

OBSERVATIONS ON THE FEMALE WARD COMMISSIONERS IN STIFPP-II TOWNS, 2007-2008

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September 2008

Introduction

Capacity-building of the “Female Ward Commissioners,” now called “Female Councillors (FC),” is a prime objective of STIFPP-II urban governance improvement activities. The project has devoted considerable staff time to cultivating relationships with FC’s in eight project towns¹. Several have cooperated closely with project activities, and one in each town chairs a newly-formed Gender Committee. The project plan includes measures to clarify the role of the FC. These measures include training the FC’s, and also working with Male Councillors to improve perceptions of the FC.

These efforts face some important constraints. A most important one is that virtually all FC’s are elected to “reserved” seats, one seat covering three wards. Each FC thus overlaps with three “general” Councillors, who are elected to one ward each. Tensions inevitably develop, as “general” and “reserved” commissioners divide up resources and try to face constituents’ demands. FC’s, for example, receive half the number of Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) cards that Male Councillors receive; but they must distribute their VGF cards over three wards, not just one.

Another constraint is the fact that electing women to Council seats is a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. It was only in 2002 that the first batch of elected women came forward to serve, as per legislation enacted in 1997 (Ahmed & Shfali 2003). Prior to that date all women council members were appointed according to their connections with existing elite groups, with the effect that they had no political strength of their own. The system is still struggling to absorb the now-elected women

¹There are eight municipalities covered by this component of the STIFPP-II project: Brahmanbaria, Gaibandha, Jamalpur, Kushtia, Munshiganj, Mymensingh, Rajshahi City Corporation, and Sunamganj. Project construction work is being done in Manikganj Pourashava, but not the urban governance component.

councillors, who only a decade earlier would have been little more than decoration to local political bodies. Their situation was, and to some extent still is, one of “responsibility without authority.”

A third, most important constraint is that Councillors, both Male and Female, have limited scope to initiate local action of any sort. One study found that “In Pourashava acts, ordinances and rules, the commissioner’s job (male/female) is not specified adequately.... The existing acts... allow only the *Pourashava* Chairmen to enjoy sole authority of the Pourashava.” (Ahmed 2003:25) Male Councillors, at least, tend to have some credibility as public authority figures, whereas few Female Councillors do. In one 2002 or 2003 focus group discussion pourashava commissioners expressed frustration:

[Commissioners]said that their main duties (though it is not defined specifically in rules or ordinances) were to ensure law and order and development in their respective wards, but they could not do so. Because they have no authority to monitor the persons responsible for implementing those programs. [sic] For example, Police and other law-enforcing agencies responsible for ensuring proper law and order situation are not listening to them. Even a government officer responsible for development is not listening to them. So a commissioner has virtually no capacity to solve the people’s problems that s/he promised to resolve while bagging votes. A commissioner has no capacity to prepare a plan or budget for his/her ward, though s/he did persuasion for approval of the original plan. (Ahmed & Shfali 2003:25)

Background Information on Female Ward Commissioners

Sharifa Begum and I did brief, structured interviews with 14 FC in seven towns², interviewing four of them twice – once in early 2007 and again in early in 2008. We spent time with two others³, learning some of the same details about them as well. The five-year period 2005-2007/2008 was the first term in elective office for all of them. At least half were born into influential families. Three or more were the daughters of former ward commissioners. The husbands of at more than half were well-off businessmen, and one was married to a Pourashava officer. The FWC ranged in age from 26 to around 55, with an average of 31 years. Eleven we knew to be married; one was divorced; and two were widows. Except for one, the eldest, they all had studied at least to Class X. So they could be

²All except Manikganj and Rajshahi

³In Manikganj and Rajshahi

considered a moderately well educated group of women by Bangladesh standards. When asked what their occupation was, the majority described themselves as housewives.

FC Education	
No education	1
Class X	3
SSC	5
HSC	4
No information	1
Total	14

FC Occupation	
Housewife	10
Own NGO	1
Ward Commissioner	3
Total	14

Their Decisions to Stand for Election

We asked 14 FC how they had first decided to stand for elections. Six said that their families had encouraged them, and/or that they felt their influential family background suited them to the job. Four others said that family and/or neighbors had encouraged them. Six said they wanted to help people in their wards. All of them said that being a FC is a full-time job.

