

-PN-ACP-494



Voices of Women

A New Era of Political Leadership in Bangladesh



The Asia
Foundation





Voices of Women

A New Era of Political
Leadership in Bangladesh

Published

December, 2001

Copyright

The Asia Foundation, Bangladesh

Case Studies Preparation and Coordination for The Asia Foundation

Dr. Tatjana Haque, Consultant

Dr. Karen L. Casper, Representative

Dan Turello, Program Officer

Debbie Ingram, Consultant

Riffat Jahan, Program Officer

Graphic Design and Printing

The CAD System, Dhaka

Photography

Dr. Tatjana Haque

This publication was made possible with support provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development under the Democracy Partnership, Cooperative Agreement # 388-A-00-95-00040-00. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Map of Rajshahi Division	7
Motahara	8
Rashida	11
Anjuman Ara	14
Mofiza	17
Map of Sylhet Division	21
Neharunessa	22
Dilara	25
Map of Dhaka Division	29
Zaeda Khanum	30
Fatema Parvin	33
Razia Akhter	36
Mira Rani Vokto	39
Map of Barisal Division	41
Rani Begum	42
Runa Leila	45
Map of Chittagong Division	47
Supria Chakma	48
Kurshida Begum	51
Sujata Dewan	54
Nur Jahan	57
Map of Khulna Division	61
Sheikh Momtaz Pia	62
Rabea Begum	65
Rebecca	68
Bulu Roy	71
List of Non-Governmental Organizations and Terms	74

What Is This New Era?

This publication presents portraits of twenty women who represent a new era of political leadership in Bangladesh. These women are among the first women ever to be directly elected to serve in local government councils, called union parishad. In the following pages, these twenty women from various regions in the country tell their stories of how they decided to run for elected office, their vision of leadership, and the challenges and successes they experience in fulfilling their duties. Twenty women and twenty different voices are presented, but one common truth revealed: women directly elected by the people can and will change the dynamic and improve the quality of political representation in Bangladesh.

Who They Are

Although women are at the helm of the two largest political parties in Bangladesh, for most women, opportunities to be involved in government are extremely limited.

The 1997 elections were significant because they offered greater opportunities for women seeking to serve in these locally elected government bodies, the union parishad (UP). Prior to the 1997 election, each UP reserved three seats for women, filled through nomination by the UP Chairman. The women served at large and did not represent any particular geographic constituency. The Local Government Ordinance of 1997 specified that the seats reserved for women should be filled by direct election among competing women candidates, running from constituencies three times the size of each general member's constituency. The new provision meant women had to campaign, and learn to be accountable to voters. With support from The Asia Foundation, many local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) developed programs to encourage and equip women to effectively participate – women traditionally disempowered, even marginalized, from the political processes in their communities. These NGOs helped non-elite women to develop their political and campaign skills, and to strengthen their voice on issues of import to all women in their communities.

Thanks to these efforts, in the 1997 UP elections, 46,000 women all over Bangladesh contested for the 12,828 reserved seats. The twenty women who tell their stories in these pages reflect regional, cultural and economic diversity, and are representative of this broader group. Only a few of them had previous experience with politics. For most, it has been their first chance to participate in political decision-making processes and to influence government institutions.

To convey their experiences better, each woman has shared biographical information using standard denominators including age, education and marital status to help provide a full and accurate context for each story. They have also shared information about their personal and family's previous socio-political activities and networks, in order to shed light on what might be described as a gradual and long-term process of political empowerment.

Information about the women's financial status and landholdings is summarized using ranked range categories. Women's financial status is ranked accordingly:

I – up to 3000 taka

II – between 3000 and 5000 taka

III – between 5000 and 10,000 taka

IV – between 10,000 and 20,000 taka

V – over 20,000 taka income per month.

Women's household landholdings are rated as follows:

I – up to one acre of land

II – between one and two acres

III – three to five acres

IV – six to eight acres

V – over eight acres.

In Bangladesh, eighty percent of farmers own less than two acres of land. Only the most elite possess over five acres. Many of the women featured in this publication are from families with some of the lowest landholdings and income levels in Bangladesh. These women have therefore demonstrated that they can overcome these disadvantages to run an effective campaign and win a public election. In fact, many of them discovered that voters prefer to elect women from poorer backgrounds compared to women from elite households, because they better represent their own socio-economic status. This realization has provided the women with overwhelming confidence that they in their own right have an important role to play.

Why They Ran and What They Are Doing

Each of these women ran for very different reasons. Some wanted to leave their homes to gain new experiences, to learn and be confronted with new ideas, or to do something useful for their communities. Others were particularly interested in building a career in politics, and in increasing their social status. Many of the women were driven by a deep-seated idealism and concern for their community and their country. They sacrificed their own time and money for the sake of a higher cause, because they felt that staying home and abiding by the traditional roles prescribed for Bengali woman would simply reinforce hierarchies and power structures detrimental to women all over the country.

For many women, participating in the UP elections was a first step toward carving out a new identity beyond their roles as mothers, wives, daughters or sisters – a professional and public identity independent of any relationship to a man. Occasionally, politics even replaced the wish to live a regular family life. One woman expressed so strong a commitment to her work that she had no particular urge to remarry after her divorce. And some of the unmarried female members decided they would not marry unless they found a “politically minded groom.” They literally rejected offers from men who would not accept their current work engagements. For a woman to chose work over a husband was, and still is, almost unheard of in Bangladesh.

Newly elected women leaders hold positions that allow them to make decisions that affect other people's lives. Many of them see themselves as true representatives of women and the poor. The shalish (village arbitration council) is just one area where their participation has proven valuable for their female constituencies. “In the past women were not allowed to attend the shalishes,” says Anjuman Ara from Lalmonirhat district. “They were kicked out. Now they [men] can't do that anymore.”

While the power women UP members currently hold might not be as strong as they would like, their presence can no longer be ignored. Their voices are becoming louder by the day. Most of the elected women see themselves continuing their work in a second term. Some aspire to a career in politics and have already set out their own agendas for the future. Others, not satisfied with the limited programs offered by the UP, have made their own plans to promote adult education and income generating activities for women through civil society.

The Challenges They Face

Given the socio-cultural context, just deciding to run for elections was the first tremendous challenge. For some women, the decision to run meant ignoring severe family objections and facing the daunting experience of campaigning and running for office without the support of their nearest relatives. And for women who won, the initial challenges of elected office grew exponentially. How could they become confident decision makers? What would other people think of them? How could they demonstrate their capacities? The newly elected women had to overcome many fears, calmly remember and apply what they had learned in trainings, and prepare to make good on the promises made during campaigns.

Most women dealt with their fears by learning from their daily practices, gaining strength from NGO backing, and trusting the support of their voters. They also managed to find convincing arguments to contend with traditional views on women's appropriate roles. Some retained orthodox Islamic practices, particularly dress codes to enable unhindered movement through communities. Others compared themselves to the female leaders of the ruling and opposition parties and emphasized their own vocational calling to do something for their communities.

"I succeeded in making them understand that what we are doing is paid work – nothing bad," says Fatema Parvin from Madaripur. "We tell them the prophet Mohammed's wife Ayesha herself was a ruler," adds Rani Begum from Barisal.

The challenges faced by female members in the hill tract areas are somewhat unique. In addition to suffering from gender disparities, female members find themselves competing for projects that are even tough for the men to come by, because there are so few. The region is generally underdeveloped: poverty is widespread, work scarce, schools limited and drinking water in short supply. Communication is also a problem, and female members find it difficult to move between their wards (constituencies), because villages are scattered on different hills. Female members in the hill districts are as determined as those in the lowlands. Unfortunately their work opportunities appear to be more limited, and their influence in the shalish does not seem as strong as that of female members in other regions.

In every region, the most severe challenge to women entering local politics came from their male colleagues. Many female members are still patronized, ignored, or cheated out of their fair share of work. They also have to navigate their way through a jungle of corruption, and fight to head up committees – because while each UP has 12 standing committees, women generally end up heading only those connected to social welfare activities.

Given the reality of these daily battles, the determination and commitment of women leaders is all the more admirable. Most of them refuse to give in to the whims of the dominating Chairmen. They support each other, and find community with other women leaders. And then they argue, protest, complain to higher officials, call the press, apply their own tactics and mobilize their own resources and networks to get their jobs done. The skills and personality traits that got them elected in the first place serve them well once in office.

Help Along the Way: The Role of NGOs

Local NGOs have played important roles in supporting women, encouraging them to run for political office and training them on how to campaign and how to govern. For many women, initial involvement with NGO development initiatives provided increased confidence and a platform from which to run for office. Many of the interviewed women worked with NGOs as cashiers, accountants, teachers and fieldworkers and benefited from

training packages focused on numeracy, literacy, savings, health and sanitation, family planning, nutrition, vocational skills, legal rights and gender awareness.

More recently, and with first-time support from The Asia Foundation, some NGOs have begun to specialize in training aimed at strengthening local government institutions. For the most part female UP members find this kind of training highly rewarding. While most UP specific training courses only last a few days, many NGOs remain involved through regular monthly meetings designed to offer both technical assistance and emotional support. In addition to newly acquired skills, changes in women's attitudes are the most evident results of NGO involvement. Increased confidence yields visible changes in how women deal with daily work responsibilities, as well as in their overall public demeanor, and in their expectation that change is possible.

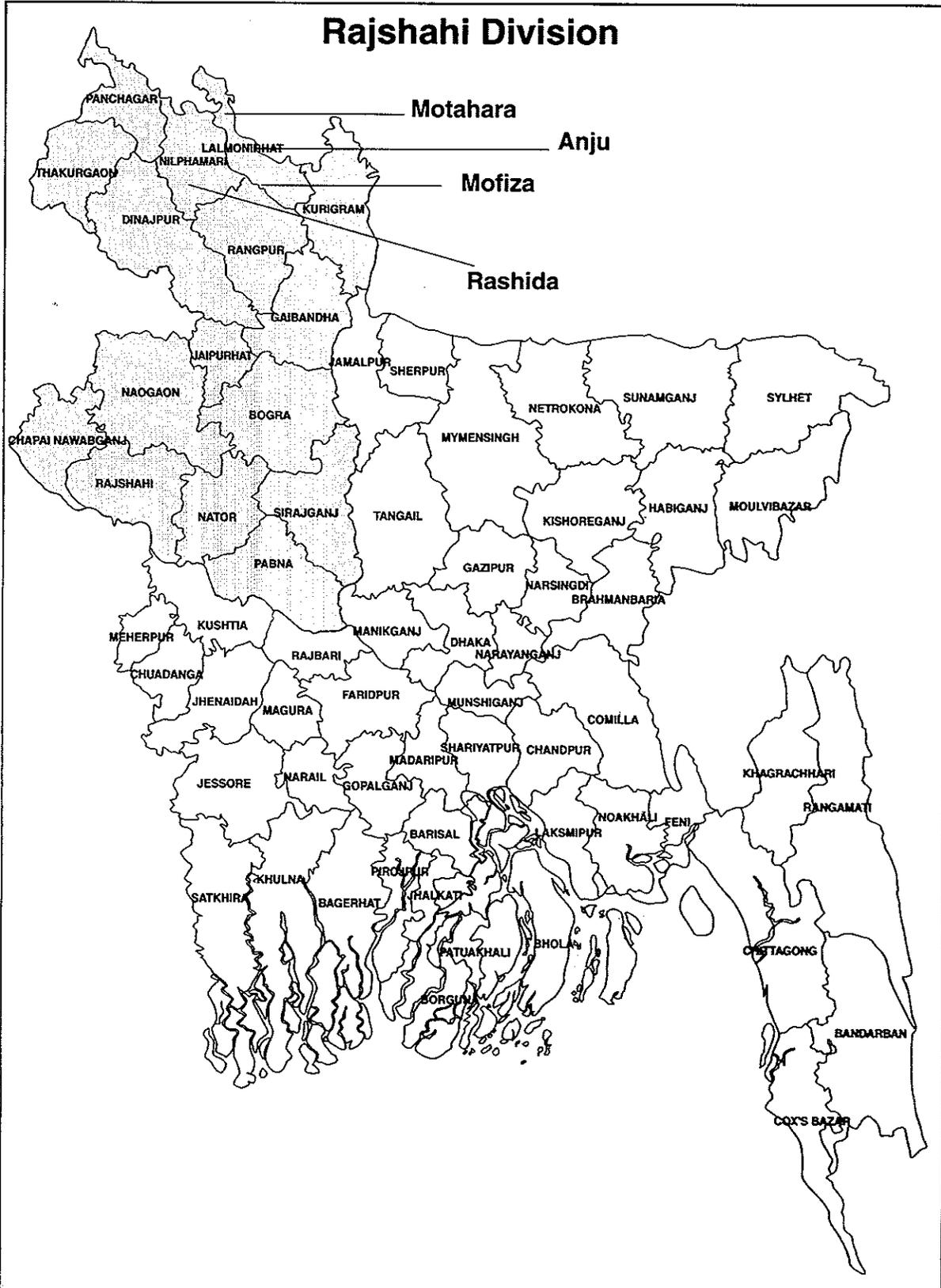
The Future of Women in Politics

The predominant concern for most women is how to overcome obstacles created by their male colleagues and Chairman, who control the management of resources and dominate the UP decisionmaking process. "In a union, all power lies in the Chairman's hands. You can't force him to do things, so if you want to achieve something you need to be clever," says Neharunessa from Sylhet. Some suggested that guaranteeing a specific number of projects for women might be the solution. Others suggested requiring a female member to provide a signature whenever the UP takes up a project, or to empower the three women serving in reserved seats, who together represent the entire union, to at least have veto power or key decisionmaking ability to affect union projects and use of critical resources. Another suggestion was to have a female representative from each union sit on the respective Thana Development Committee – the next highest government level – to guarantee knowledge of all planned projects.

Evidence suggests that promoting solidarity movements among women UP members can improve the quality of their performance in local government. In some cases, women's groups were established thanks to NGO support and the determination of those women to create vehicles of influence. Elected women who are currently part of these support groups have initiated monthly gatherings in which they discuss experiences and challenges. In some cases, these support groups mobilize to advocate together for their common agendas or to apply pressure to correct grievances against male members or Chairmen.

Ultimately, these women believe in equal rights. "I don't want men to be left behind either; I only want men and women to work co-operatively. If I were given the opportunity to talk to the Prime Minister, I would ask her to work on eradicating inequality," says Rani Begum from Barisal. The stories that follow demonstrate just how committed and determined Bangladesh's new female leaders really are.

Bangladesh Map





Name: Motahara

Location: Bhotmari Union, Kaliganj Thana, Lalmonirhat District

Age: 33

Education: Secondary School Certificate

Marital status: married

Children's Ages: 14, 15, 19

Husband: 48, Higher Secondary Certificate, businessman

Household income: II

Landholding: III

Religion: Muslim

Family's socio-political engagement: none

Woman's social memberships and links: none

Woman's leadership and work experience: nominated Union Parishad (UP) member in the past, now she is involved with Asrayon (governmental housing project for the landless), she is also vice-president of a Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) federation

MOTAHARA

Lalmonirhat, a poor and remote area in northern Bangladesh, presents two very diverse images of women roles. The first is the "invisible" woman who travels in a rickshaw with the hood pulled down and the entire rickshaw wrapped in meters of cloth. The second is the woman working with non-governmental organizations who often rides to work on a motorcycle and is not concerned with traditional conventions. Motahara reflects more the second type of woman. Her work as a UP member demands a lot of mobility.

I can go anywhere alone, even if it is late at night.

Motahara has been involved with RDRS for over ten years. She started as a member in a samiti (village group) and later became a teacher in the organization's adult education program. Now she is vice-president of an RDRS federation and a member of the UP. Her personality and links to RDRS helped her win the election.

I had five competitors. I was the most competent amongst them. I am affiliated with RDRS, where I go to offices and talk to people. So everybody thought I was the most conscientious.

Motahara is proud of her work, which keeps her rather busy.

I get up in the morning, quickly put some water on my face, have breakfast and then a bath. Then I see people who come to my home to discuss their problems and after that I go to the parishad, where I distribute wheat among the women. During that time I give them advice on family planning, hygiene and nutrition. After the wheat distribution we usually have a meeting and it ends around five or six. When I get home in the evening people are still waiting for me in my house.

Motabara is one of the three female members of the Thana Development Committee.

Each Chairman recommends one of the three female members from the parishad. The TNO (Thana Nirbahi Officer) then selects three women from all the proposed names. The TNO knows me since I have been involved in various activities for a long time.

She is also involved with Asrayon, a government project for the landless.

