in both countries face serious social and economic impediments to political participation at this local level. Social barriers such as household responsibilities, lack of family support, and lack of social safety and physical mobility, are no longer a major hindrance for women members in offering services to their constituents. However, in Bangladesh, a majority of women members fail to function effectively because of lack of education—more so than the women members in India. Women members in both countries lack sufficient political training, which makes it challenging to claim their rights when offering goods and services to voters, particularly to women. I also find that women members in both countries have failed to perform their political activities due to financial incapability, although in different ways. Indian women members receive a small amount of money per month, whereas Bangladeshi women members cannot meet the demands of three times higher constituents with irregular honoraria. Lack of financial incapability further leads to corruption in the cases of some women members in both countries. To ensure women's political empowerment through reserved seats in both countries, it is vital to make certain that enough government resources are provided for local councils, together with enough training for elected women members.

Keywords: Gender Quotas, Socio-Economic Barriers, Gender and Policy, Women's Political Empowerment, Reserved Seats, Political Participation, Democratic Representation, Developing Countries, India, Bangladesh, Gender Politics, Asia.

Empoderamiento político de las mujeres en India y Bangladesh: Cuotas de género y obstáculos socioeconómicos

India y Bangladesh han introducido cuotas de género para aumentar la presencia de las mujeres en la política, así como para lograr los efectos de inclusión sustantivos deseados al nivel de los resultados de las políticas emergentes. Este estudio comparativo analiza las barreras socioeconómicas que encuentran las representantes de mujeres elegidas por cuotas al afectar las políticas relacionadas con su empoderamiento político a nivel del consejo local, en el Gram Panchayat en India y en la Union Parishad en Bangladesh. El estudio cualitativa contribuye a la literatura comparada sobre cuotas de género y resultados de políticas. Los resultados revelan que las mujeres miembros en ambos países enfrentan serios impedimentos sociales y económicos para la participación política a este nivel local. En ambos países, las barreras sociales como las responsabilidades del hogar y la falta de apoyo familiar, así como la falta de seguridad social y movilidad física, ya no son un obstáculo importante para las mujeres miembros a la hora de ofrecer servicios a sus electores. Sin embargo, en Bangladesh, la mayoría de las mujeres miembros no funcionan de manera eficaz debido a la falta de educación, más que las mujeres miembros en la India. Las mujeres miembros de ambos países carecen de suficiente formación política, lo que dificulta la reivindicación de sus derechos al ofrecer bienes y servicios a los votantes, y en particular a las mujeres. También encuentro que las mujeres miembros en ambos países no han podido realizar sus actividades políticas debido a la incapacidad financiera. Sin embargo, la dimensión de la incapacidad es diferente en India y Bangladesh. Las mujeres indias reciben una pequeña cantidad de dinero al mes, mientras que las mujeres bangladesíes no pueden satisfacer las demandas de electores tres veces más altos con honorarios irregulares. La falta de incapacidad financiera conduce además a la corrupción de algunas mujeres miembros en ambos países. Para garantizar el empoderamiento político de la mujer mediante la reserva de escaños en ambos países, es fundamental asegurarse de que se proporcionen suficientes recursos gubernamentales para los consejos locales, junto con suficiente capacitación para las mujeres elegidas.

Palabras clave: Cuotas de género, Barreras socioeconómicas, Género y políticas, Empoderamiento político de la mujer, India, Bangladesh, Política de género, Asia.

印度和孟加拉國的婦女政治賦權：
性別配額和社會經濟障礙

印度和孟加拉國引入了性別配額，以增加女性在政治中的參與度，並在緊急政策結果層面帶來預期的實質性包容性影響。這項比較研究分析了配額選舉產生的女性代表在影響地方議會層面的政治賦權政策時遇到的社會經濟障礙——在印度的 Gram Panchayat 和孟加拉國的 Union Parishad。深入的定性研究有助於關於性別配額和政策結果的比較文獻。結果表明，這兩個國家的女性成員在地方一級的政治參與方面面臨嚴重的社會和經濟障礙。在這兩個國家，家庭責任和缺乏家庭支持等社會障礙，以及缺乏社會安全和身體流動性，不再是女性成員為其選民提供服務的主要障礙。然而，在孟加拉國，由於缺乏教育，大多數女性成員無法有效運作——比印度的女性成員更是如此。兩國的女性成員都缺乏足夠的政治培訓，這使得在向選民，尤其是向女性提供商品和服務時主張自己的權利具有挑戰性。我還發現兩國的女性成員都因經濟能力不足而未能開展政治活動。然而，印度和孟加拉國的無能力程度是不同的。印度女性成員每月只能收到少量的錢，而孟加拉國女性成員無法通過不定期的酬金滿足高出三倍的選民的要求。缺乏經濟能力進一步導致兩國一些女性成員腐敗。為確保通過兩國保留席位賦予婦女政治權力，必須確保為地方議會提供足夠的政府資源，並為當選的女性成員提供足夠的培訓。

關鍵詞：性別配額、社會經濟障礙、性別和政策、婦女的政治賦權、印度、孟加拉國、性別政治、亞洲。

Women have a democratic right to participate in politics; this is an essential part of human rights, inclusive growth, and sustainable development which, in turn, are fundamental features of the structure of democracies (OECD 2018; Panday 2010, 25-6). In fact, democracy is presumed to be genuine and effective when political parties and the national assembly take decisions collectively and impartially, involving both men and women regarding their interests and abilities (Dahlerup 2006, 15-16). Women's full and active involvement in all levels of political decision making, including giving equal voice to their views and practices alongside those of men, is therefore a vitally important matter (Mlambo, Kapingura, and Meissner 2019, 2) concerning policy and institutions. However, women's participation in both family decision making and formal political power structures remains low

globally (Ara 2017; IPU 2018). Although women's representation in parliament has continued to increase in many places across the world, women continue to lag behind in the formal political power structures (IPU 2018; Jahan 2017, 74).