Their Ideas About Problems of Their Pourashavas

When asked what they considered the most important problems of their towns, they mentioned flood and drainage and economic problems most frequently. These responses may or may not reflect their actual thinking. They may have mentioned those matters simply because the project is working on them. Similarly, the focus on sanitation may well reflect the fact that Bangladesh local governments were in the midst of a big campaign to improve sanitation at the time the interviews were done. Giving timely or accommodating answers, if this was the motivation of some, does at least show that they are aware of the priorities of their pourashavas and the project(s)/programmes operating in them.

FC's Ideas of Priority Problems of Their Pourashavas*	Number Mentioning
Flood, Drainage	9
Economic Problems of Poor People (incl Credit)	8
Employment/Economic Distress of Women	2
Sanitation	2
Other infrastructure (roads)	2
Environment	2
Total	25

*Multiple responses

Achievements and Challenges

Responses to two questions help shed some light on the FC's role and situation: 'What do you consider your most important achievement?' or 'What is the most difficult challenge you face?'

Answers to both questions reveal that a principal activity of the FC is to participate in community-level problem solving, conducted according to the Bengali tradition known as *salish*. It is customary for people with domestic or neighbourhood problems to submit to committees of locally respected people, who attempt to negotiate or impose settlements on the disputing parties. Divorces, problems with children marrying unapproved people, and other cases are mostly managed through this process, rather than through formal court proceedings. In rural areas those managing the *salish* process are almost exclusively elite males. The significance therefore of having Female Councillors participate in *salish* in urban neighbourhoods is that they have a high degree of public status.

The FC's description of challenges faced further emphasises their role in *salish*. Their comments reflect a sincere concern about social problems encountered, especially discrimination against women and violence against women. They express pride at being able to solve domestic disputes and distress at having failed to do so in some cases:

- *One girl went out from her home at 12 o'clock [midnight]. Her family phoned me to help them, and I shall be very pleased to [help] solve the problem⁴.*
- *One girl went out from the house with her boyfriend. In that situation I have to manage a way for the two families to accept their marriage⁵.*

⁴COMMID#10, Kushtia Pourashava

⁵COMMID#13, Mymensingh

- *If any problem arises in family life, salish can help to solve it. I tell the man to give den mohor [promised to the wife at marriage] if there is a divorce. If they go to court, it's expensive for all – maybe twice the amount of the den mohor. So they usually agree⁶.*
- *Early marriage is an especially challenging issue. There was an article in the newspaper about this.*
- *Violence against women has increased very much in this area. So we do salish on that matter and succeed.*
- *The main challenges I face have to do with family problems, especially polygamy, dowry demands, early marriage, divorce, etc. These are major problems in our society. I solve them by actively taking part in salish and giving decisions.*

Primary Achievements Mentioned by FC's*	No. Mentioning
Salish: Family and Community Problem-solving	11
Courtyard Meetings	1
Sanitation improvements	1
Support of NGO community-based work	2
Generally help people in the ward	5
Helped with Project HH Survey	1
Bring "Development" to the Ward	1
Total	22

*Multiple responses

Main Challenges Facing the FC*	No. Mentioning
Solving Family Conflicts in Salish	7
Helping Poor People	4
Municipal Funding Shortages Limit Development Potential	3
Helping the People	2
Creating Employment Opportunities for Poor Women	1
Weak Position of FWC Means Cannot Do Much	1
Solving Sanitation and Drainage Problems	1
Total	19

*Multiple responses

Participation in Governmental Decision Making

While many FC's already are playing a useful social brokering/negotiating role in their ward neighbourhoods, the project is attempting to get them more involved in local government decision-making activities. Two principal strategies are employed to this end. One is to encourage, urge, or even

⁶COMMID#14, Rajshahi

require that FC's be added to the standing committees of the pourashava or city corporation. The other has been to create two new committees – a Gender Committee and an Environment Sub-committee -- in which FC's may be active, including serving as chairpersons. We did not have an opportunity to observe FC's in standing committee meetings; but we did observe a Town-level Coordination Committee meeting in Brahmanbaria, and a couple of Ward-level Coordination Committee meetings. According to the Gender Specialists in each Project Implementation Unit, FC's rarely speak up in standing committee meetings. Our brief observations confirmed this. So they are mostly participating in name only. When six FC's were asked, 'Do you participate in pourashava decision-making?' three said they do, and three said they do not; even though all were on some standing committees. One group of three FC's complained bitterly that they were not informed of standing committee meeting dates; and they were not listened to if they tried to speak.

The newly formed committees, unlike the normal standing committees, do offer scope for FC's to exercise leadership and participate in pourashava decision-making. The work of the Gender Committee, for example, is directly related to FC's work in *salish*. Much of the discussion, as we have observed it in a few cases, has to do with issues affecting women: forced early marriage, dowry demands, polygamy, and violence against women. These forums offer a good opportunity for women to discuss problems and any solutions under the leadership of the FC.