Half of the population in Bothmari Union is landless. The Asrayon project started in 1999. We moved earth and filled in the meadow and built houses there. After allotting the houses, couples were given a standardized training and a loan. The TNO and the Assistant Commissioner don't know who the real landless are. We know, because we work locally. We certify who is really landless and who should get a house.

I had five competitors. I was the most competent amongst them.

Knowing who the real landless are is also important in other situations.

The Chairman sits with us and the local elites to select candidates for the VGD (Vulnerable Group Development) cards. Those elites, however, don't move around in the area. They don't really know who the real poor are, but still they rejected our list. They gave a new list to the Chairman. I felt very bad about that. We didn't accept their list and argued with the Chairman saying the people voted for us and that we are the ones who move around locally. He should therefore listen to us. We said that the elites take bribes and put their own people's names on the list. After a long argument, our list was accepted. We presented genuine data about the real poor and asked them to make a fair judgement. We were not afraid to argue, because we had the people's support. The elites on the other hand were only two to three.

When asked how she learned to debate like this and how she thinks she has changed over time, Motabara smiles and replies:

I am used to working with men and going to meetings. That increased my power. I have become more powerful than before. Knowing that now I can speak out makes me happy. Now I spend a lot of time serving the poor.

Through her training with RDRS, where she learned about family planning, hygiene, health matters and women's rights, Motabara can "serve the poor" in many ways.

We go from house to house trying to convince people not to have more than two children. We also tell men not to depend only on the women. It is harmful for women to use too much birth control, so they should start using condoms. The family options include both, not just one.

Motabara spends a lot of time visiting her constituency.

Those who live nearby I visit every ten days and those further away every fortnight. I make a round in all three wards twice every month. . . Each visit takes a long time. When you start convincing somebody about something you can't suddenly stop and leave. You need at least 20 minutes in each house. At that rate I cover 15 to 20 houses per day.

Women ask her for advice on birth control, but they also come to her with marital problems.

We do women-related shalishes and so divorces have decreased a lot. When a man wants to divorce his wife, we force him to pay denmohoor (dowry) and his wife's living expenses for the next three months. We can say anything

in the shalish. In fact the male members ask us to talk. They say most of the issues are women-related, so we should solve them.

Community development projects are also part of Motabara's responsibility.

We make brick-built latrines from the funds of the ADP (Annual Development Programme). One latrine serves five to six households. We give them ring slabs to make temporary latrines. We all sit together and discuss where a tubewell or latrine is necessary.

Motabara enjoys her work so much that she is considering running for elections again.

Now I am so used to being with people, I would miss that most. Now I can't stay for long without the company of people. I will compete again, because now I am learning how to work. So next time I will work more efficiently.

However, if she loses, she will be prepared to help her successor.

Newcomers can learn how to work from us. We can tell them how we worked day and night for the poor and how we supported destitute people. There are also people who don't beg for food, but beg for words. When we haven't been to the villages for a few days they start complaining. They want to see us; they want to talk to us. Many want more than just help.

We can say anything in the shalish. In fact the male members ask us to talk.





Name: Rashida

Location: West Chatnai Union, Dimla Thana, Nilphamari District

Age: 32

Education: class eight

Marital status: married (her husband has a second wife who lives with them)

Child's Age: 16

Husband: 40, class five, businessman

Household income: II

Landholding: I (Rashida's own land)

Religion: Muslim

Family's socio-political engagement: none

Woman's social memberships and links: none

Woman's leadership and work experience: Rashida was involved in various Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) projects and is now president of an RDRS federation

RASHIDA

I have reached this position with the help of poor people. I will never leave them for rich people.

Rashida comes from a very poor background, but over the years she has prospered. Now she is the proud owner of three bigha land. Rashida's story of how she grew into who she is now is fascinating; she is a modern-day Scheherazade.

There was a time when I didn't know much. I was just at home. Then two RDRS workers came to my house and proposed to join a group they were planning to form. I gathered some people who agreed to form a group. I collected money from them and deposited it in a bank account. After a year RDRS wanted to give us a loan, but I said we didn't want a big loan, because we might not be able to pay it back. We only took a 2000 taka loan. With that loan I started a small rice husking business in my house and my husband started a cane and bamboo business. We leased one bigha of land. Later, when that land was for sale, we decided to buy it for 6000 taka. Then one day RDRS asked me if I could run a school. I asked if the school was far away. They said, "No, you have to teach the adult illiterate women that live in your surroundings." They sent me for a five day training course and after that the school started. Once the school project finished I got bored staying at home. At that time RDRS was doing tree plantation work. So I asked the federation president to involve me in that. I worked as a tree plantation supervisor for three years. With the money I saved I leased two bigha of land. Now I always invest my money instead of keeping it; before, when I was so poor, I would just spend it. I want to educate my son.

I have been involved with RDRS since 1990. I became cashier of my group in 1993. I joined an RDRS federation in 1997 and was elected vice-president the same year. By this time my economic situation and that of my group was

better. Finally I was able to provide my family with three meals a day. Then I heard that they were planning to take ten women for an Adarsha Gram housing project. They needed a supervisor who had a Secondary School Certificate. When they couldn't find anybody they asked me and I told them I only studied up to class eight. The federation president, however, said that I could do it. So I took charge of the Adarsha Gram housing project. By this time the UP elections came up and my husband asked me if I wanted to go for it. I said, "No, we are poor. Where do we get so much money? Elections are for the rich. Maybe I would have to sell my land for this and then how would we live?" My husband, however, assured me that this wouldn't be necessary. People would vote for me anyway. I discussed the matter in the federation meeting. I said, "We are poor. We never get any help from the rich. We don't even get any recognition for doing this federation work. So I want to participate in the UP." With everybody's consent I paid the nomination money and informed RDRS. They said, "If your group supports you, go for it." I have full faith in my group. My competitor threw about her money, but I only had to spend money for the nomination fees. My group members took care of the other money needed.

I have reached this position with the help of poor people. I will never leave them for rich people.

A few months ago during the last federation election Rashida became president of her federation. Her federation work involves a lot of community development, which contributes to fostering her abilities as a UP member.

As a federation president I have overall responsibility for everything and I distribute the responsibilities to the other eight members. One might be taking care of ponds, another of a nursery, another of poultry. I sit with them once a week and check their accounts. I also monitor the issuing and repayment of loans. I am in charge of 45 secondary groups, and every week I sit with a different group.

In fact, compared to many other female UP members, Rashida managed to accomplish a broad variety of UP projects.

I did three projects through the Annual Development Programme. Sometimes we also sanction tubewells or spray machines for killing insects. I also did a Food for Work project and a project for the Local Government Engineering Department. I also dealt with divorce and dowry cases, polygamy and marriage registration. In the past they wouldn't register their marriages. Now if a husband wants to divorce his wife, he has to pay the denmohoor and her living expenses. They can't send women back so easily anymore. During the marriage registration we are present and sign as witnesses. In our area the divorce rate is now below five per cent. We did it. We also reduced underage marriage and polygamy. If we carry on working like this, we will be able to erase these things completely. Having achieved so much by starting so small makes me feel very proud. Being able to help my "sisters" makes me happy. The two things I like most are being a UP member and a federation president. When I got the UP result I cried.

It was not always easy for Rashida. She fought hard to become as successful as she is now.

For the first seven months we had to work the way the men wanted us to. They didn't give us the proper share of cards. I thought if things went on like this I would never be able to help poor people. So we discussed the problem amongst us and then the three of us went to the TNO and complained. He called for the Chairman and ordered him to give us the proper share. Since then we get our share.

She continues:

In the past, if I was standing next to an elite, he would never ask me to take a seat. Since the federation, however, and especially after having become a UP member, the elites have realized the strength of our unity. When I didn't have much knowledge about the outside world I myself wouldn't feel comfortable sitting next to them. I wouldn't know what to talk about. Now I go to different places and I work in the UP. So now I feel at ease talking and eating with them at the same table. When I first came to RDRS I was even afraid to talk to their workers. My body would shiver. After a lot of training and work experience the fear disappeared. These changes happened with the support of RDRS. Through their training we realized we are the same human beings as they are.

In our area the divorce rate is now below five per cent. We did it.

Rashida has become an influential person, but she has not forgotten where she came from:

The villagers respect me, but still treat me as one of them. I have reached this position with the help of poor people. So I will never leave them for rich people. I am a poor person myself, so I understand their problems and sorrows. I think, if I can't help my poor brothers and sisters as a UP member, then it's better not to be one at all. But if I can help them, I'll even compete for the post of a Chairman.





Name: Anjuman Ara

Location: Boura Union, Patgram Thana, Lalmonirhat District

Age: 33

Education: Secondary School Certificate

Marital status: divorced (Anju and her daughter live with her mother and younger brothers)

Children's Ages: 13 (daughter), son is with father

Household income: III

Landholding: V

Religion: Muslim

Family's socio-political engagement: her father was a UP Chairman

Woman's social memberships and links: school committee member and Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) samiti member in the past

Woman's leadership and work experience: RDRS teacher and nominated UP member in the past

ANJUMAN ARA

I am starting to feel confident about being able to help people since I got involved in this work. I know the law and I have courage.

Anju is a straightforward, well spoken, independent woman, who has always had a fascination with the law.

I heard the RDRS fieldworkers were looking for people for the legal education project. I learned about law from the RDRS training. They taught us labor, family, inheritance and criminal law and about the constitution. At first I was teaching law to six and later to ten groups with around 20 members in each group. I did this job from 1995 to 2000. I basically went there to help people and teach law, so women would no longer be oppressed. People should know about the law. For example, women don't know much about inheritance law, but men do. Many women don't even know that they are entitled to a share in their father's property.

When I heard that women were participating in the elections I became very excited, because I realized this was my chance to serve the people. I was a law teacher, so people liked me a lot. They thought a woman like me should be in the UP. They would say, "We like the way you talk. You explain things so nicely." I became very inspired by that. Besides, my father was a Chairman.

Anju's legal knowledge is particularly useful in her shalish work.

The shalish interests me most. From my law education I learned that divorcing a wife out of anger is not acceptable. Once a man in our village divorced his wife like that. The mullahs argued the divorce was complete. They said,

“Once a banana tree is hit by an axe it will fall.” I called all villagers and explained the law to them. I told them that “hilla marriage” is a disgusting system. It is outrageous to send your wife to a total stranger and then remarry her again. Then the villagers said, “Fine, but at least they have to remarry.” I agreed to that, but insisted on leaving out the hilla. The mullahs, however, refused to marry them without a hilla, so I brought a mullah from another area and arranged the marriage. As reaction to that the village mullahs wanted to excommunicate the couple, but I said, “Do it, if you want to, but I will take legal action against all of those who do it.” Then they became afraid and made no more problems. That made me really happy.

Anju believes the presence of female members has improved the shalish system immensely.

Women benefit, because we are ensuring their rights. There are so many things that women can't say to a man in a shalish, but they can easily tell us. I like that. In the past women were not allowed to attend the shalish. They were kicked out. People would say, “What do women want here?” Now they can't do it anymore. In our presence they can't shout at women. Now everybody gets proper justice. Men take sides in the shalish, but we female members are neutral. Often there are rumors about male members taking bribes, but we never do. We just want to help our people, so that they don't have to go to court.

People would say, "We like the way you talk. You explain things so nicely." I became very inspired by that.

Besides her commitment to women's rights, Anju is engaged in community development.

Women's main problems are oppression and dowry. But for the whole community it is the lack of tubewells. The government doesn't sanction the necessary amount of tubewells. There are so few tubewells here, that people drink water from wells or the river. Sanitation is also important for our village. The villagers would do their business wherever they could and that spread diseases. We motivate people to build latrines. We tell them, for example, that it would help to maintain a separate latrine and save children from getting ill. We say, “When you do it in an open place, flies will sit on it and spread diarrhea, cholera and dysentery.” We called local elites, such as landowners to the meetings and asked them to convince their sharecroppers to build latrines. Sometimes we formed groups of 20 people consisting of imams, schoolteachers, madrassa teachers and members to go from house to house to motivate people. After realizing this still wasn't enough, we formed groups with school children. Now we go with them from house to house to motivate people.

Anju has managed to get involved in various UP activities, which is a big achievement given the difficulties female members in other unions often face with their male colleagues. She thinks it is up to the women to change this situation.

Nobody will give you your rights for free. You have to go and get them yourself.

Anju has had to fight for herself since her divorce. When asked if she sometimes feels lonely she raises her voice and replies emotionally:

No. I would have married again a long time ago if I felt lonely. It has been nine years since we separated. I am self-sufficient and I am not afraid of anything. I think if men can go on alone, why not women. And if something

happens there is always the law to protect me. Women are not alone. Some men don't marry again after the death of their wives. Like them, I think my husband is dead. What can a husband do to increase your power? If you can be self-sufficient you don't need a husband to depend on. Women who don't have a husband can be courageous too.

**Women who don't have a
husband can be
courageous too.**





Name: Mofiza

Location: Chandrapur Union, Kaliganj Thana, Lalmonirhat District

Age: 45

Education: class eight

Marital status: married

Children's Ages: 11, 14 at home, the other six children are married

Husband: 50, Secondary School Certificate, farmer

Household income: 1

Landholding: 1

Religion: Muslim

Family's socio-political engagement: her uncle was a UP member

Woman's social memberships and links: member of the school committee

Woman's leadership and work experience: nominated UP member before, now president of a Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) federation

MOFIZA

Today is a day that made me very happy. You came to discuss things with us and we got a chance to tell you what we have done in the last three years. Nobody asked us about our problems before. Today I feel happy and good to be able to share that with you.

Mofiza is a radiant woman in whose company one immediately feels relaxed. She tells us how it all started.

I joined an RDRS samiti in 1982 and got a job there in 1989. I was in charge of the social awareness center and was running seven to eight training courses. I got an award of 2000 taka, because I managed a big number of students. We taught women how to sign their name, how to grow vegetables and how to use sanitary latrines. I myself had learned those things before. RDRS gave me a lot of training, but not enough work. I was only organizing groups and taking loans, but that was not enough for me. I wanted to do more than that. Then my trainer told me about the direct elections for female members... I convinced my voters they would benefit if I was elected. They saw my capacities and knew I could go anywhere. They knew I could bring them necessary things other people could not. My villagers are poor; so am I. My competitor was an elite, but the villagers didn't vote for her.

Once Mofiza became elected her status in her family increased significantly.

In the past they wouldn't recognize me at all, but now they do, because of my work and skills. Even when my elder brother-in-law does something wrong I point it out. Now my in-laws are very proud of me. They don't do anything without my advice.

In her position as a UP member Mofiza has to demonstrate responsibility for her community.

People come with different kinds of problems. For example, once their irrigation channel got blocked, so they all came together to get help for cleaning it. We made a plan and sent it to the council. The Chairman got it approved by the TNO. Then we appointed workers to clear the channel. They also come with demands for bridges connecting roads to their children's schools. They come to us, because they say the male members don't listen to them.

Mofiza thinks the villagers don't approach the male members for help very often, because they belong to the rich. She, on the other hand, comes from a poor background, and people can relate to that.

Poor people get more help from poor UP members, because they know the sufferings of the poor.

I am still one of them and they can share everything with me openly. Poor people get more help from poor UP members, because they know the sufferings of the poor. Rich people have less understanding. The Chairman and male members don't listen to them like I do. And poor people are afraid of talking to them. With them, they cannot express everything openly, but they are not afraid of me, because I am poor also. I am one of them.

She is confident that she can adequately represent the poor in the UP.

I speak about their problems in the UP meetings. Financial support alone is not enough. Social support is necessary too. There was a bad woman in our area. I brought her back on the right path. Everybody asked me why I would mix with such a person. I replied: to make her good. This woman did bad things. I asked her not to do that and to live a good life. I promised to support her. I told her she could come to me whenever she wanted to. It wasn't her fault. The society is responsible for her situation, because they are elites and she is poor. Now everybody praises me, because I managed to put her back on the right track. We don't have work opportunities for women here. There are not that many NGOs we can send them to.

Mofiza was a nominated member before, but this was nothing like her current position.

When I was a nominated member I never went to the parishad. Chowkidars would come to collect my signature. I didn't feel like a member that time. People wouldn't call me to any shalish. They didn't even know that I was a member. But now people of three wards know I am a member, because they voted for me. They feel they have a right to approach me. It makes me happy that I built mosques and temples with the TR (Test Relief) project. I also set up tubewells in three places. With these kinds of activities everybody knows about me. The villagers respect me as an educated person who has links to all levels of society. They think, "Only this woman can really help us, so we should re-elect her." They say, "We were destitute, but survived with her help." You don't help people only with goods, but also with your advice. For example, sometimes when I give people food and relief cards, I tell them it's not the only thing I do. I also plan to spend money for schools and mosques. I tell them, "These are your things also. It is not good to depend on food and relief cards. You shouldn't come to me with your personal problems only. You should also demand tubewells, schools, roads and bridges. One card only helps a single person, but these projects help the whole community."