To enhance women's political participation, more than 130 countries have implemented policies involving gender quotas at the national and local levels (Hughes *et al.* 2019).[1] Gender quotas ensure that a certain number of women appear in candidate lists, in parliament itself, in committees, or in the government (Dahlerup 2006). The aim of the policies is to increase the number of women who participate in legislative activities—which is of primary, if not increasing, democratic policy relevance today. Scholars often argue that gender quotas are not merely about escalating women's numbers; rather, quotas—negatively or positively—can change the quality of elected representative bodies and offer opportunities to advocate group well-being in policy making and participation in politics (see e.g., Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012). Gender quotas do not, however, have equal positive effects on women, and some studies find cases where quotas have led to inadequate policy changes or even to further/increased gender-inegalitarian outcomes. This is because some factors—especially underexplored dimensions of quota design—actually restrict quota-elected women in their ability to introduce, influence, or change policy (Clayton 2021). Prodip (2021a, 2021b), for instance, found that variations in the institutional design of gender quotas and patriarchy often limit the ability of quota women to introduce durable women-friendly policies in political legislatures. This is particularly so in some parts of the developing world. What is lacking is a detailed understanding, especially in developing countries, of the socio-economic barriers that quota-elected women continue to encounter regarding their full and effective participation in affecting policies. To take some initial steps toward an answer here, I compare the cases of India and Bangladesh with a particular focus on the lowest tier of rural local governments—in the *Gram Panchayat* in India and the *Union Parishad* in Bangladesh.

The number of members of the *Gram Panchayat* is not fixed but varies from five to 30 members including a *Pradhan* (chairperson) and *Upa-Pradhan* (vice-chairperson) depending on the population in the district.[2] The Constitution guarantees the reservation for women of not less than 33 percent of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in the *Gram Panchayat* (Kasturi 1999, 125; Priebe 2017; Rai *et al.* 2006, 230). The *Union Parishad* in Bangladesh comprises 13 members including the chairperson, three seats reserved for women, and nine general members elected by the direct vote of local inhabitants (Khan and Ara 2006).[3] India and Bangladesh each adopted a system of reserved seats in politics

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1 For updated information, see https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/about

2 The *Gram Panchayat* consists of eight-to-ten villages, although, since the population number is the criteria, this may be just one village. The average is 12,000 to 15,000 inhabitants, leading to variations across the country.

3 All *Union Parishads* in Bangladesh are divided into nine wards/constituencies regardless the size of the population and district magnitude.

during the 1990s. India adopted reserved seats for women at the local level only, but Bangladesh introduced reserved seats for women at both the national and local levels (Rai *et al.* 2006). The expected aims of this electoral quota policy design were to increase women's presence in local politics as well as to bring the desired substantive inclusionary effects at the level of emergent policy outcomes of various kinds. With some exceptions, however, the expected policy outcomes of gender quotas have been limited in both countries. Several studies have identified that institutional factors (Pande and Ford 2011; Jayal 2006; Panday 2010, 2013; Rai *et al.* 2006), socio-economic factors (Baviskar 2002; Bryld 2001; Chathukulam and John 2001; Chowdhury 2013; Panday 2013; Rai *et al.* 2006), and cultural impediments (Bann and Rao 2008; Prodip 2015; Rahman and Khan 2018) have barred women members in both countries from participation in local decision-making processes, particularly in Asia. Less effort has been devoted to exploring the relationship between gender quotas and policy influence in local councils in Asia, especially in India and Bangladesh, from a comparative perspective. In earlier work I have argued that women members in reserved seats in local councils in India and Bangladesh have failed to affect political decisions due to institutional and cultural constraints (Prodip 2021a, 2021b). Yet the relationship between gender quotas and affecting policies understood via a socio-economic lens has been somewhat neglected in the literature. To address this lacuna and update the literature with reference to more recent policy developments, the present article aims to examine and explore to what extent and how socio-economic factors hold back quota-elected women in their ability to influence policies in the political decision-making process in local councils in India and Bangladesh. Both countries are similar in enough respects to conduct a valid and useful comparison. Gender quotas have notably increased women's numbers in local councils in India and Bangladesh. The women this study draws from nevertheless face similar challenges in politics, primarily because both countries are dominated by patriarchal cultures and philosophies. The patriarchal philosophy that molds the political system in the two countries has long presented women as unfit for political activities (Chowdhury 2013).

I hope to contribute to the literature through a qualitative research strategy comparing women's policy influence in the political decision-making process in local councils in India and Bangladesh. I argue that, if the socio-economic barriers identified can be removed through some key policy developments in the near future, women members in reserved seats would have better opportunities and a stronger voice in the decision-making process to secure rights and resources for their voters—and especially women.

The article begins with a review of the literature on the conceptualization of women's political empowerment, women's numbers and policy influence, concepts of socio-economic barriers to women's political participation, and research focusing on India and Bangladesh. This assists in providing a theoretical framework to guide the subsequent analysis. An outline of the research design and methodology

follows, then the findings of the study are presented. The final section discusses the findings and provides a conclusion with possible solutions.