There are a couple of possible reasons why FC's often do not speak up in standing committee meetings. The most obvious one is that, customarily feminine behaviour precludes loud speaking in group situations; and most of the FC's are high status women with a good reputation to maintain. Another is that the male decision makers, Mayors/Chairmen and other Councillors, do not invite the women to speak. In one Town-level Coordination Committee meeting we observed, FC's spoke only after being asked to do so by the Chairman/Mayor.

In one Ward-level Coordination Committee meeting there were many women observing the proceedings but none were officially considered members. None of the women were seated. They stood around the edge of the gathering listening to the discussion. We asked to hear from some of them, and

some relatively well educated young women spoke at length about matters of concern to them. Poor quality of roads making it difficult for children to get to school during the rainy season, and inadequate access to health services were two issues they mentioned. The importance of this observed situation is that it shows that: women, at least some women, will speak up if given an opportunity to do so. It also shows that their concerns may be somewhat different from those expressed by men of the same communities⁷.

Another, most important reason why FC's will have difficulty participating actively in some of the standing committees is that, Male Councillors and the Mayor/Chairman are involved in economically high-stakes local negotiations. This is especially true in the Tender Committee, Hat-Bazar Committee, and any others that involve issuing licenses or contracts with monetary value. It is not in the interest of the existing elite decision making groups to expand and include others.

Standing Committees on Which Six FC's Serve*	No.
Tender	3
Recruitment	2
Civil Works	1
VGF (vulnerable group feeding programme)	3
EPI (immunizations)	1
Torture of Women	1
Roller (use of road-building equipment)	1
Hat-Bazar (regarding	1
Gender	6
Women & Child Welfare	1
Water Supply Comm.	1
Cleanliness Committee	1

*For eight, we have no information. This information may be incomplete.

The Panel Chair Position

In each municipality two or three Council members are selected to serve as Panel Chairs, that is, deputy Chairmen/Mayors in the event of the Mayor's absence. The project has urged all participating towns to enroll at least one FC as a Panel Chair. According to our information, the Panel Chairs are selected (in rank order: 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Panel Chairs) at the time of election. So it was

⁷The project's participatory local planning processes, developing Community Action Plans (CAP) and Poverty Reduction Action Plans (PRAP) have included large percentages of females.

reportedly not possible to give this designation to FC's mid-term. In three project towns, nonetheless, one FC is designated as a Panel Chair⁸. There will be scope to offer this distinction to more FC's during the ongoing elections in all municipalities during 2008.

The Panel Chair position, especially the 1st Panel Chair, seems to be one of high status. In Jamalpur Pourashava, for example, we found in early 2007 that the only desk in the common hall for Councillors was used by the 1st Panel Chair. Others did not have desks; nor did they have even a common table to use, as they do in most other project towns. There did not seem to be enough chairs to seat all Councillors, though they said there were chairs for them. The 1st Panel Chair had a large, comfortable chair with a large towel draped over the back of it, in the manner of a Chairman/Mayor; and other Councillors stood around looking somewhat uncomfortable during our brief visit to that location.

Seating Arrangements and Other Working Spaces

One indicator the project uses for progress in enhancing the status of FC's is the appearance of an office, or at least a desk, for her use in the Pourashava/City Corporation building. The working space of the FC is not up to this standard as yet; and perhaps it never will be. There may not be enough space in the municipal office buildings to allow for that. Most, however, have provided a common hall room for the use of all Councillors. In two towns provision has been made for a separate hall room for Female Councillors, sitting apart from Male Councillors⁹. This may not be a good idea, if the goal is to integrate FC's into local decision-making processes. Sitting apart from their male colleagues, they will not have opportunities to hear much local news. "Information is power," and sitting separately reduces FC's access to it.

⁸Kushtia, Munshiganj, and Rajshahi

⁹Gaibandha and Rajshahi

General commissioners, who are virtually all male, have large offices in their wards. The one FC we met who was a “general” commissioner representing only one ward¹⁰, rather than a “reserved” commissioner with three wards, had her own office.

Relationships Among Councillors

In formal questionnaire interviews, the FC’s all said that they get along well with their male colleagues. Informally, however, they spoke differently. In one group discussion (in Gaibandha, 2007), we asked, ‘Who has more responsibility – male or female council members?’ On that occasion and others this question prompted a lot of discussion that exposed tensions. These are inevitable, as mentioned earlier, given the odd arrangement of semi-overlapping responsibilities of male and female councillors in each ward. Several FC’s in all towns said that they had more responsibility than male councillors, because they had people in three wards expecting help from them, while the men were responsible to only one ward.