When asked if the villagers have greater respect for the male or the female members, she replies:

They respect us [women] more. They think we are superior, because we are members of three wards. Villagers call us "ward chairmen" and they call male members only "member sahib." Our signatures are compulsory for

getting loans from krishi bank (agro-credit bank). The rule is that a UP Chairman or a female ward member must sign. So they think we do the work of a Chairman.

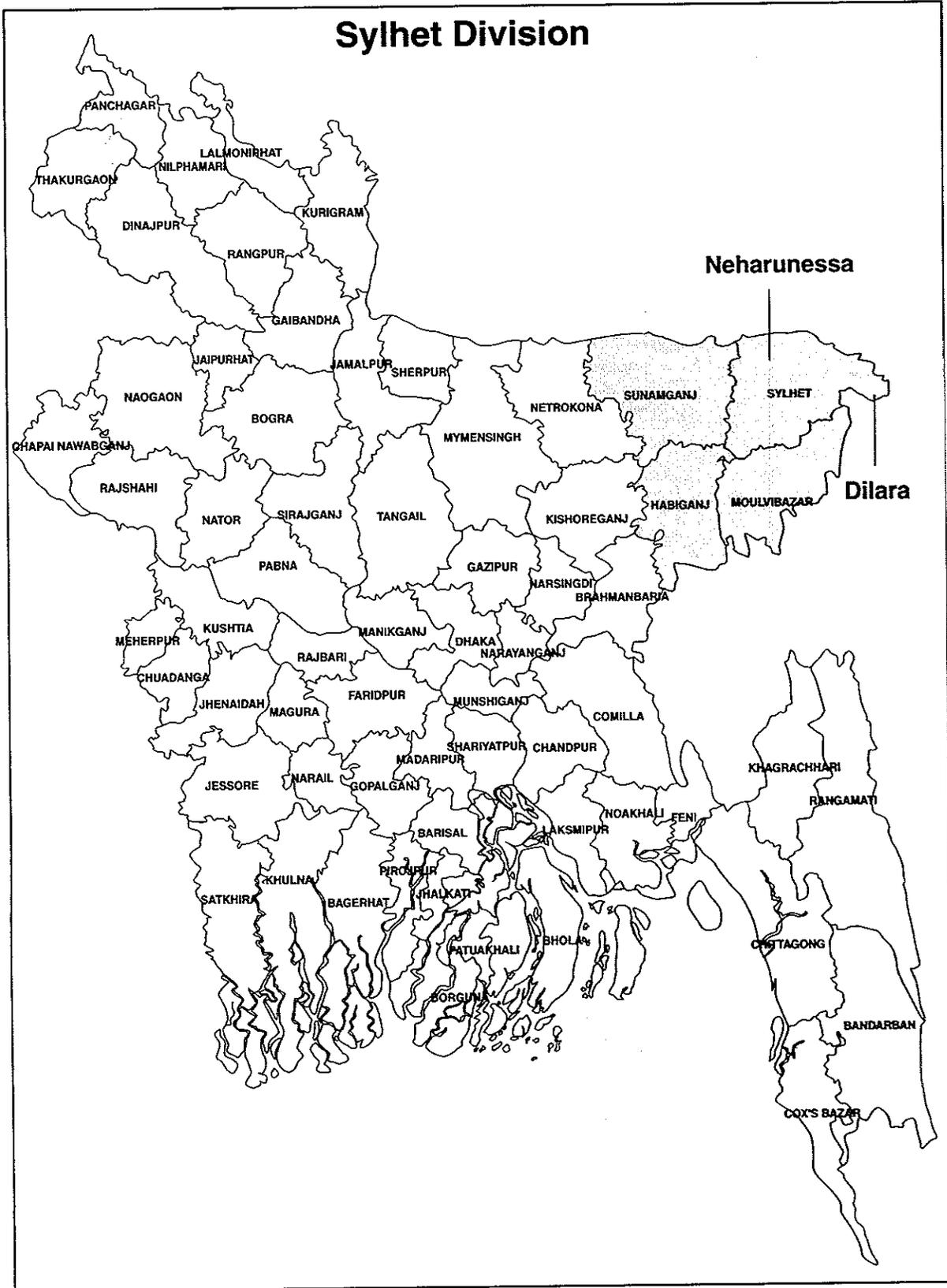
I tell them, "You shouldn't come to me with your personal problems only. You should also demand tubewells, schools, roads and bridges."

Mofiza wants to continue her political career.

I hope I can do more work in the future. Our Chairman doesn't care about women's issues. In our school there is only one female teacher. More women would come if I were to get involved. Women would become interested in education. Now we have a school. One day there will be a college and we will make progress in education. I hope to compete for the post of a Chairman in the future.



Bangladesh Map





Name: Neharunessa

Location: Bisonat Union, Bisonat Thana, Sylhet District

Age: 32

Education: Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Education

Marital status: married

Child's Age: 3

Husband: 35, Higher School Certificate, businessman

Household income: III

Landholding: II

Religion: Muslim

Family's socio-political engagement: her husband is a local Awami League Leader

Woman's social memberships and links: member of the school committee and Thana Development Committee, links to Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST)

Woman's leadership and work experience: works as a teacher and is the president of the UP women's samiti

NEHARUNESSA

Bisonat is both a very conservative and a very neglected thana. Many villages lack good roads, an adequate electric system, or sufficient tubewells. Most female members of the thana are poor and have a minimal educational background. Many women feel they are marginalized from political processes.

We keep shouting at the top of our voices hoping that one day they will hear us.

Compared to these women Neharunessa is relatively well off. Thanks to her husband's political connections and her own position as an established teacher, she has quite a bit of influence in her village. This important standing was recognized by her competitors in the election.

Three others, in addition to me, submitted their nomination, but later they withdrew. There is only one girl's school in our area. The other nominees were all mothers of my students. They said, "Since you are there, there is no need for us."

Other factors might have played a role as well in the success of Neharunessa.

My neighbors were very supportive. They asked the other nominees to withdraw. The villagers did not allow them to send their nomination papers to the TNO. They arranged a big meeting where they demanded that the others should withdraw, so that their apa ("sister") could be elected.

Regardless of her influential position in the village, Neharunessa faces limitations when it comes to getting her share of work in the UP.

I get very little support from the UP. Whenever someone comes with a problem, I take my own initiative to solve it. With the help of the local Member of Parliament I managed to start a road construction project. But it was all through my own initiative. The Chairman doesn't give women members any work. Still I go to villages regularly and take care of things.

None of the female UP members in Bisonat Thana head any committee.

We know this mandate is on paper, but the Chairman doesn't listen to us when we tell him about it. I am not in charge of any projects, though in the past, they asked for our signatures and appointed us as project leader, but this designation is only on paper. There was a social development committee, but the Chairman refused to include any elected women on it. We protested when we discovered the committee meeting was held and none of the women had been informed.

Nebarunessa is the president of a women's samiti she decided to organize as a form of support for all female UP members.

The women's main problem is that the UP doesn't give them much work. Some don't even get invitations to attend the meetings. They just use the women's signatures on blank documents.... Perhaps the female members could be informed earlier, maybe through a letter from the Ministry, about the type of development work that will come

I get very little support from the UP. Whenever someone comes with a problem, I take my own initiative to solve it.

to the parishad. Then they could show that letter to the Chairman and demand their share. In my UP we are not getting much work. Wherever we went for help, no response came. I thought we might be able to do something if we were united. So, I decided to organize a group. I made this samiti myself. Now we can tell different organizations that we are an association, and they can help by giving us training.

Nebarunessa also identifies the broader problems women Union Parishad members face.

These women are desperate to talk to someone about their problems. They want to work, but they are excluded from all facilities and means for public services as well as opportunities for employment. They address this problem in every possible meeting, but nobody supports them. Most of them are very poor here. They don't have any kind of job... I can guarantee they are capable of doing anything.

Nebarunessa thinks those women might have a better chance if they were more educated.

In a union, all power lies in the Chairman's hands. You can't force him to do things, so if you want to achieve something you need to be clever. And for that you have to be educated.... I was just talking with a BLAST lawyer about admitting the female members to the Open University, through which they could gain a Secondary School Certificate in two years. I already enrolled one of them, but I don't have enough money to pay for everyone's admission fee. Though I think this would really help them. It doesn't matter if the Chairman gives me work or not; people will listen to me, because of my educational qualifications. If they were more educated, the Chairmen would probably ignore them less.

Although female members of this union have been granted limited work opportunities, Nebarunessa is prepared

to give it another try in the coming elections. She also has ideas on how to improve the women's situation in her area.

Now the government is giving women 50 per cent of the teaching jobs. This helps educated women, but those who only have basic literacy should also be involved in some kind of government or NGO work. I think the government should provide jobs for women of all sorts of educational backgrounds. I want to arrange adult education for women and employ female teachers for that purpose. I also have a plan to start a sewing project with 50 women. I will arrange help from different organizations. When women can work and earn a monthly salary, they don't have to worry about men.

I thought we might be able to do something if we were united.

Nebarunessa also has suggestions for improving the effectiveness of the local government:

The government should ensure that all UP members are delegated responsibility. They could organize a committee for each ward and design specific work responsibilities. The government should distribute the work directly. Monthly and yearly reports on work results should then be submitted to the UP.





Name: Dilara
Location: Kuchai Union, South Surma Thana, Sylhet District
Age: 31
Education: Higher Secondary Certificate
Marital status: unmarried (lives in a joint family)
Children's Ages: none
Eldest brother: 58, Secondary School Certificate, businessman
Household income: V
Landholding: III
Religion: Muslim
Family's socio-political engagement: her youngest brother is a member of the Jatiya Party
Woman's social memberships and links: school committee member, links to Voluntary Association for Rural Development (VARD)
Woman's leadership and work experience: family planning worker with a governmental youth action group in the past, now treasurer of Sylhet Samaj Kallyan Sangstha (SSKS) and secretary of the Sylhet Sadar and Companyganj UP women's samiti

DILARA

Dilara lives with her five brothers and their families in a large extended household. Her brothers run a business and have their own shop; one works in a bank, another rents out houses; in short the family is well off. Dilara herself receives income every month from shares in a business she has invested in. Since 1998 she has been involved with VARD, which offers female members support for their UP work. Initially Dilara was not interested in getting involved with the UP.

I didn't want to compete in the UP election, because I knew about the corruption. I heard about Chairmen and members misappropriating relief goods. I wanted to help the villagers in the way I was doing before, but both Hindus and Muslims insisted that I compete. For that reason I even avoided going to the village for a week. However, when I went to the village again after that week, I found out that the villagers had already gone to my eldest brother to ask his permission. As my father is dead, my eldest brother is the guardian. When he agreed, I had to do it.

Once she got used to the idea of campaigning though, she was set on winning. Her educational background and strong links to the community also provided her with strong public support she needed.

While I was campaigning in the area I felt strong public support. So I knew I would win. Since my childhood I have helped villagers whenever they needed me. I always had good connections with doctors and clinics through my job as a family planning worker, where people could send patients to the clinic even at two in the morning if needed. I also can write things for them, like inheritance certificates.

Dilara is a determined young woman, and this is reflected in her personal crusade to manage and direct her own life.

I decided to remain unmarried since I have not found somebody equal minded. I had a few proposals, but my brother told the families of my special requirements and that I would not leave this job.

Dilara also applies similar determination to do a good job as an elected official and has worked hard to overcome the obstacles she faces as a woman member:

The main problem is that at present members are unable to do UP work in the proper UP office because of repair work, but in a shop the Chairman has rented to us. He charges us rent for his own economic interest. I went to the TNO to complain about this, but he didn't listen to me. The former TNO was a good and honest man, but the 17 Union Chairmen had him transferred. I also went to the DC (District Commissioner), but had no success. Sometimes I feel we members are nothing but pawns to money for the benefit of the Chairmen, TNOs, DCs and MPs (Members of Parliament). We didn't have to pay rent in the former UP building. Four male members paid the Chairman rent money, but I said, "I will not pay a single taka." The Chairman said to me, "Then sign the resolution, so we can get the money from the UP fund," but I didn't. "Then you have to sit under a tree next month," said the Chairman in response. I replied, "If you can sit under a tree, I can as well." We always have arguments like this about the UP office. The original UP building needed to be repaired and I proposed to do it with the annual budget fund. Everybody agreed and a sanction of 20,000 taka was granted. I started the work. The Chairman realized that the building would soon be fixed and we could return to work there. So he asked me to stop the work, but I didn't. I finished the work. Then he complained to my brother. I got very angry with my brother and told him, "I am a member, not you. In the future never interfere in my UP matters."

While I was campaigning in the area I felt strong public support. So I knew I would win.

Dilara has to draw on her own sources of support to get things done.

With the help of the local MP, I built a road, 275 meters long. It happened because during the 1996 elections the MP stayed in our house for a few days. He calls me "sister." That's when I told him, "I can help you on one condition. If you win, you have to build us a road." He made a commitment and I had the contract arranged even before I became a UP member. During the rainy season the road to the primary school used to get flooded and was dangerous for children who could hurt themselves on their way to school. In 18 years of office, the Chairman did nothing to repair this road. But I had the road repaired in one and a half years.

Dilara has also worked hard to find allies among the Union Parishad to advance her causes.

The Chairman has two members who follow him, but we are ten. The ten of us support each other because we have the same commitment. We do our monthly meetings separately in our homes. Our rule is as long as you are not dead, you cannot be absent from the meetings. This is exactly why the Chairman is jealous. He thinks, "Why do ten members do whatever this woman says?" But I never say anything that doesn't make sense. That's why everybody is behind me.

Most female members in this area were facing similar problems carrying out their duties. They formed a women's samiti and Dilara became the secretary.

We didn't get any of our rights. We didn't get our proper share of Vulnerable Group Development cards (food and relief cards). Female members were not even provided with a chair in the UP office, but had to sit and wait on the

veranda. So I thought if we were united, we could help each other claim our rights. At the beginning we had no training on what to do in the UP. Although I am educated, I didn't know these things. Later VARD offered us training. Through them we learned that we can be members or chairmen of project committees. Then we

I told my brother, "I am a member, not you. In the future, never interfere with my UP matters."