Literature Review and Key Concepts

Women's Political Empowerment

Before the 1980s, academics argued that "women are not where the power is" (Nowtony 1980, 147). However, researchers, development and women's organizations, and policy makers changed this view after the UN Beijing Platform for Action in 1995[4] (see e.g., Sheikh 2012). Scholars often amalgamate elements of the concepts of 'gender equality,' 'gender equity,' 'female autonomy,' 'women's status,' and 'women's empowerment' (Malhotra and Schuler 2005, 72; Sheikh 2012, 70). However, the idea of women's empowerment can be differentiated from other concepts by two essential features: 'process' (Kabeer 1999; Rowlands 1997) and 'agency' (Malhotra and Schuler 2005). Kabeer (1999, 436) defines empowerment as an "ability to make choices." To be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choice; "the notion of empowerment is that it is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make a choice acquire such an ability" (Kabeer 1999, 436-7). Kabeer's definition of empowerment is crucial as it contains the two important elements of process and agency and discreetly differentiates 'empowerment' from the general concept of 'power' as exercised by dominant individuals or groups (Malhotra and Schuler 2005, 72).

Political empowerment is a necessary part of the overall empowerment of women (Sheikh 2012, 74). Several scholars have asserted that social freedom leads to women's empowerment and, finally, this empowerment leads to economic and political empowerment (Lopez-Claros and Zahidi 2005; Shroff 2010). However, questions remain as to the necessary ordering of elements of empowerment in a causal chain. For example, women's participation in electoral processes such as national parliaments and local government institutions is a precondition for their political empowerment (Sheikh 2012, 74). Further, Hannan (2003) contends that empowerment is more than promoting the participation of women in politics. It also encompasses procedures that lead women to recognize their rights, to sound their voice to secure political demands, and to have greater access to decision-making processes (cited in Sheikh 2012, 74-5). Lopez-Claros and Zahidi (2005, 4) argue that women's political empowerment is the "equitable representation of women in decision-making structures and their voice in the formulation of policies affecting their societies." This adds nuance to an understanding of wom-

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4   The Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equity, Development, and Peace is known as the Beijing Platform for Action, an agenda for women's empowerment. This platform is important as it aims to advance women's empowerment and remove all barriers to women's active participation in economic, social, cultural, and political decision making.

en's political empowerment in terms of both their participation and their agency, especially their ability to raise their voices to influence decision making to provide resources (public goods and services) to their people (particularly women).

Women's Presence in Political Decision Making and Policy Influence

Women representatives are likely to articulate diverse desires and priorities from their male counterparts worldwide (Clayton 2021; Schwindt-Bayer 2006; Tremblay 1998; Wängnerud 2000). Thomas and Welch (1991) found that women in U.S. state legislatures were different from men, especially in the priority women give to dealing with health and welfare issues for children, women, and families. Thomas (1991, 1994) found that women's numbers have a positive impact on sponsoring and passing bills regarding women, children, and families in 12 U.S. state legislatures. Wangnerud (2000) found that the greater presence of women in Swedish political life has affected policy priorities involving gender equality, family policy, and social policy. Bratton and Ray (2002) found that size has an impact on municipal childcare policy in Norway. Schwindt-Bayer (2006) showed that women legislators place a much higher preference on policies related to women's issues and family/child issues. Kittilson (2008) suggested that women's descriptive representation in national parliaments had a persistent and noteworthy impact on maternity and childcare leave policies in 19 OECD democratic countries. Swiss, Fallon, and Burgos (2012) argued that an increasing number of women in legislatures have an influence on improving child health outcomes in developing countries worldwide.

However, some scholars also argue that an increase in women's numbers alone does not have a significant effect on women's policies and outcomes. Caiazza (2004) contended that, rather than admitting an increased number of women into formal political life, the *right political culture*—party dominance and attitudes toward women politicians—plays a significant role both in promoting women-friendly policy. Chaney (2006) argued that focusing on increasing the overall number of women legislators is not enough to bring substantive representation because a range of other institutional factors—both in party-political and parliamentary contexts—frame the behavior and magnitude to which policy makers act to advance equality in political debate. Dauti (2018) found in several legislatures that, women representatives do not, in fact, wield greater voice and power in decision making even if they constitute significant numbers. Moving to Africa, Wang (2013) claimed that several factors, including the women's caucus in legislatures, their relationships with male colleagues, and the depth of their ties with civil society and the aid community makes a significant contribution to pro-women legislation in the Ugandan Parliament.

Socio-economic Barriers to Women's Political Participation

Several studies have found strong evidence that gender quota policies have produced positive impacts in promoting women's empowerment politically and

socially within, as well as outside, developed countries. These include: challenged existing social inequalities (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005, in Scandinavia); enhanced equity and efficiency in significant political bodies (Kittilson 2005; Pande and Ford 2011); reduced gender discrimination (Hawkesworth 2012; Dahlerup 2006); influenced government expenditures of social welfare such as education (Chen 2010); changed perceptions of women regarding their roles in legislative accomplishments and politics (Bauer 2008, in East and Southern Africa); and brought changes in government agendas (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008). However, within and beyond the developed nations, quota elected women face many socio-economic barriers to their effective participation in politics.

Scholars have observed that lack of education and training, plus gendered household responsibilities, together with insufficient financial resources, are the principal factors that hinder women's political representation (see e.g., Sawer and Simms 1993; Shvedova 2005). Some have also found that, although there is no explicit correlation between literacy rates and women's participation in politics, a minimum level of education is often needed to obtain candidate selection/nominations in politics (Goetz 2003, 2; Shvedova 2005). Lack of education may therefore exclude women from entering political decision-making bodies or influencing policy from inside them. Indeed, studies have shown that many women lack sufficient political training essential to ensure effective political participation (see e.g., Shvedova 2005). Phillips (1991, 199) argues that the burden of women's private lives is an obstacle to taking part in public matters. In most countries, women carry out the largest portion of household work (Kassa 2015; Phillips 1991) which can make it difficult to become immersed in political activities (Sawer and Simms 1993). Financial resources are likewise needed for sustained political participation, but women often have limited access to, and control over, economic assets as Tolley (2011) shows in her multi-level government study in Canada.