As this is a political environment, relationships are driven by many factors other than gender. Some FC’s, for example, are close to their Chairmen/Mayors, even relatives of them in one or two cases. Being close to the Mayor puts a FC in a good position politically and can stimulate rivalries with other FC’s. Other political allegiances and rivalries no doubt relate to relationships among husbands or long-standing family histories of a complex nature.

An important consequence of electing FC’s rather than appointing them is, they now have constituents who voted for them and may or may not re-elect them. So they have become more political than before. They certainly must have more pressure on them to actually *do something* for their people than the elder generation of appointed FC’s did.

Conclusions

¹⁰In Rajshahi

The project is at a watershed point now, in terms of its work with FC's. The 2008 elections will see a new batch of FC's and MC's taking office. Some of those cultivated by the project's facilitators will be leaving office. Newly elected councillors, both male and female, will have to be trained on clarification of the FC's role. It is a good time to learn from the preceding two years' experience with FC's and fine-tune the programme as we start working with the next batch of councillors.

In the previous two years there was some training given on the role of the FC in urban governance. All FC's got this training in eight towns.¹¹ Only one male councillor from each town, however, was included in the training. We have been told by at least one FC that the men need the training at least as much as the women do, if not more.

It is a good time for a systematic assessment of the situation of the FC's in project towns. One way we plan to do this is to conduct some focus group discussions with councillors who have served during the previous term. Key questions will provide the project with much needed information and ideas for the future. A list of proposed matters to discuss is presented below.

The project's work with FC's is occurring at a time of national transition in their role. The transition is not yet complete. Further changes are going to occur in the normal course of events. It is not only the FC's role that is unclear. The male councillors also face many limitations to their capacity to promote development of their wards and towns. The project is providing a useful service in attempting to clarify the role of the FC. But the project can only clarify that role to the extent that Bangladesh society and political development allows it to be clarified.

Our limited observations and discussions with FC's suggest that the project has, at least, given some of them a sense of direction. One FC, for example, was asked in early 2007 what specifically her FC duties were. She said that she did not know for certain. When interviewed again in 2008, however, she had an answer: 'To work for pourashava development activities, and now to be involved in

¹¹Not in Manikganj, where this project component is not included.

STIFPP-II activities [meaning Gender Committee, courtyard meetings, and so on]'. Like a few others in all project towns, this FC is a strong personality born into an influential family. She clearly has leadership skills, which will be exercised more and more fully as the political system offers increasing authority for her and others like her to act.

Citation

Ahmed, Tofail, and Masuda Khatun Shfali

2003 Gender Dimension in Local Government Institutions; A Review of the Legal-institutional Framework and Recommendation for Improvement. Dhaka: Nari Uddug Kandra. (61pp.)

Focus Group Discussions with Councillors: Some Key Questions

Prepared by Sharifa Begum, Gender and Social Development Specialist, STIFPP-II

1. What are FWC's* duties?
 - a. Understanding of FWC's role has it improved?
 - b. Where do you meet people? Do you have enough working space (Desk, Chair, Table) in the Pourashava?
2. Do you ever meet and talk with FWC's of others towns ? (not STIFPP-II towns). Is there any family, colleagues or any organization or the occasion? Does any other project support your FWC's role?
3. Do FWC's face any problems during last five years? If problems what is the solutions?
4. Best achievement of FWC's Biggest Challenges you made?
5.
 - (a) Is it new for FWC's to be involve in pourashava?
 - (b) Do FWC's take part in the decision making process where are FWC's are most effective?
6. Are the FWC's decisions are effective?
7. Any suggestions for the sustainability of primary groups and community Development Committees?
8. Did you get STIFPP Training?
 - a. Was it helpful?
 - b. Any suggestions?
9. Have you been involved in Land Acquisition? Specially the female headed house holds get their compensation package?

10. Do you about the activity and recruitment of poor women labourer and their wage during construction work? Can you help anyway? Have you done anything for the women labourers?
11. (a) Do the Mayor is cooperative & helpful?
(b) Who has more responsibility, FWC's or MWC*?
(c) How is the relation of FWC's & MWC's?

*FWC: Female Ward Commissioner (now known as Female Councillor)

*MWC: Male Ward Commissioner, Male Councillor