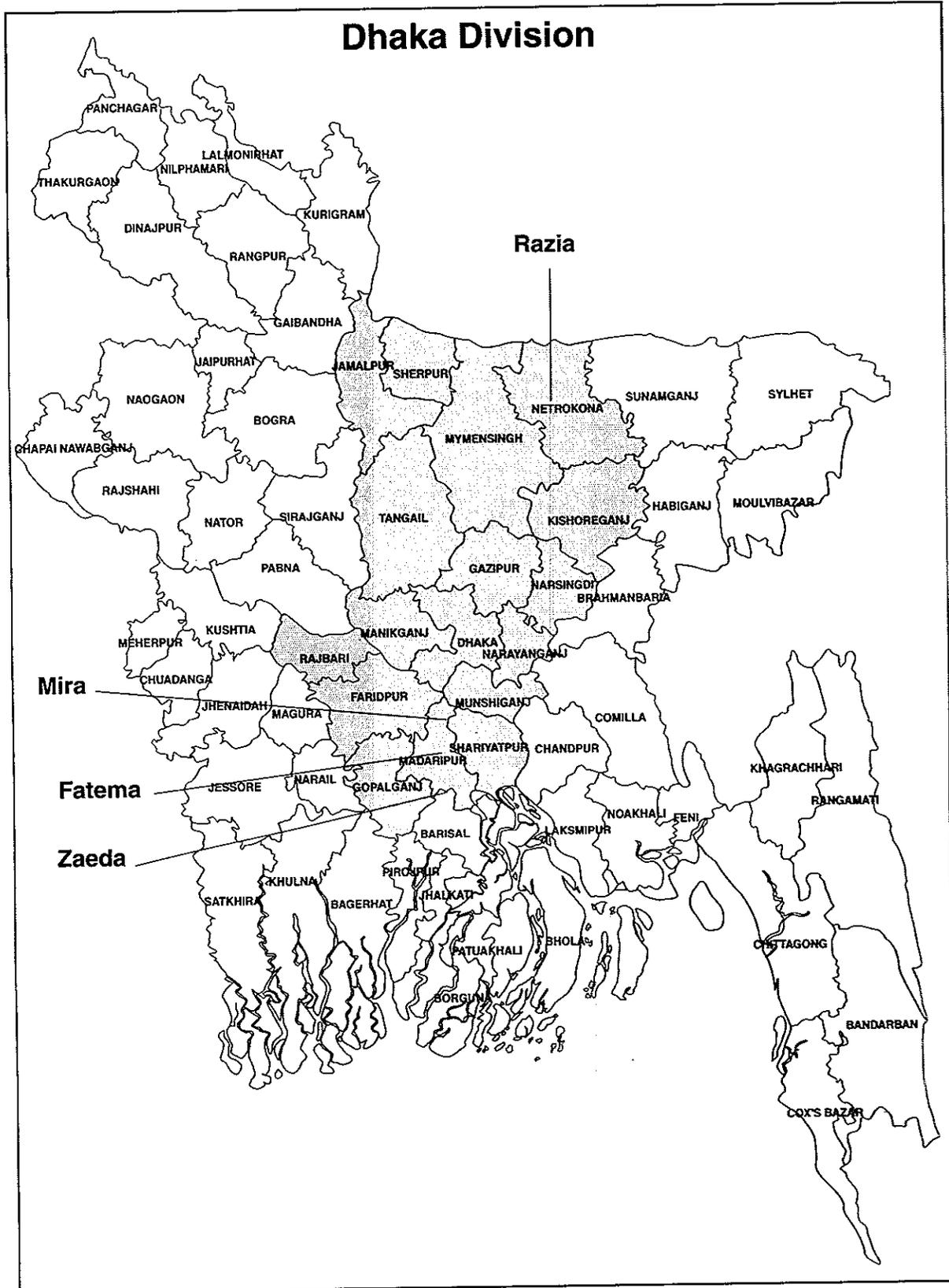
collected the manual and made a little progress. Last November we held a reception for the Parliament Speaker who donated 10,000 taka to our samiti. He also promised to give every female member three tubewells and a small project worth 5000 taka. He and other respected people from Sylhet are on our advisory board. Now I can go to the Parliament and meet the Speaker or Ministers through my samiti. I couldn't have done this on my own.

Dilara has clear ideas for her political future:

I am an optimist. I will compete if people have confidence in me. I have a plan to rehabilitate destitute women through a sewing project. It might take two to four years, because we need capital. We hope to train 50 to 60 women who could train others. I already took two destitute women to a shelter for women and arranged six months training for them. Women are disadvantaged. Our society is still ruled by men, and women don't have any rights. They should earn some money. When both husband and wife earn money, they can offer their children a better education and a better life.



Bangladesh Map





Name: Zaeda Khanum

Location: Patch Kholo Union, Madaripur Thana, Madaripur District

Age: 30

Education: Secondary School Certificate

Marital status: married

Children's Ages: 5, 12, 14

Husband: 45, Bachelor of Commerce, works in a bank

Household income: II

Landholding: I

Religion: Muslim

Family's socio-political engagement: her brother is an Awami League member, her brother-in-law was a UP Chairman

Woman's social memberships and links: member of the Thana Development Committee, links to the Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA)

Woman's leadership and work experience: chairperson of the UP women's committee

ZAEDA KHANUM

Blaming their male colleagues for sidelining them in decision making, female members of 15 union parishads in Madaripur Sadar Upazila have threatened to resign en masse.
(The Daily Star, 4.2.2001)

Zaeda was one of the 15 women. In fact she is primarily responsible for encouraging female members to resist their male colleagues' abuse of power. Recently turning 30 years of age, Zaeda is a fearless and very determined young woman.

After the election, the Chairmen and male members did not give us proper recognition. So I decided to bring 14 journalists to MLAA at my own expense. I discussed the issue with the other female members. As I was the most qualified among them I became their leader. We formed a committee and notified the TNO, the DC, the Members of Parliament and the Ministers. We also informed the press. When all the Chairmen saw how active these new women were, they formed an association too of all the elected Chairmen. If any work arrives at the thana headquarters, the 15 elected Chairmen sit together and in this way they still exclusively rule the 15 unions of the thana.

Zaeda describe the kind of struggles women members face to carry out their duties on the Union Parishad and some of the strategies they have developed to address the negative attitudes and obstacles put up by the male members and Chairmen:

I go to the meetings. I discuss things, but they don't listen to me. I keep talking anyway, but at the end of the meeting I feel disappointed and go back home. The Chairmen and the male members treat us female members

like showcase dolls. They think, "When we feel like calling them they come and when we tell them to go they go. What kind of members are they anyway? They are pseudo- members." The government, however, issued a letter stating that female members should be heads, secretaries or members of one third of all the projects coming from the Annual Development Programme. We should also be entitled to draw up half the list of the candidates for the Vulnerable Group Development cards. I made my list according to that directive, but I won't submit it if they don't agree to give me my share. I will send a written complaint to the DC and TNO and if necessary I will go to the press.

When asked where she gained so much confidence, she smiles and says:

I am not afraid of anybody, not even my husband. You know, through my tactics I managed to get a few things done in the UP. For example, I managed to get 100 tons of wheat from the Food for Work project. But I had to promise the Chairman his percentage to get the work contract for my constituency. The Chairmen always take a percentage from these kinds of projects at the time of distributing the work to members. But he still created a lot of obstacles for me. I tell you, I had to apply a lot of tricks to get this work done.

I discuss things, but they don't listen to me. I keep talking anyway, but at the end of the meeting I feel disappointed and go back home.

When asked whether she could envision a more co-operative relationship with her male colleagues in the future Zaeda angrily shakes her head, "no."

I don't need any help from the male members. I am an elected member. I can do my own work. They try to avoid us. They think, "What can female members do?" So why should I want to work with these men? They will never help us under any circumstances.

Given these problems, Zaeda believes establishing a women's committee for all female UP members in the area is of utmost importance to serve as a support group and means of information sharing.

I am a member of the Thana Development Committee. I therefore receive new incoming information and I inform all female members about it. Whenever necessary, I take the initiative and call a meeting. When we sit together we discuss our problems, like lack of recognition and not getting the appropriate amount of wheat, and we discuss what we can do about this.

She pauses for a moment and sighs about how difficult it is to persevere.

Ah, if only these women had more fighting spirit, I would turn this entire district upside down.

In order to motivate women's involvement in such a committee, Zaeda identifies the need for financial and logistical support. She thinks an organization like MLAA would provide the ideal setting for official women committee meetings. Also, female UP members would probably take invitation letters more seriously if they were backed by a non-governmental organization.

I think we female members should have a joint bank account, so we could bear the expenses for our meetings together. I also asked MLAA to arrange a place where we can meet together. Even if we were to meet only every three to six months, it would still be of great help.... MLAA gives us transport allowance and food whenever we



attend their meetings and training sessions, but I don't want that. I want them to give me a place where I can speak and listen to other women members' concerns.

Will Zaeda run in an election again?

I will go for reserved seats again if I get positive feedback on my work. I think reserved seats are better, because only we women compete, so I won't feel ashamed if I don't win. There is no bigger shame than being defeated by a man. However, if they don't give proper recognition to the reserved seats, then general seats are better. Going from a reserved seat to a general seat, though, would decrease my work area, which would decrease my recognition. In that sense, it is probably better to compete for the post of a Chairman, but you need from seven to eight lakh taka (US\$ 12,500 to 14,500) for that. There are many competitors, but I will go for it on the day God makes me able to.

Ah, if only these women had more fighting spirit, I would turn this entire district upside down.





Name: Fatema Parvin
Location: Pearpur Union, Madaripur Thana, Madaripur District
Age: 35
Education: Secondary School Certificate
Marital status: married
Children's Ages: 6, 16, 18, 20
Husband: 45, Higher Secondary Certificate, businessman
Household income: II
Landholding: I
Religion: Muslim
Family's socio-political engagement: husband is a member of the Awami League
Woman's social memberships and links: member of madrasa and mosque committee, links to Proshika and Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA)
Woman's leadership and work experience: before her marriage Fatema was the secretary of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Young Women's Group, she was both a nominated and a general seat UP member in the past

FATEMA PARVIN

Fatema is a dynamic woman. She is the mother of four children, two of them already grown up. She has a long history of political involvement. Before her marriage she was the secretary of the BNP's young women's group in Khulna. She started her UP career as a nominated member in the mid-1980s. Then she was elected into the general seats and now she is a member of the reserved seats.

I was a nominated, not directly elected, member once, but even then I was working as much as the male members. One day the male member of that ward said, "Why is a nominated member showing off so much?" On that day I decided to run for direct election and started to make preparations. I would never have come this far if I cared about what people say!

Fatema succeeded and became a member holding a general seat.

I was the only woman elected. When we went to take our oath I was standing in the same row with the other members. I was introducing myself to people when the Thana Nirbahi Officer came towards me and asked me to take a seat. He said the oath was only for elected members, not nominated ones. Then our Chairman told him that I was an elected member also. At that point I was the only elected woman member in the entire Madaripur district. It was a very nice feeling and I thought my success would encourage many other women.

When asked why she went for a reserved seat this time rather than a general seat, she replied:

I figured I already was a nominated and a general seat member before, so I should try the reserved seat now, work in a bigger area, and gain broader popularity. It was part of my plan to move forward step by step. I was even preparing for the upazila elections, but later these elections were dropped.

Fatema describes how being directly elected instead of nominated makes a big difference.

When I was a nominated member people would say, "You are only here because the Chairman wanted you." Now, however, I can say that I was elected by the people. Participating in the elections is quite an experience. You get so tense. You always wonder, Will I be elected or not? I was so happy when I heard I had won, you wouldn't believe it. I would not have felt so much joy if the competition had not been so tough. There is no fun in an election without competitors – and the competitors need to be strong. You need tough competition, where the difference is only around ten votes.

I would never have come this far if I cared about what people say!

Fatema chairs the road construction committee.

The workers have a team leader and he is responsible to me. Once in a while, when the work quality isn't good, I need to scold him. I try to make him understand that this work is for his country and that he must not neglect it... I feel very good about being the chairman of a committee. Being a woman I am head of a project. Oh, if only more women could work in leading positions like me.

Fatema's mother had significant influence in shaping her life.

My mother was not a member, but she regularly participated in the village shalish. Whenever there was a shalish, people would come to my mother for justice. She contributed a great deal to what I have become. She always inspired me.

Fatema too feels the respect of the community despite the many obstacles she has faced along the way.

I think local people respect me more than a man. People can always reach me. I am always available, but male members are always busy. Even when I go to take my bath in the pond, women wait there to discuss things with me. But it wasn't always this way. I was educated in a town. People would use that against me and say, "Those kind of women never stay with their husbands." Once I went to a huzur's (Islamic priest's) house to ask him for a vote. When he saw me he said "Nauzoobillah" (Save me from the devil) and fled. In the early days people would criticize and make fun of women like me interested in politics. At the beginning I was a little afraid of them. I wouldn't say anything in front of them. I was also very young, but eventually I succeeded in making them understand that what we are doing is paid work – nothing bad. I would tell people that if women stayed home, there wouldn't be any progress. That is how things started changing. Fatwas (religious edicts) have decreased and women are now advancing. They receive training from NGOs. Now the women don't care about the huzurs as much as they did before. In the past village women did not know how to talk. Now when you go to the villages you can see that they talk quite well. They not only have the courage to talk, but they also talk in a sensible way.

There is still room for progress, as Fatema still must face regular resistance from the male members of the UP. Unlike her mother, for example, Fatema is not receiving proper summons to the shalish though this is one of her functions on the UP.

They don't call us to the shalishes. They don't accept us because we are from the reserved seats. We might get one third of the work from the Annual Development Programme, but we don't get one third of the money involved in it. We always get the less important projects, while the men keep the major projects for themselves. They say we are from the reserved seats. They don't seem to understand the real meaning of reserved. They think women from the reserved seats are supposed to do poultry raising and family planning type work.

Despite these many obstacles faced along the way, Fatema feels a sense that she personally has contributed to making changes important in people's lives, particularly women's lives.

Of course I have contributed to the changes in my area. I was a member even before I became involved with NGOs. I convinced the villagers to educate their children rather than send them to work. I arranged cheap books for them. I couldn't help them all alone, so I connected them with NGOs.

If God keeps me alive until the next election and if the people want me, I will compete for a Chairman's post.

When asked about the future, Fatema replies confidently and with clear ideas about her plans:

If God keeps me alive until the next election and if the people want me, I will compete for a Chairman's post. If I win I will promote women, reserved seats, and local development. I will set up cottage industries for women with the help of the government or NGOs. When villagers cannot marry off or educate their daughters they send them to Dhaka to work in garment factories or to do domestic work. There, these women get abused. I will try to provide income-generating work for them by establishing small industries like sewing projects or chanachur and candle factories. I will take loans from BSCIC (Bangladesh Small Cottage Industries Cooperation) or from NGOs. In this way, no women will be neglected, not even those who cannot be married off. I feel sorry for poor women. I want to do something for them.





Name: Razia Akhter

Location: Modunpur Union, Kendua Thana, Netrokona District

Age: 31

Education: class eight

Marital status: married

Children's Ages: 6, 8, 9, 13

Husband: 42, Higher School Certificate, runs a grocery shop

Household income: 1

Landholding: 1

Religion: Muslim

Family's socio-political engagement: her husband is a member of the high school and bazaar committee, her father was a UP member

Woman's social memberships and links: links to Padakhep Manobik Unnayan Kendra (PMUK) and Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS)

Woman's leadership and work experience: Razia worked in an insurance company and early on was a group leader of a credit samiti at the Association For Social Advancement (ASA)

RAZIA AKHTER

Razia is a sharp politician who understands the importance of women's political participation, the scope of influence available through political participation, and the possibilities for her own daughter who may be able to excel in politics beyond her mother and grandfather.

It would be good to have more female members in general seats, although personally I am not so interested. They only represent two villages, and I am so used to walking that I wouldn't like to work in two villages only. My father held a general seat, I hold a reserved seat, and I want my daughter to become a UP Chairman.

Razia has had links to various non-governmental organizations over many years. ASA in particular has been important to Razia. As she has always been popular in her village, people came up to her to approach ASA to organize loans for them. Eventually a samiti of 25 women was formed with Razia acting as the group leader under ASA. She was with ASA for eight years. For a few years she was also connected with PMUK. More recently, and in relation to her UP work, Razia received training from BNPS. Razia described the value of this training.

I learned how to talk and act in public. They taught us about accounting and budgeting. We also learned that if we three women are united in the meetings, the Chairman cannot overrule us or keep things hidden from us.

Razia is deeply committed to the people in her constituency and works hard to understand and represent their interests.

I make rounds in my wards twice every week. Two or three women usually come with me, and I visit all households every Saturday and Wednesday. On those two days I walk around in the wards and see what people are doing. I

check in on pregnant women and children and advise them to go to the health clinic. They don't know much about these things, but I know more thanks to my training from Padakhep (PMUK). Sometimes, women complain that hospitals don't give them medicines they need. In these cases I advise them to go to the hospital on a day when I can be there too. Saturday is haat (market) day, so I spend the morning in the village and go to the bazaar in the afternoon to see people I missed in the village. I advise people about bank loans. I don't work for the UP every day. However, if there is special work, a meeting or problem that needs attention, I'm ready. Today, for example, many people will be waiting for me in Modunpur, because they know about a meeting there. They will be waiting for me, because they can catch me there after the meeting is over. Next Wednesday the bank will start giving loans. Most probably they want to discuss that with me, because they are afraid to talk to the manager directly and they want me to talk to him. Like yesterday I had to go to the bank with a widow pensioner because she felt too shy to talk to the bank manager. I don't mind spending my own money for the rickshaw fare, because I know they won't manage without me.

Since I was elected, women are getting more respect here.

Razia feels people appreciate her commitment to UP work.

The villagers feel the freedom to discuss anything with me. I spend two to three minutes in every house on my way. When they see me they feel good, and I enjoy chatting with all of them. I like my work a lot. I think when I die, everyone will come see me.

Razia is particularly proud of having increased women's status and condition in her area.

Since I was elected, women are getting more respect here. Now women have value. Previously, men would make bad comments to girls in the streets, but now they show them respect. Generally, Bengali girls are reluctant to talk about such harassment, but they came to me to complain. So I approached these men and scolded them by reminding them about their own mothers and sisters.

Razia was not always so confident and assertive. She reflects on the changes she has experienced in her life since the election.