In India, some positive impacts from reserved seats policy include: increased women's interest in contributing to public goods and to offer social benefits (Deininger, Nagarajan, and Xia 2015); reduced discrimination and enhanced voice (Duflo 2005; Duflo and Topalova 2004; Priebe 2017), and addressing practical gender needs (Jayal 2006). Yet many studies have identified some socio-economic problems that hinder women's effective participation in local politics in India and some have found that a lack of education hinders women's effective participation. Illiterate women members, for instance, have limited understanding of training and legal literacy (Bryld 2001; Jayal 2006). Further studies suggest that domestic work creates an extra burden for women members, as women are the primary household workers in rural India (Chathukulam and John 2001, 92; Vissandjee *et al.* 2006). In a study into the potentials and pitfalls of increasing participation through decentralization, Bryld (2001, 160) found that, after maintaining all domestic activities, women members could hardly manage to find time to attend regular *Panchayats'* meetings. Scholars have found that some women mem-

bers ask for permission from their family members prior to attending meetings in *Panchayats* (Bryld 2001, 158; Vissandjee *et al.* 2006, 443) and scarce resources limit women's effectiveness in offering services to their electorates in India (Baviskar 2002; Rai *et al.* 2006). The most mystifying aspect of *Panchayat* functioning, for women representatives, is that of finance and many women have confessed to being very diffident about financial matters (Baviskar 2002; Jayal 2006). Although the situation of women in local politics has gradually improved due to the policy of reserved seats since the 1990s, women members are still confronted with some crucial socio-economic barriers in local politics in India.

In Bangladesh, positive impacts from reserved seats policy include: the adoption of reserved seats brought a qualitative change in perception of women's roles in politics (Chowdhury 2002); enhanced visibility in different committees and expanded voice and social legitimacy in contributing to specific women's issues (Nazneen and Tasneen 2010), and women members being able to use formal and informal strategies to cope with male dominated political office (Rahman and Khan 2018). However, studies have identified some key socio-economic barriers that bound the effectiveness of reservation policy toward women's political participation. Some underline that women members are deprived of rights and privileges due to their level of understanding of the roles and functions of the *Union Parishads*, caused by limited education and political training (Democracy Watch 2015; Panday 2008, 2013; Prodip 2015; Sogra 2008), household activities, and the lack of spousal support restricts women's engagement in the public sphere (Ahmed 2008; Khan and Ara 2006; Prodip 2016; Zaman 2012). This lack of income and discrimination in resource distribution among male and female members has played a confining part in women's effective roles in local politics (Chowdhury 2013; Sultan *et al.* 2016; Prodip 2014). A lack of safety and security also confines women's mobility to attend meetings and represent their people (Panday 2010; Prodip 2018; Sultan *et al.* 2016). Other scholars agree that violence and fear of sexual harassment reduces women's performance in political matters (Ara 2017; Chowdhury 2013). Even though women's quota reservations were implemented in 1997, certain socio-economic impediments have made women members ineffective in their participation in local politics in Bangladesh.

Although several studies on women's quotas in local governments in India and Bangladesh have been carried out, few comparative studies exist of the two countries (Chowdhury 2013; Panday 2008; Rai *et al.* 2006 are exceptions). None of these studies have explored the relationship of gender quotas and women's political empowerment through a comparative perspective. Rai and others (2006) stand out for their examination of the impact of gender quotas on women's empowerment in three South Asian countries: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. That, now fairly dated, study compared the performance of elected women members of the first legislature in the *Union Parishad* in Bangladesh, but this is not enough for us to fully understand the actual outcomes of quota policy in the two countries.

The other two studies (Chowdhury 2001; Panday 2008) were based on secondary resources only. Recently, Prodip (2021a, 2021b) found that quota-elected women in India and Bangladesh have failed to exercise their voice in the decision-making process in a more egalitarian manner due to clear institutional and cultural challenges. Hence the present study contributes to filling the gap in our understanding of women's political participation in the two countries by identifying the socio-economic barriers that the women in reserved seats face with regards to their political empowerment.

Research Design and Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative research strategy (Creswell 2009, 173). Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) argue that qualitative research provides researchers well-grounded sources of rich data (cited in Austin and Sutton 2014)—in this case, women's insight and commentary through in-depth interviews.

Selection of Respondents

The *Nadia* district in West Bengal in India and the *Rajshahi* district in the *Rajshahi* division of Bangladesh were chosen as the study areas—both have analogous cultures and languages, similar administrative evolutions, and contiguity. They can, therefore, contribute toward representing the familiar features of Indian and Bangladesh society. In total, there were 84 respondents to the interviews used for this research. Three elected women members from reserved seats of each *Gram Panchayat* and three *Gram Panchayats* from each of the two *Panchayat Samiti*[5] of Nadia were approached for interviews totaling 18 elected women members. Likewise, three elected women members of each *Union Parishad* and three *Union Parishads* from each of the two *Upazilas*[6] of *Rajshahi* district, totaling 18 elected women, were designated for interviews. Forty-eight key informant respondents were also selected for interviews to explore their perception concerning women members' capabilities in the activities of local councils. The sample sizes and study sites are presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Sample Size and Study Sites[7]

Types of respondents	Data collection method	Number of respondents	Study sites
Elected women members	Semi-structured interviews	18	Nadia, West Bengal, India

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5   *Panchayat Samiti* are rural local governments at the intermediate level in *Panchayat* Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India.

6   *Upazila* is the intermediate level of rural local government in Bangladesh.

7   5 × 2 means each of five from *Gram Panchayat* and *Union Parishad*.