Changes came from all directions. My way of talking changed, and I have more courage than before. I would not have become close to so many people if I had not run for the elections. Before I did not talk much because I felt shy, but I am not like that anymore. I have helped many people make a living. With my female colleagues I have had more co-operation. In the early days, male members would try to patronize me, but I was always clever enough to understand their tricks. At the beginning I didn't attend all the big shalishes, but for the last two years they have been calling me to every court, because I have an excellent knowledge of the laws and the rules. Before I was a housewife. Now I can employ someone to take care of the housework and can concentrate on my children's education and on public relations. Before I was a housewife with many needs. Now I am a UP member. I don't need to ask my husband for money, not even for my daughter. Before we quarreled a lot. He was unemployed and I was in the house and when two people stay at home all day they end up quarrelling. Now I am away from home most of the time, so there is no quarrel.

Razia believes that her determination to attend all UP and other important meetings, even at night, regardless of the long journey, has served as an important encouragement for other women and enabled them to become more united to address their common concerns.

Women should be united. We have a women's development committee in our village that holds monthly meetings in the UP. BNPS has a women's development committee too. These committees deal with problems like women's oppression, under-aged marriage and dowry issues. The village men seem to both fear and respect these united women. Though I am not a member of these committees, they call me whenever there is a meeting. On committee meeting days, hardly any women stay at home. They go there. They even speak. They do this because they think if a female UP member can stay out until late at night, then they should at least be able to go to meetings held during daytime.

Before I was a housewife with many needs. Now I am a UP member. I don't need to ask my husband for money.





Name: Mira Rani Vokto

Location: Amgram Union, Razoir Thana, Madaripur District

Age: 45

Education: Bachelor of Arts (BA)

Marital status: married

Children's Ages: 13, 14, 18, 23 (four daughters)

Husband: 55, BA, teacher

Household income: III

Landholding: V

Religion: Hindu

Family's socio-political engagement: her husband is vice chairman of the Amgram Union Awami League

Woman's social memberships and links: member of the Thana Development Committee, links to Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA)

Woman's leadership and work experience: assistant accountant of Gono Unnayon Prochesta (GUP) in the past, now she works as a teacher; she is also secretary of the Amgram Union Awami Women's League

MIRA RANI VOKTO

Mira comes from an affluent family background. She is the secretary and her husband the vice chairman of the Awami League Party in their union. Mira is also one of the three female members of the Thana Development Committee. The family appears to be both influential and popular in their village.

When people hear I am sick, they queue up at my door to visit me. They loved me and my husband even before I became a UP member.

Mira has been involved with NGOs since 1975, when she was the assistant accountant for GUP. In support of her UP work she received training from MLAA, with an emphasis on legal issues. The training was helpful, though Mira would like it to be longer than the customary one to three day courses and structured somewhat differently.

I think it would be better if they gave us a bit more time, because you can't catch everything in a short time. It would also be better if they would teach these things by using stories, which are easier to remember.

As a UP member, Mira uses this legal aid training to conduct shalishes, and this has changed the view of women's roles as shalish committee members.

I got involved with the shalish committee just after my election. The first day I was in a shalish I just listened. I didn't make any comments. After listening to everything, I gave my verdict. I felt very good, because I could express my personal opinion. They listened to me and valued what I said. I liked that a lot. At first the village heads used to say, "What value does a woman have? What can she say?" We didn't protest then. However, I thought to myself, "Brikko tomar nam ki, phole porichoi" (a Bengali proverb, "My future work will show you who I am"). Now they have seen that the verdicts issued by women are not bad, and they call us to every shalish.



Mira often must confront the problem of dowry.

Most of the shalish cases deal with dowry issues. Dowry will always exist although it is illegal. Usually it happens secretly. I am spending money for my daughters' education, so I say I can't spend any money for their marriage. Girls need money for education just like boys do. Besides, don't boys need girls? And if they don't, then girls don't need boys either. In a dowry dispute we try to argue with the boys by saying, "Why do you demand money? What do you want? Do you want to marry money or do you want to marry the girl?" Sometimes this kind of logic works and they feel ashamed and say they are sorry. Whenever there is talk about marriage people call me. I go there and tell them that we will only agree to the marriage if they don't demand any dowry money.

Now they have seen that the verdicts issued by women are not bad, and they call us to every shalish.

Polygamy is another issue with which Mira is confronted often.

When we hear that a man wants to take a second wife, first we try to convince him not to do it. If we fail, we then go to the woman he intends to marry and explain that she will have permanent problems with the first wife.

Mira believes that husbands and wives should go to legal aid courses together.

Men would learn about women's lives and become more understanding.... I also tell the male members to bring their wives to the UP meetings and to encourage them to talk. I tell them about gender relations.

When asked if doing shalish work as a Hindu is a problem for her she shakes her head, "no." In fact, she is not so happy with certain aspects of Hindu law. She cites the reforms of Begum Rokeya, a prominent historical figure, as examples for the appropriateness of new laws.

I am a Hindu, but I am trained. I know Muslim law. My suggestion for the government is to change the Hindu property law. Why don't girls get their father's property? I have four daughters, but all property will go to their uncles. I know there is no such law, but we can make new laws. We wouldn't be educated now if it weren't for Begum Rokeya. So a new law should be made. See, I can ride a bicycle. The first time I went to the office on a bicycle, a man said he would throw me off the bike. I told him to come if he dare. Then other people gathered around us and asked what had happened. I told them and asked everyone, "What is the problem if a woman rides a bike?"

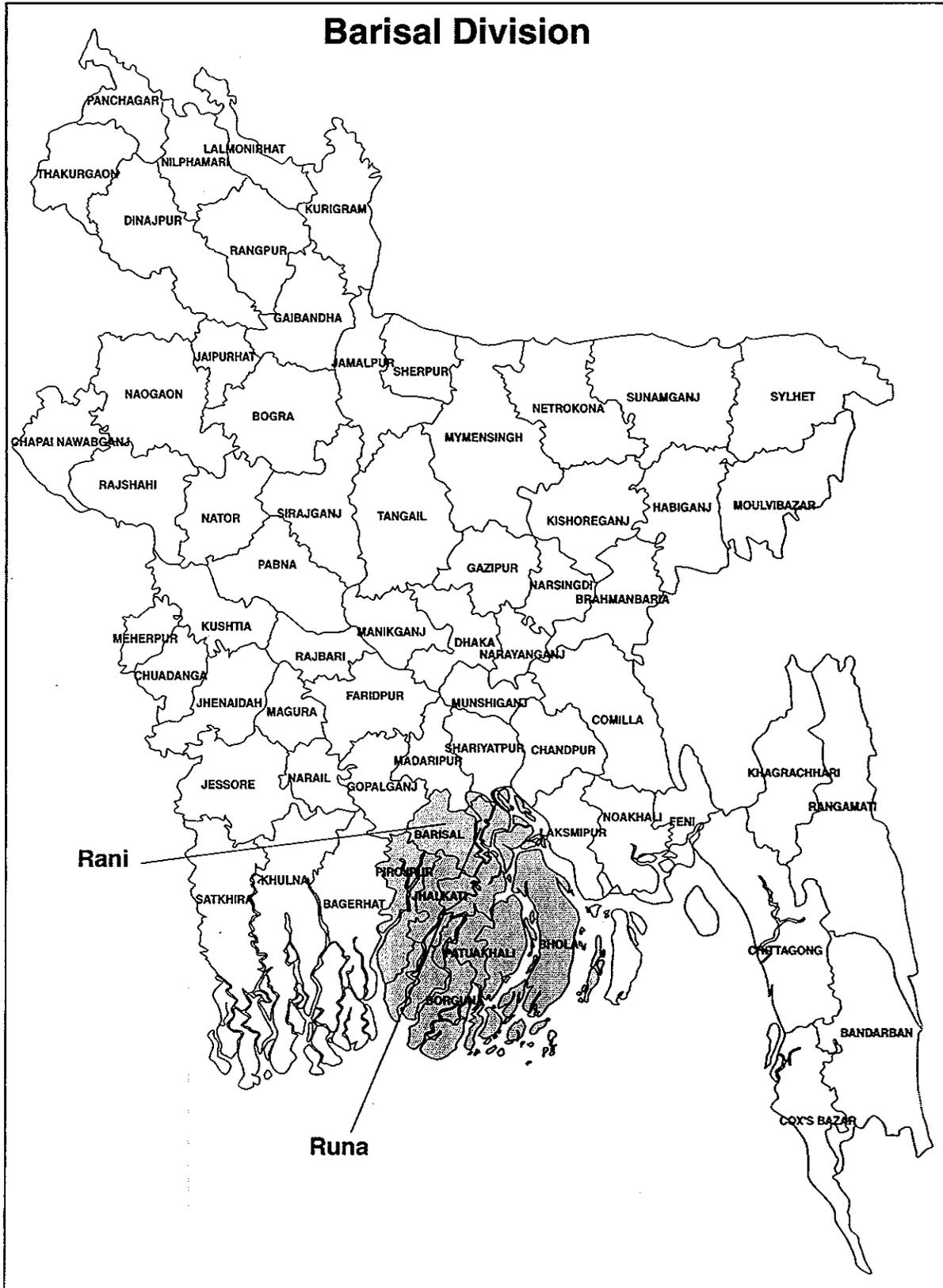
Women can do anything now. The Prime Minister is a woman, so why shouldn't I become a Chairman?

Mira doesn't seem to lack in confidence, particularly with respect to her influence and support among women. She is thinking of competing for a Chairman's post in the next election. She did it once before, but lost because she was too young. Now she thinks the time is right.

Women can do anything now. The Prime Minister is a woman, so why shouldn't I become a Chairman? I can gather all the village women behind me with one call.



Bangladesh Map





Name: Rani Begum

Location: Tongi Baria Union, Barisal Thana, Barisal District

Age: 28

Education: graduate student

Marital status: unmarried

Children's Ages: none

Brother: 35, Secondary School Certificate, businessman

Household income: I

Landholding: I

Religion: Muslim

Family's socio-political engagement: her father and grandfather were village doctors

Woman's social memberships and links: links to Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST)

Woman's leadership and work experience: cashier of a credit samiti at the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC)

RANI BEGUM

Rani, a delicate looking young woman, is graduating with a degree in social welfare. She is unmarried and lives with her mother and siblings. Since her father died, her elder brother takes care of the family. At first sight Rani appears shy and reserved, but the impression proves wrong as soon as she starts telling her story. Her face lights up as she talks in her eloquent, confident style.

I thought, as an unmarried woman, I couldn't really do much, but now I see that I can. Before, women had to compete with men, and voters always preferred men. But now with the reserved seats they have to vote for a woman, so I decided to compete. In our union, elections took place a year late, because of a dispute. During the year, I saw that women in the surrounding unions were doing well. I was sitting at home all the time, so I thought it would give me a nice opportunity to get out of my home and learn things. There is no guarantee that I will get a job just because of my education. The UP membership can only be of advantage.

Rani received training from BLAST.

An advocate taught us about property law, marriage registration, divorce and how to organize a shalish. He also told us which problems to deal with locally and which to send to court. I liked this training a lot. I think it is very important. All my education did not teach me anything about law. For example, the fact that family court should be responsible for all legal problems faced by women and that women do not have to spend any money to obtain its services. But hardly anybody in the village knows this. Our trainers said we couldn't learn the whole law in three days, but still we learned quite a lot. Once somebody explains one word to you, you can then understand ten words yourself. They also told us to ask for their help whenever necessary. That gave us a lot of courage.

Rani asserts that women UP members are perceived as more neutral than male members when conducting a shalish.

Once a man beat up his uncle. A male UP member and I were in the shalish. My verdict was that the nephew should bear his uncle's hospital costs and beg for forgiveness. The male member's verdict, however, was a fine of 5000 taka. He was in favor of the uncle, so that he could get a 1000 or 2000 taka commission from the uncle. The male UP members need money for tea and cigarettes. That's why they take sides, but we women don't. So the villagers think we are more neutral than the male members. In the end, the final neutral verdict was that the man had to pay 500 taka for his uncle's treatment and beg for forgiveness.

I thought, as an unmarried woman, I couldn't really do much, but now I see that I can.

To overcome obstacles put up by male UP members, Rani offers several suggestions for her women colleagues.

Sometimes the other female UP members complain about the fact that the male members don't call them for any shalishes. In these cases I advise them to discuss the matter with the male members themselves and the local people and try to convince them of the benefits of having a woman sitting in the shalish. As far as I know, village women think it is a big help to have women representatives in the shalish. In former times they could not reach the UP members, so they would have to talk to the members' wives. But now they can find us at home whenever necessary and we make time for them. The women that come with me to the shalish in the evenings tell me they are not afraid, because a UP member is with them. Then I tell them I am a woman too, but they say I am a UP member and I know all the places. I know everybody. I know the TNO and the DC. Everybody fears me, so they feel safe with me. However there are many huzurs, who don't like women members to be present in the shalishes. They say women's presence is strictly forbidden, but this is not written in the Koran or Hadiz. We tell them the prophet Mohammed's wife Ayesha herself was a ruler. She fought in the battlefield. These arguments have changed even many huzurs' minds.

Rani believes that women like herself must commit themselves to advancing women's cause; but women in leadership can make a huge difference in bringing progress.

Even when a woman is not guilty, men will make her feel guilty. Men are from the same stock, so they only help each other. I am a woman, so I will take the woman's side, and that will increase our power. I am the chairman of the Regular Maintenance Project and even men respect me. Through working with them I have gained their cooperation. This is a big step for women's advancement. The government is employing more women as schoolteachers, so in that field we are way ahead. It would be good if this could become compulsory for other jobs. Inequality between men and women is still huge, but now women are advancing. You can see it in the offices, or in the courts – women are increasingly present. The head of our government is a woman and we have female UP members.

When asked what she thought about reserved seats for women she replied:

They make a big difference. With the reserved seats voters are bound to vote for a woman. For example, one day a huzur was telling me, "I don't want to vote for a woman, but you are competing for a reserved seat, so I have no choice and so I will vote for you." On the other hand if I were to compete for a general seat, people would say, "It is a sin to vote for a woman instead of a man." They also think that if a problem occurs, particularly at night, it might be easier to get a man than a woman. So they vote for men. That's why it is good to have reserved seats.



Rani thinks she has experienced a lot of personal growth since she was elected.

I could not deliver a speech in public before. I didn't know the DC or TNO. I didn't know many places in Barisal. Now I move around a lot and I know them. I meet many political leaders and workers, and I feel I am progressing. Today I can come here and talk to someone like you. Even girls with a higher education than me did not have that chance. I am very proud of this.

Once somebody explains one word to you, you can then understand ten words yourself.

When asked if she wants to run for the coming elections she contemplates her base of support.

First I will evaluate my popularity to see how much work I could do if elected. Then I will decide.

She has some suggestions for the government...

There should be specified tasks for the female UP members. According to the manual they are supposed to get one third of the responsibilities, but this only refers to the Annual Development Programme. Also, our allowance should be increased. Our constituency is so big that some people call us "ward-chairmen" or "vice-chairmen," but these are only words; our allowance is still the same.

And for the Prime Minister...

She should do something to prevent women from being left behind. I would ask her to work on eradicating inequality between men and women. I don't want men to be left behind either; I only want men and women to work co-operatively.





Name: Runa Leila
Location: Rai Pasha Union, Barisal Thana, Barisal District
Age: 35
Education: class ten
Marital status: married
Children's Ages: 15, 18, 20 (all students)
Husband: 45, Secondary School Certificate; retired air force officer, now businessman
Household income: I
Landholding: I
Religion: Muslim
Family's socio-political engagement: none
Woman's social memberships and links: links to CARITAS, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), and other local NGOs
Woman's leadership and work experience: president of Bangladesh Krisani Sava (local organization), chairperson of the UP women's committee

RUNA LEILA

Even before joining the UP Runa was involved in various activities where she demonstrated her leadership capacity. She was the CARITAS representative in her village for four years and responsible for loan distribution. For many years she has also been the president of Bangladesh Krisani Sava, a local organization lobbying for the rights of the poor.

I learned to become the voice of the poor.

The first thing Runa did when we met was to proudly present me one of her new business cards. In fact, with her cream colored silk sari and tinted glasses she comes across as an apt businesswoman. Her past leadership experiences feed into her current work with the UP. And the networks she is gaining through her political engagement and her contact with BLAST are proving valuable for her other activities.

I need these links so that I can help my women.

Runa remembers how she became a UP member...