Elected women members	Semi-structured interviews	18	Rajshahi, Bangladesh
Elected male chairperson	Key informant interviews	5×2= 10	Nadia, West Bengal, India & Rajshahi, Bangladesh
Elected female chairperson	Key informant interviews	5×2= 10	Nadia, West Bengal, India & Rajshahi, Bangladesh
Elected male members	Key informant interviews	5×2= 10	Nadia, West Bengal, India & Rajshahi, Bangladesh
Local women politicians	Key informant interviews	3×2= 06	Nadia, West Bengal, India & Rajshahi, Bangladesh
Local government officers	Key informant interviews	2×2= 04	Nadia, West Bengal, India & Rajshahi, Bangladesh
Officials of women's organizations	Key informant interviews	2×2= 04	India and Bangladesh
Academics	Key informant interviews	2×2= 04	India and Bangladesh

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data were collected through semi-structured and key informant interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 elected women members (India 16, Bangladesh 17) in the *Gram Panchayat* and the *Union Parishad.* Forty-one key informant interviews were conducted with various respondents (see Table 1). Informed consent was obtained from respondents and pseudonyms were used to respect anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in the Bengali language in both countries and for the 74 interviews, recordings were translated into English.[8] Participants' answers were coded and themes then developed. Data analysis was performed through conversation analysis (Damico, Oelschlaeger, and Simmons-Mackie 1999). The study's application for research ethics was granted on July 1, 2018, by the UNE Human Research Ethics Committee.

Findings from the Field

Key findings of this study are organized into two broad categories: social and economic barriers. Social barriers include lack of education, training, and knowledge; household responsibilities; lack of family support; and lack of social security and physical mobility. Economic barriers encompass financial incapacity, corruption, and lack of coalition among women members.

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8   Ten respondents (7 in India and 3 in Bangladesh) could not be reached due to unavailability and time constraints.

Social Barriers

Lack of Education, Training, and Knowledge

In India, this study corroborates the findings of previous studies that found a lack of expertise in reading and writing confines women's effective participation. Of the 16 interviewed, three women members completed their secondary-level education, five accomplished higher secondary education, and only two women members completed their Bachelor of Arts (BA). The lack of education was noted by all interviewees. Six women members said that less educated women cannot read the acts, circulars, and guidelines of the *Gram Panchayat* because they find them difficult to understand. As a result, they do whatever their *Pradhans* say. They do not know how the *Upa-Samiti*[9] is formed and how projects are distributed among the members. They are also ignorant as to whether they have the signatory power to pass a bill for development projects. As noted by one woman member: "I have never read the acts, circulars and guidelines of the *Gram Panchayat*. I am totally dependent on (the) *Pradhan's* word. I also do not know whether I have a signatory power or not." Another woman member said: "I do not have any idea about the project distribution policy. Party leaders and *Pradhan* distribute all projects among male and female members." Four other women members mentioned that a lack of training made them more vulnerable in the decision-making process. For example: "I did not receive any training over the last five years. I do not also know who provides training to women members."

In Bangladesh, 13 women members did not complete grade-nine education, and they exhibit a limited understanding of the forms, procedures, and functions of projects and standing committees. A woman member remarked:

> The politics of *Union Parishad* is very complex where education plays a crucial role to strengthen someone's position. Without sufficient education, someone cannot influence decision-making process rather saying yes or no almost in all meetings. As I am not educated, I do not know how projects and standing committees are formed and function.

This study also finds that 14 women members have not received any training from NGOs or the National Institute of Local Government (NILG) in Bangladesh. This is in line with Democracy Watch (2015) which found that only 31 percent of women members received training on political capacity building in their study on the constraints of women's political participation in local government in Bangladesh. Among these 14 women members, three of them are working as members for their second terms. One woman member reported: "Although I have passed seven years as member, I am yet to receive training on any issue. As I could not

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9   Each *Gram Panchayat* in West Bengal has five committees, called *Upa-Samiti*.

complete Grade Five, I failed to claim my rights for my local citizens." An NGO official who works with a women's empowerment project in local government said:

> NILG and NGOs do not provide trainings to women members on time. As I know, women members that were elected in 2016 did not receive any training. A few of them received training at the end of their tenure. Finally, these trainings did not work for them at all.

It was observed that few women members in Bangladesh assume that their positions, powers, and authorities are higher than those of male members. They do not have clear ideas about the power and functions of the chairperson. A woman member pointed out: "I heard that the power and authority of the male and women members are equal. I perceived that the status of women in reserved seats are almost nearest to the chairperson." This variant of lack of knowledge has created confusion and tension between women members and chairpersons. A male chairperson further explained: "As women members represent three times bigger constituencies than male members, they assume their positions are nearest to the chairpersons. Thus, they often blame chairpersons without proper understanding."

Household Responsibilities and Lack of Family Support

In India, the majority of women members do not consider household responsibilities and lack of family support as threats to their work in the *Gram Panchayat*. Only three women members revealed that they could not attend meetings regularly, as their first task was to maintain household activities. A woman member noted, "I need to take care of my children, husband, and family members first. If meetings are called in the morning, I could not attend in most cases." Male members of the family often do not support women domestically, as is noted by a male *Pradhan*: "Usually, males do not want to help them in their household's activities. As women have to give priority to their family affairs first, they sometime miss important meetings." A woman member added: "My husband often quarrels with me if I go to the *Panchayat* without completing household tasks. It is hard to maintain family and office together."

In Bangladesh, a majority of women interviewed said that they can manage and balance house and office work well. Only two women noted that they consider household activities as their leading role. One of these women explained: "I have a poultry farm and I look after this, as my husband is very busy with his business. Sometimes, I cannot attend village court and local *shalish*."[10] A female chairperson remarked: "One of the woman members of my *Union Parishad* is busy with taking care of her grandchild. She comes to *Union Parishad* after completing her household activities."

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10   *Shalish* is a community-based traditional institution for conflict resolution through mediation, which passes informal judgements over property, family, marriage, divorce, or inheritance matters in Bangladesh (see Hossian 2012).

The majority of women studied in Bangladesh were also free to attend *Union Parishad* activities with only one female member reporting that: "My husband reminds me to finish household works first before going to the *Union Parishad*. I do not have any option as nobody helps me to complete my work."

Lack of Social Security and Physical Mobility

In India, most of the women members interviewed said that they are able to move around, attend meetings, and feel safe in public places. Only two women members noted having limited participation in *Panchayat* meetings due to lack of physical mobility. Previous researchers have noted that some women members needed the permission of their family member(s) prior to attending meetings in *Panchayats* (Bryld 2001, 158; Vissandjee *et al.* 2006, 443). However, the reason for a lack of physical mobility here is quite different from the previous studies. Women are not prevented from attending meetings, but they do not feel safe to attend, especially when these are organized in the evening, as reported by a woman member: "Although my family do not restrict me, I have never attended any local disputes meeting. Male members often go to the police station to deal with various issues even at night. However, I never went to police station at night."

In Bangladesh, the majority of women members reported that they could move around freely, go to meetings, and feel safe at outside. Only two women said that they avoid attending local *Salish* due to lack of security, which is similar to cases in India. Previous studies also suggested that lack of safety and security, meetings at inconvenient times and places, and the scarcity of male companions are barriers to women representatives attending meetings in the *Union Parishad* (Panday 2010). Women members said that *Shalish* is usually called in the afternoon and continues up until midnight. To avoid criticism of the senior male citizens of society, women members often refrained from attending local *Shalish*. One-woman member who has had a 28-year political career in the *Union Parishad* pointed out:

> I attended only two local *Shalish* over the last 28 years. In most cases, *Shalish* was called in the afternoon and it took more time to finish. Sometimes, my husband was busy, and he could not escort me. It does not look good to come back house alone at late night while people treated me badly and often used slang languages. I personally also feel insecure to return home alone.

Economic Barriers

Financial Incapacity

Financial resources provide scope for women's full and effective involvement in politics (Tolley 2011). In India, this study finds that the financial status

of the women members is very low, as on average they receive only Rs.150 (about 2 USD) per month as a sitting allowance. Thirteen women members said that, due to their lower economic status, they could not carry out their political work effectively. They hesitate to participate in social programs in their villages and are dependent on their husbands to meet the cost associated with *Panchayat's* activities. As noted by one: "I feel shame to talk about my financial condition. How can I meet people's demands with Rs. 150? I always request my husband to give me some money to meet the cost related to the *Panchayat*." A male chairperson observed: "Women come from lower economic strata. Without money, it becomes hard to provide services to women and local people." Two women members noted that finances are an issue: "We have not received our honorarium in the last year."

In Bangladesh, the honorarium of the women members of the *Union Parishad* is BDT 8,000 (around 95 USD) per month; nearly 50 times the amount those in India.[11] Out of this BDT 8,000, women members receive BDT 3,600 (about 43 USD) from the *Union Parishad*. However, the portion that they received from the *Union Parishad* is not regular. In comparison, for male members it is. A woman member said: 'It is almost two years since I received a single payment from the *Union Parishad*. Although our *Union Parishad* has a higher income, the chairperson did not give our honorarium. However, the chairperson has provided honoraria to all male members." An interview with the chairperson of the same *Union Parishad* reveals that the chairperson maintains good relations with the male members in order to run activities smoothly and to avoid hostilities. As the chairperson remarked: "If I do not provide honorarium to male members regularly, it becomes hard to run the *Union Parishad* efficiently. Even though women members do not get their honoraria regularly, they do not create any trouble for me." The underlying and continuing discrepancies in persistent gender perceptions here should need no further underlining.

Women members in Bangladesh also face additional financial costs in relation to their position in society. Many people come to women members' homes to ask for help—which customarily in both countries may lead to offering them breakfast and tea. Sometimes, they are also asked to donate a certain amount and attend various social programs, as well as providing transportation costs for poor people if they meet in the bus or other local transports. A woman member noted this extra burden: "Many people, especially women, come to me to request support for various issues including girl's education costs. Moreover, when people come to my house, I need to offer biscuits and tea. However, I rarely can meet their necessities."

The major source of income of the *Union Parishad* is taxes. Yet most *Union Parishads* do not receive regular tax payments, and, therefore, fail to provide honoraria to women members regularly. The common views of three women members are: "The income of our *Union Parishads* in very limited as majority of the people

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11   The average monthly labor wages in Bangladesh is around BDT 12,000 (almost 142 USD).

do not pay tax regularly. Thus, the chairpersons do not provide us honorarium regularly." Finally, women members become more vulnerable when they cannot spend their earnings without their husband's permission, with husbands deciding where and how the honorarium should be spent. One woman member said: "I am accountable to my husband for each case regarding use of money that I have received from the *Union Parishad*. My husband manages, uses, and controls my salary."

Corruption

In India, this study found that the low honoraria tled some female (as well as male) members of the *Pradhan* and *Upa-Pradhan* in the *Gram Panchayat* to be open to (or have been open to) corruption. They have earned some money illegally from the development projects and social safety net funds. A male member said:

> Members (male and female) of the *Gram Panchayat* receive only Rs. 150 (2 USD) per month as sitting allowance. A member has to spend much money to do the works of the council. To manage the cost associated with services, I see a few elected representatives earn extra money from development projects. How can we expect women's empowerment if they do corruption?