There was a sanitary latrine project going on in our union. I asked a male UP member to sanction a latrine for a very poor family I knew, but he refused to do it. He told me if I wanted to help them I should become a UP member myself. That stuck with me. How could a simple UP member refuse such a small request from someone of my position? Then I thought "shala" (damn it), I will indeed become a UP member myself!

As an elected UP member, Runa now applies the same determination to overcome obstacles to do her job properly and to advance the cause of the women she represents.

As a UP member I don't accept everything the Chairman decides. I protest. I tell them, "Go and see the government manual. If you make decisions without my presence I won't accept it. You take bribes in the shalishes, but I don't." My concern is to make sure that women get a fair verdict. That is why the government appointed me. Still some Chairmen and male members have not accepted us as their colleagues. They still cannot accept us as leaders, but I managed to get my share. I know what we are supposed to get according to the UP manual. If they don't give me my fair share of responsibility, I have the guts to go to the TNO and the DC. I am a leader now. I am able to help other people. That is a great thing. However, to be a good leader you have to sacrifice. Sometimes, my husband says we are using the family income for my politics, but I think it is worth it and if necessary we will only eat twice a day.

I learned to become the voice of the poor.

Runa's time – time she would normally spend with her family – must also be sacrificed in her efforts to fulfill her duties as a Union Parishad member.

It gets very busy when relief comes and particularly during Eid we are so busy that we don't have any time to enjoy it ourselves. We don't get any rest. Fridays and Saturdays are holidays for everyone else, but not for us.

Currently Runa is facing another leadership challenge – one that involves sacrifice that goes way beyond financial and time constraints.

I am having problems with my road construction project. Local mastaans (gangsters) want illegal tolls from me. I told them, "You will use this road, not me. I need all the money for this road, so no extra money is left." I also asked the village elders for help. Sometimes they help, sometimes they don't. Then I lost my patience and told the mastaans, "Either I will send this project back to the government or I will fight with you and continue the work, but I won't give you any money." It was so hard to get the funding for this project from the government, but still within six months I managed to get three roads sanctioned. But to do this, I went all the way to the Secretariat. I even had to make a special request to the Ministers. So I've decided against giving back the project. I am going to fight the mastaans. Yesterday the situation was so bad that nobody wanted to come to the work site with me. There were two parties of mastaans and everybody was expecting a serious clash. I told them I am a public representative. I don't need anybody. I will go there with my workers. Four thousand people voted for me and I value this. So I went there alone with my 20 workers. I told them, "If anybody tries to attack us we will face them with our 'kodals' (earthcutting tools)." I don't care what happens, the road might not be complete, but history will be made.

Having been elected to a reserved seat at the union level, Runa sees even greater future advantages in competing for one of the reserved seats at the thana level.

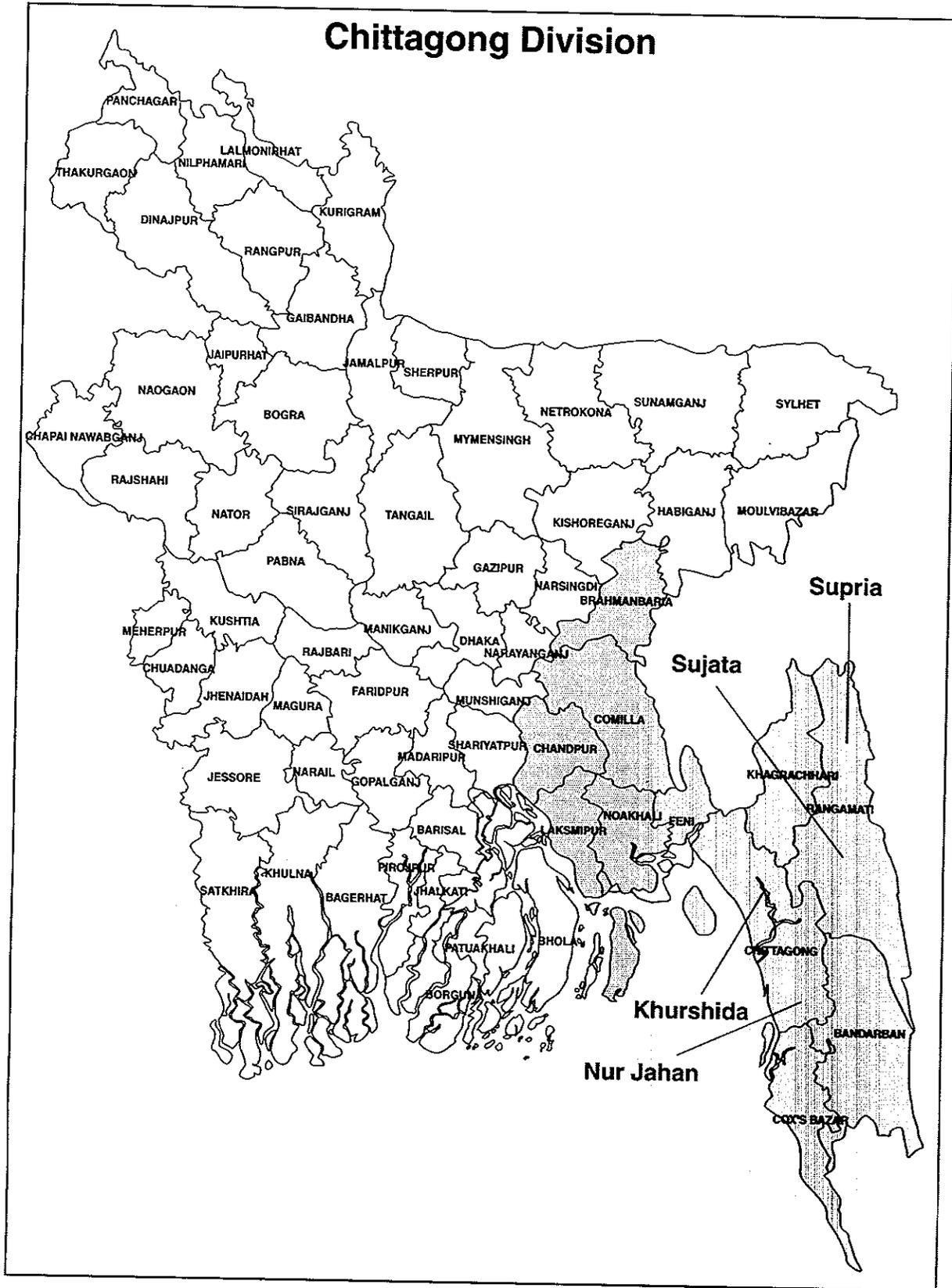
**I am going to fight the mastaans...
history will be made.**

There is now a proposal for a special type of reserved seat for women which covers three unions. I want to go for that. It is not so prestigious to compete for general seats, because they are only responsible for one union. It would be more fun to compete for a larger area.

Runa feels no regret for her decisions to enter public office.

I feel satisfied when I think about my achievements. I had to sacrifice a lot to reach this point. I would not have achieved all this if I had stayed home.

Bangladesh Map





Name: Supria Chakma

Location: Moghvan Union, Rangamati Sadar Thana, Rangamati District

Age: 37

Education: class five

Marital status: married

Children's Ages: 8, 10, 12, 14, 15

Husband: 39, Higher Secondary Certificate, businessman

Household income: I

Landholding: III

Religion: Buddhist

Family's socio-political engagement: her brother was a UP member, her father and uncle were UP Chairmen

Woman's social memberships and links: member of the school committee

Woman's leadership and work experience: nominated UP member in the past, now group leader of a Proshika credit samiti

● SUPRIA CHAKMA

Supria traveled a long way for this interview. She looked very dignified in her ceremonial dress, which she brought along especially for this occasion. She explains why she chose to run in the elections:

In our hill society women work more than men. They go out and earn their living and after work they do the cooking. Women do everything here. They have more responsibilities. Men work if they feel like it, otherwise they stay at home and gossip. So I thought women's involvement in the UP could bring development to our area. The local people also wanted me to participate in the election and I wanted to help them.

Supria has fond memories of the day she was elected.

We had a feast with many people. I was thinking that finally I would have a chance to help my people develop this union. I felt good about that. When they declared the result I was very happy, but my competitors were very sad. They also had expectations, so I held their hand and tried to console them by telling them the practical results would be the same.

Supria, however, could not help her people as much as she had originally expected.

The government says it gives women power, but I didn't get any power. If the government would distribute projects equally among men and women, I could do something for my people... but so far, my power is only on paper. Not even qualified women get projects here. Even small projects like clearing the road, so children can go to school safely, would help. The villagers could earn a living and women in particular could make progress with projects like poultry raising, construction work, weaving, and tailoring. In the last three years I only worked on two very small projects both related to clearing the jungle for roads.

Poverty is the main problem in the area.

Most of the people here are very poor. To provide work for them, we need weaving, tailoring, poultry raising and cattle breeding projects. People are floating on water here. (Note: Around 40% of cultivable land in Rangamati was submerged in 1960 by a lake artificially created for hydroelectric purposes.)

The constraints to addressing these problems extend beyond those within the Union Parishad -- according to Supria development projects from the central government remain scarce.

So far, my power is only on paper.

I told the Chairman and the members that I haven't received any good projects so far. My area needs to be developed, but what can they say? There just aren't many projects coming to the UP. Projects are so rare. The government doesn't fund many projects to the hill districts; it spends most of its funds in the plains. I don't know why the hill areas get fewer projects. Maybe it's easier to construct roads in the plains than it is here. As we are surrounded by water we don't need roads that much. We need motorboats, but the government seems to ignore our problems. I don't know why.

When asked if any NGOs were helping with adequate development projects, Supria thought for a long time without providing an answer. Her own direct experience with NGOs has been limited to an all day training course by UNICEF, where she learned about sanitation and basic health. She was slightly more enthusiastic when asked whether the Minister for Hill Tracts was helpful.

When I applied directly to the Minister, I got a project involving eight metric tons of wheat. I let him know about the problems in this area and about the shortage of projects for our UP. Then he approved a special project for me: clearing a road for school children. The road existed, but it was covered by jungle due to neglect. We are getting some development benefits because now we have our own Minister.

Supria occasionally sits in on a shalish. However, since the hill districts use a dual system that relies on a tribal council as well as the UP to resolve local conflicts, female members here have not had as great an impact on the shalish system as in other unions.

We go to a shalish if they invite us. People tend to apply to the tribal headmen, and a UP member or the Chairman when they have a problem. Then we all sit together and try to find a solution. People listen to my suggestions if they are good. When I need guidance on an issue, I ask the elders for help and I always welcome their advice. However, most of the time the tribal headmen give the verdict.

When asked if she will run in the next elections, Supria responds:

I am not sure yet. I'll go for it if the people want me to, even though I was not able to do many of the things I thought were necessary. I want to get tubewells for my area, especially for schools, monasteries, and mosques, so that people get pure drinking water when they go there. I also want to help people with practical projects like poultry raising.

While Supria's experience as a UP member has not met her expectations, she has not lost hope in making a difference, and has some ideas for how to make her work more effective in the future.

We have no female representative from my area in the Thana Development Committee. It would be good to have a female member from each area, which would make it easier to find out about planned projects. We could also tell the committee our problems and issues. Also, there is no female members' committee at the moment. If we started one, we could discuss issues we care about and we could learn from each other. A lot of work could be done, so I hope it will be done in the future.

A lot of work could be done, so I hope it will be done in the future.





Name: Kurshida Begum

Location: Salimpur Union, Shitakundo Thana, Chittagong District

Age: 38

Education: class eight

Marital status: married

Children's Ages: one grown-up daughter, teacher at Community Development Centre (CODEC)

Husband: 48, Higher Secondary Certificate, shop employee

Household income: I

Landholding (her father's): III

Religion: Muslim

Family's socio-political engagement: two uncles were UP Chairmen, one uncle is a UP member in her union

Woman's social memberships and links: links to CODEC

Woman's leadership and work experience: cashier at Village Education Resource Center (VERC), group leader of a credit samiti at the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and former ASANNITA family planning worker

KURSHIDA BEGUM

I used to have a job and earn an income. Now I am a UP member, but I don't have any income.

Kurshida and her husband are not particularly well off, but her parental family is rich and influential. Her brothers run businesses and own shops. Her husband works in one of these shops. She and her husband live in the extended family compound.

VERC opened two schools on my father's land in 1993. We took care of the schools and ran them. I didn't get any money for that. I just did it to help the poor. VERC organized a samiti for the students' mothers, and I was the samiti's group leader. I have been with them now for eight years, and I too save money through this samiti. All the mothers wanted to deposit their money with me, because they trusted me. I was their cashier. About nine months ago two BRAC workers came to our village trying to convince people to form samitis. They opened a samiti in one of their areas, but people were suspicious and came to me to ask whether they would be cheated. So when the BRAC workers came to the village again, I invited them to my house and talked to them. They said to me, "Since you are already related with one samiti, why not work for our samiti as well." So I linked up with BRAC too. They wanted me as their leader, because my family has a good reputation.

Kurshida worked for ASANNITA and gained valuable experience.

From 1993 to 1997 I was employed as a fieldworker in ASANNITA's family planning project. I joined the organization because of our economic situation. Our house was destroyed during the 1991 cyclone. My husband didn't have a job anymore. He retired, so we needed something to survive on. I went from house to house to give people advice and to distribute pills and condoms. My monthly salary was 800 taka (US\$ 15). They taught us how



to do physical check-ups and how to determine and advise them on which family planning method would be most suitable for them.

Kurshida now has links to CODEC.

A CODEC worker came to this village and formed a group with 25 women. They arranged meetings, but the husbands didn't want their wives to go to those meetings. Here in Chittagong people are religious. They don't want women to go out of purdah. I convinced them by saying, "I am a female member and I will be present there, so there won't be any problem."

I used to have a job and earn an income. Now I am a UP member, but I don't have any income.

At first, Kurshida was very reluctant to run for a seat on the UP.

There was an advertisement about women's direct elections in the newspaper. During that time I was working at ASANNITA. My brother told me to compete in the elections, but I didn't want to go. I said to him, "Even if you provide the election expenses, this election will ruin my future. There is no income involved in this thing." But he just about dragged me to Shitakundo (thana headquarters) to submit my papers!

But now, aside from the lack of income, she is quite pleased with her decision to enter public office.

When I was working with NGOs it was for my family, but as a UP member I now serve the people. When people come to me with their needs and I can serve them, I feel happy. I feel good about my work. However, I would be even happier if this job provided an income. With the NGO job, I could provide money for my family, but as a UP member it's impossible to do anything else, because it involves so much work.

Kurshida faced some criticism, but no overwhelming obstacles when she decided to run for election.

I didn't have any problems, though the elder people would sometimes say, "During our time we didn't see women going for elections, but nowadays Hasina and Khaleda not only go for elections themselves, they also want our housewives to follow suit." Many people didn't like the idea of women breaking purdah. One day an old man asked me why I wanted to go for elections. He said to me, "Do you like it that a stranger can look at your face?" I was wearing a burka then and I still do. I told him that my honor is in my heart, not in my face. I said, "If the Prime Minister, who runs the whole country, is a woman, why shouldn't I be able to run for local election?" Hearing this people would laugh and say, "We are sure you can."

The obstacles have been greater since securing a seat on the Union Parishad.

I haven't received any important projects since I became a member. The men usually snatch them away. They say, "How can women work on the streets? How can they work close to male laborers?" However, often the villagers listen to us rather than the men. When the husband beats a woman and she goes to her parents' house, the men on the UP say, "Why does the wife have to go away if the husband merely beats her? Our wives don't do that." Then I say, "I also live with a husband, but he doesn't beat me." When I say these things people understand that I am right.

Kurshida's efforts to advocate for justice has extended beyond the concerns of women, and has required mobilizing the support and cooperation of others.



Once an influential family beat up a villager. I took the initiative to organize the shalish in the UP office. The male member, however, wanted to do the shalish in the village. The accused were a bit like mastaans. We were at risk of being attacked if we held the shalish in the village. So I gathered more than 100 people and held the shalish in the UP office. The accused said boldly, "Let her do the shalish in the UP. We shall see what a female member can do." They were confident they would win, but in the end, they had to pay the fine. Since I anticipated they might create problems afterwards, I had notified the police station. I had also asked the police to be present at the UP office for the shalish. When the accused announced I was no longer allowed on the lands they owned and leased to others, the police declared I could continue to go wherever I wanted and they would look after my security. So I went there the next day and nothing happened.

When people come to me with their needs and I can serve them, I feel happy. I feel good about my work.

Kurshida plans to run for the coming elections:

I want to be a member again, although I have to think about a job to earn money. I will participate in the elections, if my people want me.





Name: Sujata Dewan

Location: Chapchori Union, Rangamati Sadar Thana, Rangamati District

Age: 29

Education: class eight

Marital status: married

Children's Ages: 1, 9, 11

Husband: 35, class ten, businessman

Household income: II

Landholding: III (they have joint land with the other family members, own boats and timber)

Religion: Buddhist

Family's socio-political engagement: her brother was a member of the municipality, her brother-in-law was a UP member and now he is Chairman of the Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB)

Woman's social memberships and links: member of the Thana Development Committee

Woman's leadership and work experience: cashier of the BRDB women's samiti

SUJATA DEWAN

Sujata comes from a fairly well off and politically influential family, with a solid educational background and strong links to the community through involvement with NGOs.

My brother-in-law was organizing the women's samiti. I entered the samiti in 1989 and for the last two years I have been working as their cashier. When the government declared the reserved seats for women, my brother-in-law and neighbors asked me to compete. I didn't have any competitor from this area, so I won the election unchallenged.

She thinks people chose her for her educational background.

Educated people are very rare here. The people thought they needed somebody able to go to official places. They also thought a woman without education or speaking skills couldn't really do official work, because the job requires dealing with big shots in the offices. They knew I had some education. I was born in Rangamati town. That is another reason why they supported me.

Sujata's ability to effect change in her union is limited by the insufficient resources and distribution of projects to the bill tracts.

In the last three years, I have only worked on one road construction project. We had to clear the jungle to construct the road. But we've never had the chance to work on something big, like building a temple. We only get little repair work. Big projects never come to our parishad. I don't know if our UP has ever received a big project. I don't know why the government doesn't send us big projects. Maybe they don't get this far, because unions are the

lowest levels of administration. They all go to the regional and district levels or to the municipality. Our work assignments depend on these levels. I think the districts in the plains get more development projects than the hilly areas. We always see on television that different unions are working on this or the other project, but we never get anything here. In a whole year, we only got two tubewells. What will two tubewells do in such a big union?

NGO efforts are addressing some of the needs in the hill tract municipal areas, but rural communities are yet to receive adequate education and sanitation, among other public services.

When local women come to see me they ask me why there is no development project to help them.

Education is not as big a problem as it was in the past, because UNICEF and BRAC established schools here. Still, their schools are only for those who are very poor and can't afford education. They teach up to class five. We don't have any public primary schools here. They have them in the Rangamati municipal area, but for our children it is very difficult to get there. They have to cross long waterways. We don't have enough sanitary latrines either. Development work doesn't seem to be happening here. The hill people earn a living by growing pineapples and bananas. But the government doesn't give them any development support. Handloom industries or poultry raising and cattle rearing projects would be really helpful. When local women come to see me they ask me why there is no development project to help them.

With these limitations and other challenges, Sujata is disappointed that she cannot help her people as much as she'd like.

I can't do what I really want to do for them. I am not able to prevent soil erosion. The villagers want ponds and they want support for their temples, but I can't provide this. The government gives us very limited projects. How can the Chairman distribute them properly in such a big union? All UP members want a project, because everybody has needs, so at the end nothing happens and the projects lay there abandoned. Roads are another problem here. Though I am a member of three wards, only the people from my ward know me, because it is very difficult for me to get to the other wards. Besides, I have a baby, so moving too far is a little difficult for me at the moment.

Sujata struggles with unfortunate gender biases that prevent her participation in the shalish and undermine the quality of justice by favoring men.

I never go to a shalish. The tribal headmen do the shalish. Those who request the shalish usually suggest who they would like to have in the shalish. Nobody ever invited me, and I feel uneasy going there without an invitation. Not even the women call me, though I always tell them to come to me if they have any problems, but they don't. They think nobody would listen to a female member. Still I think it would be very good if women could be present. At the moment men can do whatever they want. They can leave their wives whenever they want and nobody questions them. Male judges just ask the men to pay a token compensation and then let them go. If it were up to me, the verdict would be very different, but they don't give any value to what women say. If I did go and they didn't listen to me, it would be embarrassing for me. People do not want to discuss small family problems openly. Big problems go to the tribal headmen. The people don't know that we women union parishad members are also authorized to do a shalish. I always tell them about this, but they never come to us. You see, the headmen are appointed by the tribal king.

Sujata sees her future decision to run again tied to successful implementation of the peace treaty between the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Government of Bangladesh.

I have not thought about it, so I don't know if I will do it or not. I will see how things evolve. The peace treaty has not been applied here yet. If it is not implemented, there will be many complications. The army will patrol the area regularly and the shantibahini (militant tribal group) will come as well. There will be lots of problems. People here are angry with the government, because they are not applying the treaty. We don't enjoy equal rights like the people from districts in the plains. Often we hear that development is not possible because of political chaos. Right now we are enjoying more peace because of the treaty. But there will be lots of problems if the treaty is not fulfilled. So far only one per cent of the treaty has been fulfilled – 99 percent is still left.

Male judges just ask the men to pay a token compensation and then let them go. If it were up to me, the verdict would be very different, but they don't give any value to what women say.





Name: Nur Jahan
Location: Salimpur Union, Shitakundo Thana, Chittagong District
Age: 40
Education: class eight
Marital status: married
Children's Ages: 8, 17, 18, 22
Husband: 55, graduate, export/import business
Household income: V
Landholding: I
Religion: Muslim
Family's socio-political engagement: none
Woman's social memberships and links: links to VISION 2000 and Community Development Centre (CODEC)
Woman's leadership and work experience: previously a family planning worker at ASANNITA

NUR JAHAN

Nur Jahan is an affluent, elegant woman, who speaks in a soft and gentle voice. In the past, she was engaged in family planning work.

I worked with ASANNITA's family planning project for one and a half years. That was six years ago. I went from house to house to distribute medicine or encourage people to have a ligation. After the elections, I helped an NGO called VISION 2000. They also did family planning work. Their doctor came every month to the village. I let him use my house as a center.

She explains how she got involved in the UP elections.

I learned from television that female members would be directly elected. My husband was keen on my running for elections because being a member helps the family's reputation. And I was interested to see what membership would feel like. Women in our country are left behind. I thought I could help them. The few of us women who have the chance to get out of our homes should make the most of the opportunity. Before we were housewives who never left our homes. Now we often go to the field for our work. Among the three competitors, one was a selected member before, but the villagers never saw her face. She was a member on paper and would only take the allowance from the UP. Our situation is different now because the government asked us to come out of our homes and work side by side with men. The local people liked me. They knew me because of my work with ASANNITA. People from my area selected me during a meeting. They all helped and supported me.

Nur Jahan had to spend a considerable amount of money on the elections, but she does not regret the expense, as her image improved significantly after she won the election.

I spent around 50,000 taka (US\$ 900) on the elections. In Bangladesh, you have to spend money in various ways for an election. I helped poor people. The money is not a big deal. What really matters is the honor. People didn't know and respect me the way they do now. Before they only knew me as a housewife and I had to behave like one of them. Now I behave like a member. I am invited to everything.

Nur Jaban identified various sources of training and information in support of her role as a woman Union Parishad member.

CODEC took us to Shitakundo for a three day training on family planning, AIDS, and mother and child care. The government writes books and makes television announcements on women's rights. There is a woman from Mohila Samiti who publishes a magazine and sends it to us every year. They wrote about the rights and responsibilities of a female member.

The few of us women who have the chance to get out of our homes should make the most of the opportunity.

When asked what kind of activities the UP performs, Nur Jaban responds:

Road construction, cleaning ponds and graveyards, and shalish work. The UP is involved with most kinds of village work. The family planning workers who work in the villages have meetings with us whenever necessary. For example, when they want to arrange meetings with the local women, I vacate my house for them. I also let them use my house to administer polio vaccinations. People know my house, because I am a member.

Nur Jaban believes that an alternative to the local government welfare program must be found in order to more effectively assist poor women and widows.

We give pensions to old women. There is also a pension for widows and abandoned women and relief for destitute women. In every union, they get 30 kilograms of rice or wheat every month; 90 widows get 100 taka (US\$ 2) per month. However, I think something should be done to provide permanent work for poor women. Currently, these women receive food and relief cards for only three, six or twelve months. If the government were to give the women a large amount of money, cows, or goats, then they could build a real income. With enough funds they could buy sewing machines. Nothing can be done with 100 taka a month.

Nur Jaban has developed good working relationships with her male colleagues on the Union Parishad and benefits from strong support from her husband.

The three male members from my wards respect me and let me get involved in any kind of project. I don't know about other male members, but the three from my area never do anything without consulting me. They like the way I work. Besides, my husband is quite influential in the village, but he doesn't use it to oppress anybody. Everybody respects him like a Chairman, because he is smart and educated. My husband advises me whenever necessary. That is why the locals take me seriously. We are popular in our area.

With experience gained through her job as a UP member, Nur Jaban has developed new skills and undergone many changes over the past years.

In the past I didn't have so much courage. I was confused and afraid about what to say or with whom to talk. I didn't know how to do a shalish. But because I've done so many, now I know what I'm doing. I mix with all sorts of people and know everybody and I've learned how to talk. So now my work is easier.

Nur Jaban also notes that people's perceptions about her and their behavior towards her have also changed over time as they now value her role in representing women.

At first, people didn't know me. Perhaps they thought I was still like a housewife and I wouldn't come if they called me. Now, however, they see I go everywhere, to any function or shalish. I do my best to make people happy. It is better for people to have female representatives now. Even when women have a little quarrel with their in-laws they run to us.

The three male members from my wards respect me and let me get involved in any kind of project... They like the way I work.

Nur Jaban is encouraged by how village women are gradually changing over time, and highlights the importance of the participation of women as UP members as a new source of further change.

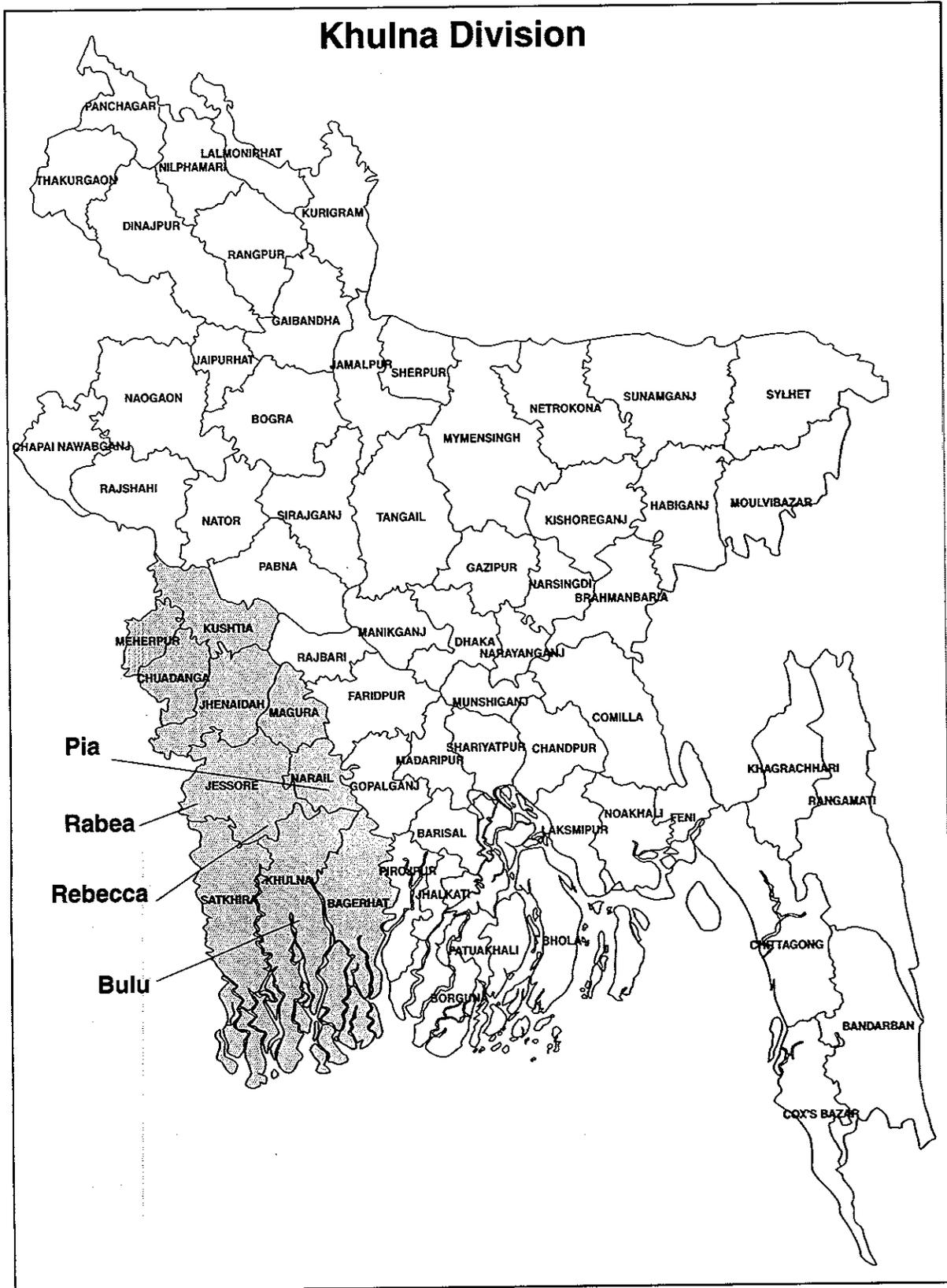
A lot has changed. In the early days women were not as conscious or educated. We have always encouraged the village women to work with NGOs as fieldworkers or volunteers. We tell educated women not to sit at home. When they have quarrels with their husband they come to us. Other women saw this and learned from it.

Nur Jaban intends to run again in the future so she can continue to have a positive impact.

I want to do something for women if I get the opportunity, maybe start a sewing project with a few women. That would also be a development for the area.



Bangladesh Map





Name: Sheik Momtaz Pia

Location: Itna Union Parishad, Lohagora Thana, Narail District

Age: 26

Education: Bachelor of Arts (BA)

Marital status: unmarried

Children's Ages: none

Father: 72, BA, former teacher, now pensioner

Household income: I

Landholding: III

Religion: Muslim

Family's socio-political engagements: both her grandfathers were UP Chairmen

Woman's social memberships and links: member of the school committee, member of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), links to The Hunger Project and Rupantar

Woman's leadership and work experience: worked as a journalist in the past

SHEIK MOMTAZ PIA

Pia is a remarkable, dynamic young woman who is excited to be a leader.

I took a leadership course at The Hunger Project. They taught us how to develop and use our inner strength to become a complete human being. They taught us how to fight hunger, how to strive for a hunger free society, and how to strengthen ourselves and our country. I also learned how to organize and train people. I work with people. I am a leader and, inshallah (God willing), I will always be one.

Pia describes the qualities of a leader, and why she believes she is one.

Those who can show society the right path, can do something for the people, can wash away the ugliness of life and turn people toward its beauty – they become leaders. I think these are my activities too. Since I was young, I have tried to help destitute, divorced and neglected women. I am always by their side. I have always been involved with different welfare and cultural organizations and I was involved with politics when I was in college. I participate in meetings and processions in the district headquarters. For the last three to four years, everyone in the area has been calling me a leader.

In addition to public office, she is working to create other opportunities for leadership.

I am thinking about opening an NGO myself. I have already laid the groundwork and chosen a name: "Sugandha" (fragrance). It would be a welfare organization for progressive women.

Even before entering public office, Pia built a critical base of support among the landless through advocacy and legal process by taking on the local gangsters.

We have many people in our area who are landless and hungry. Back in 1975, Sheik Mujibur Rahman distributed some "khas" land (government-owned land) among them. But four cruel and oppressive mastaans in our area were the ones actually making a profit from it. We organized the people and told them, "You are the owners of this land, but these four mastaans have been abusing your land for the last 25 years. Join us. We don't have a personal interest in the land, but if you join with us, we can take that land back by force." They joined us. I was a journalist at that time and I managed to rally support from 18 different newspapers. The District Commissioner, various Members of Parliament, and the Home Minister were also in favor of our movement. The mastaans retaliated by filing an illegal arms case against one of the landless. But eventually, we won. That's when the landless said, "Pia is our means to survival. We will make her a member." That's why I ran for office. I didn't have to spend a single taka for my election, even though my family was not supportive, because they don't like politics. In fact, they stopped giving me my allowance and they keep pressuring me to get married. It was my landless neighbors who supported me.

Those who can show society the right path, can do something for the people, can wash away the ugliness of life and turn people toward its beauty – they become leaders.