Further, party leaders often distribute resources such as social welfare programs (e.g., ration cards, maternity cards, disability cards etc.) among their relatives—as noted by a woman member: "I see our party leaders often allocate resources to their relatives. When government resources are distributed among the relatives, women members are automatically excluded from those project's shares."

In Bangladesh, in recent years the majority of women members have found themselves near destitute due to the corruption and/or malpractice of the chairperson and male members (Rahman and Khan 2018). In this study, four women members revealed that the chairpersons managed, distributed, and implemented development projects and social safety net cards without consulting with female members. To pay for development projects, the chairperson needs the signature of women members on the cheque and sometimes the chairperson forced women members to provide signatures. As one woman member noted, if any of them refused to provide a signature, the chairperson changed the signatory in the following year:

> No sooner had we come to the *Union Parishad* than the chairperson called a general meeting. He requested us to provide signatures on an empty resolution book. We (male and female members) trusted him and gave signature without any doubt. The chairperson has done everything by his own way as we have signature on resolution book. He did all of development projects and grabbed all of money.

It was observed that a number of women members provide their signatures on the cheques without receiving an equal share of projects they are signing for. One woman member stated: "I am also responsible for not securing women's rights in my electorates. I agreed to be chair of a project committee to get some economic benefits." A limited number of woman members and the majority of male members distributed resources (such as social safety net cards) to their kin instead of distributing them among the needy people and poor women they were supposed to reach. A woman member said: "male members always care about their families and relatives. If they get projects or social safety net cards, they always wish to distribute those resources to their lineages rather than other poor people in the village." She further added: "I also distributed one widow card and one disability card to my sister-in-law and one of my nephews. If my relatives are eligible to get social safety net cards, why I will not offer them? If somebody calls me a corrupt woman, what I can do for that?"

Lack of Coalition among Women Members

If women become sizable in legislatures, in theory they have an opportunity to form strong coalitions to promote women's issues in the decision-making process (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012, 8). This study asked women members whether they engage in coalition building to strengthen their voice and ability to promote women's issues in policy making in local councils in both countries. Strikingly, all women members in India reported that they do not need to form a coalition to argue for or promote their rights in the meetings. In Bangladesh, nine women members of three *Parishad* reported that they maintain strong unity among themselves to argue for an equal share of projects. However, six women members of three *Union Parishads* said that they always maintain good relations with the chairpersons and male members. Concomitantly, they do not cooperate and support other women members to claim their rights for fear of losing the few benefits that support of male members brings. The chairperson and male members offered them gifts, a little money, or transportation services, as noted by one woman reflecting the voices of another two women members:

> Three women members have never come to same platform to claim their rights. The chairperson managed an other two women members by offering BDT 2,000 to 5,000 (around 24-60 USD 24) during distribution of development projects. It is impossible to fight alone against the chairperson and nine male members to secure my rights.

Again, this evidence from interviews highlights the long way that gender quotas still have to go, particularly in Bangladesh, to be able to even approach the kind of equality or gender parity these policies were specifically designed to create—or at least support. On their own, gender quota policies do not, in practice, always advance gender equalization or women's empowerment. Without the appropriate

changes in perceptions, and the political and social cultural norms that continue to drive them, women's quotas may not amount to more than a highly visible, but substantively thin, band aid that, in the end, fails to support women's political empowerment or undergird policies to institutionalize equality politically in these countries.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has discussed the socio-economic barriers that women members in reserved seats face in affecting policies with regards to their political empowerment at the local council level in India and Bangladesh. The findings are important as they reveal the personal insights of women members in reserved seats who are currently encountering rather significant socio-economic barriers to their political empowerment. This study contributes comparatively to the literature on gender quotas by applying a socio-economic lens, which—in addition to the other barriers identified and focused on strongly in the literature to date—is vital for identifying issues, developing solutions, and assisting women to work effectively in political decision-making.

Gender quotas aim to increase women's presence in the political decision-making as well as to bring expected substantive inclusionary effects at the level of emergent policy outcomes. Feminist political scholars have argued that women's presence in all levels of government makes a difference in political decision making as they bring a diverse set of experiences and perspectives to bear on the political and administrative issues discussed and decided upon at the grassroots level in local government fora (Philipps 1995, 65). I find that gender quotas have formally and demonstrably increased the number of women in local political councils; additionally, I found that quota-elected women indeed are very vocal in articulating their desire to influence the policy-making process to open up more resources for their constituents, and women in particular. However, they have encountered grave socio-economic challenges in attempting to influence decisions in local councils.

Lack of education and political training may debar women representatives from fuller and more effective participation in the policy-making process (Shvedova 2005). This study finds that more women members in Bangladesh than in India fail to perform their activities effectively as a result of a lack of education—both political and more generally. These findings are corroborated by previous studies (Democracy Watch 2015; Panday 2008, 2013; Sogra 2008). This study does suggest that fewer women members in India faced challenges due to a low level of education than expected—or at least fewer self-reported educational gaps as a major encumbrance. What is more important to note is that women members from both countries continue to face a serious lack of training in politics—such as leadership qualities, assertiveness, and capacity building—which makes it difficult to claim

their rights as council members or rights for their constituents and is corroborated by earlier studies in India (Bryld 2001; Jayal 2006) and Bangladesh (Panday 2013; Sogra 2008). Lack of education and training further leads to a scarcity of knowledge among women members in Bangladesh, which is not the case in India.

Women devote much time to fulfilling the basic demands of their family members, which limits their involvement in political structures (Kassa 2015; Philipps 1995). Previous studies in India (Bryld 2001; Chathukulam and John 2001; Vissandjee *et al.* 2006) and Bangladesh (Ahmed 2008; Khan and Ara 2006; Zaman 2012) have found that household responsibilities seriously hindered women members' roles in local councils. However, this study suggests that in recent years (excepting those affected by the pandemic—which is likely only to exacerbate the issue and the lack of functional equality in the near future), only a few women members in both countries fail to attend council meetings due to the burden of household responsibilities. The possible explanation might be that women members in both countries can and have managed work at home and in the office effectively. But again, their ability to do so is not always an autonomous individual choice and needs to take into account more external factors than their male counterparts generally face. Women members are often restricted to venture outside of their homes to offer services to citizens in India due to the lack of permission from husbands and family members (Bryld 2001; Vissandjee *et al.* 2006), and in Bangladesh for lack of overall safety and security (Panday 2010). What this study does suggest is that, in the last decade, fewer women members in both countries remain restricted from leaving home to offer services to local people as in Panday's (2010) study. These restrictions now mainly come from a lack of social safety and security, not from husbands or family members, on which the pandemic has again had a serious effect. However, male members in India indicated an awareness that some women members faced barriers from their family members, which suggests a possible wider perception shift may be possible in the future. It is also promising to see that lack of physical security and mobility appear to have been less serious obstacles to women members in their ability to perform their activities in local councils in India and Bangladesh, at least until early 2020. One plausible interpretation of this worth noting is that patriarchal behaviors and norms in the families might be changing for women in relation to their participation in local politics. However, further in-depth studies, particularly as the pandemic subsides, are required to understand the role played by familial support in promoting women's participation in the local councils.

Financial resources are significant requirements for both men and women to ensure their participation in politics. Women, in particular, continue to have minimal access to economic resources compared to men in many developing countries (Tolley 2011). This study updates Tolley's findings with respect to India and Bangladesh and shows how women remain perceived, in some places, as secondary when it comes to timely financial remuneration or funding for their public

duties. Importantly, in relation to this research, limited resources confine women's effective roles in local politics in India (Baviskar 2002; Jayal 2006; Rai *et al.* 2006) and Bangladesh (Chowdhury 2013; Democracy Watch 2015; Sultan *et al.* 2016). The situation has not yet sufficiently changed to deliver the egalitarian aims of gender quotas. Indeed, lack of financial ability continues to keep women members alienated from, or unable to adequately perform their duties in, many social and political activities in both countries. The study found, though, that the dimension of financial inability is quite different from country to country.

Women members in India are provided a small amount of money per month, whereas women members in Bangladesh, despite receiving a relatively high payment, are not regularly provided with their honoraria from the *Union Parishad*. Although the honoraria of Bangladeshi women members is almost 50 times higher than that for Indian women members, Bangladeshi women members cannot meet the demands of three times more numerous constituents compared to their male counterparts. Financial incapacity has, in some cases noted by the interviewees, further led to corruption of the *Pradhans*/chairpersons and male members in both countries. This undermines women members. Also, a few women members in both countries have sought illegal incomes from development projects rather than offering services to their voters because of their financial condition. Some women members in Bangladesh maintain good relations with the chairpersons and male members to secure any economic benefits from the projects. The study also found a tendency for women members to opine that they do *not* consider supporting and cooperating with other women members to claim their rights and privileges in a legal way because they were unlikely to lead to effective lobbying positions, and/or might undermine the support of male members that secures what little financial or other benefits women members can or do receive and use.

This study also uncovered some new factors that are important to discuss more deeply in future research. These revolve around corruption, shifts in cultural norms or circumstances regarding general security and personal autonomy, and coalition building based on group advocacy for gendered issues. First, some women members have used corrupt practices due to lack of enough financial resources in both countries. They justified this by claiming that they earned extra money illegally from the development projects to provide services to their citizens that they would not otherwise have been able to give. Second, a few women members in India do not often attend meetings due to lack of safety and security, which suggest some advances have indeed been made that specifically assist the aims of gender quota policy. Previously, in line with cultural norms, many women had to ask permission from their family members before attending meetings in the *Panchayat,* which I found is less of an issue now, especially in India. Third, and perhaps most significantly, some women members in Bangladesh have been open in reporting that they have chosen *not* to form coalitions with other women members to secure their political rights or increase the strength of their voice or

lobbying power the at local government level. Other negotiation tactics have been used to support women members' bargaining positions: several reported that they entered into informal negotiation with council chairpersons to acquire an equal (or more equal) share of projects. They rationalized this alternative by stating that, if they do not maintain good relations with the chairperson, they would be deprived of projects and funds and would fail to provide services to their voters. The implications of this for the efficacy of gender quotas in achieving their substantive goals are serious. Without concomitant shifts in both broader cultural perceptions (concerning political equality and women's empowerment), and women's educational preparedness to function as equal bargaining partners in local government administration, gender quotas are indeed unlikely to fulfil their aims substantively. The point concerning formal versus substantive gains in gender equality and/or parity, and its implications, is well known and well discussed in developed polities. It is more marked and certainly recognized, yet less discussed, in developing ones.

Overall, women's political empowerment may be formally enhanced by inclusive policies like electoral quotas but, as the findings show, if these do not function alongside additional inclusive policies promoting effective political training, rhetorical, and public speaking/bargaining skills, legal and rights knowledge, etc., any leverage or inclusory advantages formal quotas may be expected to give cannot actually filter into mainstream politics and mainstream gender equalization. Women members in reserved seats in both countries are faced with economic hurdles that seriously affect their ability to influence policy. To ensure that gender quotas/reserved seats offer more than just a formal recognition of women's political empowerment, more government resources for local councils need to be made available to women. Sufficient training to elected women members in both countries, as well as more encouragement for educated women to participate actively, will be paramount in this endeavor.

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