Pia believes that one particular duty of the UP is to protect the interests of the poor and landless. She cites an example of those who have lost their land or crops because of exploitation and improper documentation of their landholdings.

It is the UP's duty to solve all the problems in the union, but they've done little about it. Those who had a document got their land back. But those without documents – their land was looted.

Pia expresses serious frustration by the attitudes and performance of her male colleagues on the Union Parishad, and describes some of the conflicts she is facing to secure her share of resources on behalf of her constituency.

The Chairman and the men neglect us even though we are qualified. I am proud to say the female members are much more qualified than the men, though they still oppress us day by day. They don't give us food and relief cards to distribute and they don't give us our share of work. They say, "You came from the reserved seats, so stay that way." I say to them, "Did the government send us here to sit in front of you dressed up in saris?" We quarrel often. We have to fight a lot to get our share of resources. I am supposed to get 28 cards, but recently they have conspired against me and I am now left with only six cards. So I asked the TNO not to approve this action. Tomorrow I will go there again to make sure he warns the Chairman personally. If necessary I will organize a jhata procession (sweepers procession) in the upazila with the people I am supposed to give cards to. (Note: A jhata procession uses broomsticks and would be interpreted as a public insult to the Chairman). If necessary I will beat him up myself. He is oppressive and abusive, and I don't see any other way. We weren't able to do anything over the last three years because of the Chairman and the men on the UP.

The problem she faces with her male colleagues is not only a problem of gender, but also of political favoritism.

The male members get more responsibilities than we do because they are buddies with the Chairman. I am a member of the opposition party and that is my curse. They told me they would give me more responsibility if I changed party.

Pia identifies joint training of UP members as one possible solution to the problem of gender tensions and inequality.

I don't think the government can do it alone. It might help if NGOs organized a nationwide training for all members and Chairmen, one that is effective and not just empty words. They should make them understand their rights and responsibilities. Perhaps there would be more understanding if they did a joint training with men and women. If the training is given separately, the male members and Chairmen can just deny everything later. Joint training is very important to improve the UP.

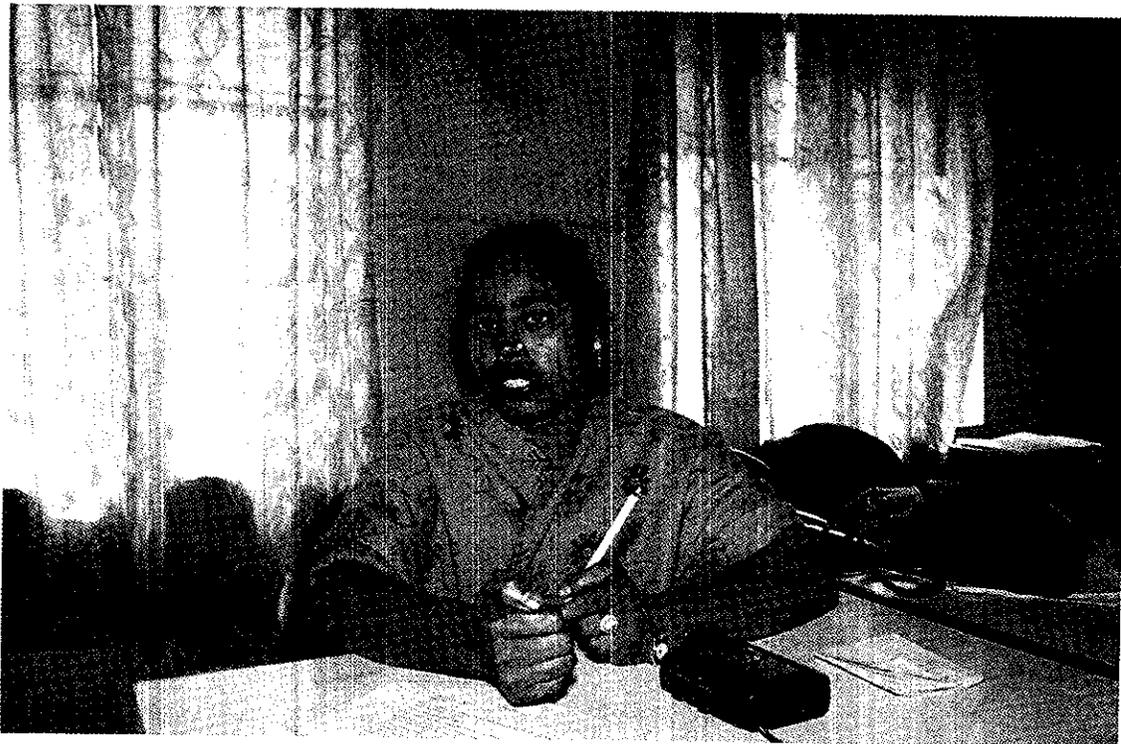
I am proud to say the female members are much more qualified than the men, though they still oppress us day by day.

Pia sees her personal and political life as deeply intertwined and does not intend to compromise either.

I am planning to get married in the future. Once, a marriage proposal was almost finalized, but they demanded I leave politics and stay home. So that marriage didn't happen, because I would not agree to that. I am waiting until I find a politically minded groom. But if I don't find someone like that, I might not marry at all.

Pia has a number of suggestions for the government.

The Chairman sits in a designated chair where he conducts meetings. The female members should have special places around the table also. They should have a separate room. Their allowance should be increased and they should be given transportation money, because they have to cover three wards. We don't have any income of our own. We are dependent on either a father or a husband, so the UP should pay our rickshaw fares. The UP manuals should be sent directly to the women, because often the Chairman doesn't pass them on. There should be at least one female member from every union on the Thana Development Committee, so information can flow more freely... The female members should have veto power, as together they represent the whole union.





Name: Rabea Begum

Location: Lebutola Union, Jessore Sadar Thana, Jessore District

Age: 30

Education: Higher Secondary Certificate

Marital status: married

Children's Ages: 4, 10

Husband: 35, Bachelor of Arts, landowner

Household income: III

Landholding: IV

Religion: Muslim

Family's socio-political engagement: none

Woman's social memberships and links: group member at Banchte Shekha, member of the Thana Development Committee

Woman's leadership and work experience: teacher at Ahsania Mission

RABEA BEGUM

Rabea joined Banchte Shekha for economic reasons, but this has proven to be only one of the benefits. Besides being a Banchte Shekha group member, Rabea works as a teacher at Ahsania Mission, where she earns 500 taka per month. She also receives diverse training from these NGOs.

A Banchte Shekha worker told me about the organization. I joined one of their groups and took a loan from them. I bought cows with that loan. Banchte Shekha sent me to Madaripur for legal training and to the Ahsania Mission for a one-day training on gender issues. They helped us understand some of the reasons why women remain oppressed as well as how they can progress. The trainer came from Dhaka and trained us by using posters depicting these issues.

Banchte Shekha encouraged Rabea to get involved with politics, and her husband was supportive too, since he ran for election himself, though unsuccessfully. Rabea ran in the election in the hope of improving the overall status of women.

The village women are neglected and insulted. I went for the elections hoping I could do something for them. There were no elections before. Women members were selected. Then it was all talk, no work; but now we are elected and have to fulfill what we promise. My determination and the deep anger within me led me to the elections.

Rabea's parents and extended natal family was not very supportive of her decision to campaign.

They thought I would become bad since I would have to go out in the streets and speak to all sorts of people. My husband, however, said, "I want my wife to compete in the elections, otherwise I will marry someone else and send her to the elections."

Rabea was overjoyed when she won.

I remember the day I became elected. My husband rented a private car. Everywhere people were waiting for me with flower necklaces. I got ten of them in a single place. I was so happy. I bought sweets for the villagers. They were celebrating my victory by playing dhol (a special type of drum) music. The people would say, "You are a wife in a good family. You go out with a burka, so there is no problem." In fact, my father-in-law had given me the money to buy a burka for that purpose.

Village women are neglected and insulted. I went for elections hoping I could do something for them.

Though religiously orthodox herself, Rabea identifies unjust cultural practices carried out by the traditional religious elite.

When a husband wants to take back his wife after a divorce, the mullahs demand a hilla marriage. This means the wife has to marry another man and live with him for three months and ten days. Only then can she divorce the second husband and remarry the first one. I don't think this is just. It is shameful that the wife should have to live with another man, just because her husband uttered the word "talak" (divorce) out of some silly anger. In my opinion a monetary fine would be a better solution than the hilla marriage.

A recent rally in Dhaka resulted in violence that sent reverberations throughout the country, creating tensions between fundamentalists and other members of civil society. Rabea reflects on this incident and asserts that unjust political motives, not religious ideals, were the cause of this incident.

I heard a policeman was killed inside the mosque. It is a sin to kill a man inside a mosque. In my opinion they are terrorists and anti-Islamic. No Muslim can kill a person in the house of Allah. Those mullahs killed a person inside the mosque for political reasons. They used Islam for the sake of politics. If they were real Muslims they would never have killed a person inside the mosque.

When asked about the reaction of the mullahs in her village to her election campaign, her association with NGOs, or her involvement in other activities, Rabea responded strongly.

I don't care at all what the mullahs say. I don't agree with them and I don't listen to them. We have to earn our living. Nobody gives you money, if you don't earn it yourself. The mullahs say women should stay home, but I say, "When my stomach is empty, there is no benefit in having shy eyes." They won't give me food. I have to work for my children's future. I have to develop this country. This is not possible if I stay at home. When I say these things they do not reply. Only the ignorant and illiterate think that NGOs are bad. What would happen to this country if it weren't for the NGOs? Where would all the unemployed people go? The government doesn't provide many jobs. You can't even get a government job by paying lakhs of takas in bribes. I think the unemployment problem is decreasing due to the NGOs.

Since being elected Rabea's greatest challenge is to overcome the obstacles to her leadership created by her male colleagues on the UP.

I go to the UP meetings, but they don't take place regularly – only once every six to nine months. Women don't have much say in the UP meetings. When we try to say something, the male members usually stop us by changing the subject. They don't let us speak and this makes me very angry. It was such hard work to get elected from three wards, yet the male members still oppress us. They don't give us any work. Even showing them the manual doesn't

work. The two other female members are poor. The Chairman uses them. He takes their signature, gives them some money and does the work himself. He is corrupt, and he steals and misappropriates things.

The right thing would be to have an equal number of men and women on the UP.

Rabea is also a member of the Thana Development Committee, but she is unable to use this link to improve the circumstances in the Union Parishad.

If I complain I will be in his bad books. If we go against the Chairman, we won't even get what we are getting now. He is very influential. Everything is under his control. He is from the ruling party. So am I, but we are from different groups within that party.

All the same, when asked whether she preferred certain parts of her interview to be kept off the record, Rabea replies:

It is not a problem. I have been afraid of the Chairman for too long. I am still afraid of saying things to him in person, but if it they are written in a book, the whole country will know about it, so I don't feel afraid.

Rabea believes increasing the number of female members on the UP would improve the quality of women's participation, enhancing their unity and helping them assert their interests.

The right thing would be to have an equal number of men and women on the UP. Then we would have the power to fight the men. Women are not united, but men are. If we say something against one man, all the others come to his aide. But women don't have this unity.





Name: Rebecca

Location: Diara Union, Jessore Sadar Thana, Jessore District

Age: 39

Education: class nine

Marital status: married

Children's Ages: 20, 22, 25 (all three sons are pursuing higher education)

Husband: 45, Higher Secondary Certificate, businessman

Household income: IV

Landholding: 1

Religion: Muslim

Family's socio-political engagement: her father and nephew were both UP Chairmen

Woman's social memberships and links: none

Woman's leadership and work experience: cashier at Banchte Shekha in the past, now president of the school committee

REBECCA

I'm proud to be a woman. I don't have high educational qualifications, but people respect me and that is my pride.

Rebecca is a charming woman with a strong commitment to both her work and the woman's cause. Her father and nephew both held posts as UP Chairmen. Before starting her political career Rebecca was a cashier at Banchte Shekha.

That was ten years ago. In those days people said women would become bad if they left their homes. But if we had stayed at home, we would not have learned so much. At Banchte Shekha, I received training on what to do with the loan we received, on poultry raising and cattle rearing and on raising women's consciousness... When the villagers saw me organizing women they said, "One day Rebecca will become somebody." Then the government declared direct elections and everybody in the village asked me to compete.

Rebecca's main source of support and motivation for her decision to campaign were the women of Banchte Shekha.

My husband said he would leave me if I went for elections, but my sons said, "You compete, let us take care of Father." My parents were angry with me too, because I had not discussed things with them. I admitted I was at fault for deciding without consulting my family, but I went for the elections with the support of Banchte Shekha. So I actually got my main support from women, and I went for the elections in order to do something for women.

Now Rebecca's principal concerns are for these women, and to use her position to assist them in improving their lives and managing their daily struggles.

Many abandoned or abused women come to Banchte Shekha and join groups. They survive by raising poultry or rearing cattle thanks to the loans they get, and they often become more aware of the options available to them. Many of them actually decide to leave their husbands. This morning one of these women came to me. She was never very happy with her marriage. Her husband did not even give her food. So she left him and now she wants a divorce. The husband came to me this morning begging for forgiveness, but the woman doesn't want to go back to him. All day she had to work outside and when she came back home she still had to do all the household work including house repairs. They live in an earthen house that needs regular maintenance. It is really hard work. So I told her I would arrange a divorce for her.

I'm proud to be a woman. I don't have high educational qualifications, but people respect me and that is my pride.

Rebecca demonstrated her personal commitment to her constituents during the last nationwide floods, and attributes her knowledge about providing service to Banchte Shekha.

During the last floods, our union opened five flood shelters and I worked hard to bring people from flood-affected areas to these shelters. I heard that Banchte Shekha was distributing relief goods, but I was running my own assistance program. I collected donations from my wealthy relatives and distributed them to the flood victims. I brought bags full of clothes, rice, lentils, vegetables, candles, kerosene, soybean oil, and matches to my union and distributed them. My work brought me happiness. I could not have done all this if I had stayed at home. I pulled it off thanks to what I had learned at Banchte Shekha.

Banchte Shekha also supported her directly to be a more effective Union Parishad member by providing Rebecca and the other female members critical training to perform their duties and to overcome the obstacles.

When we first came to the UP, I felt like we three female members were only there as decorations. We didn't have any work. We would come and just sit and sign. We never even read what we were signing. We were fools. Then Banchte Shekha taught us how to check what we were signing. I can't even begin to tell you how much support we received from Banchte Shekha. They told us we had to claim our rights from the Chairman, because they wouldn't just be handed to us on a silver platter. We asked the Chairman for the manual. He didn't want to give it to us, but later he had to. Banchte Shekha taught us how to work with the UP. They taught us everything. I was a housewife before, but I was reborn by being with Banchte Shekha.

Through her involvement on the UP and by engaging women on the shalish, Rebecca has become a catalyst for change in her area, a role model for the women, and a sign to men that gender dynamics are changing.

In the old days, women who applied for a shalish had to wait under their veils in a corner and listen to what the men were saying. They wouldn't say anything themselves. Now they say, "If our sister can work and interact with men, why shouldn't we?" And if the men try to oppose them, they argue back. That's why the village men say, "Our women are overpowering us because of this Rebecca. Before, they didn't leave their homes, but now, because of this Rebecca there are hordes of women going to the shalish." Educated or not, no woman is left behind. I think in my area, women have made progress. I travelled with them. I taught them how to speak. Now they can speak in front of anybody. This is my pride.



In considering these transformations, Rebecca describes the vast improvements in women's lives of her generation compared to her mother's and grandmother's.

When I compare my mother's life to mine I feel pain. I think I would die if my life were like hers. How can you get any satisfaction by just doing household work? Women desire to live a full life too. They wish to travel freely. In the old days women knew nothing else besides their husband, their children and their home. But now they can work outside and provide for their families. My mother's generation led a really hard life. My mother-in-law says, "You have a much better life." She says her mother-in-law only allowed her to eat after everybody else had finished. So while she was the one doing all the cooking, she only got the leftovers. My mother says similar things about her mother's life. Sometimes she got so hungry she couldn't bear it anymore so she would go to the pond with the excuse of fetching water and once there she would secretly eat some rice with salt. So both my mother and mother-in-law say, "If we were born a generation later, we might have enjoyed our lives."

My husband said he would leave me if I went for elections, but my sons said: "You compete, let us take care of Father."

Rebecca would like to continue her UP work, and hopes that more women will seek public posts.

I am not sure this system will be maintained over the long term. But in case it is, they should also create posts for female chowkidars (village police). I don't find the male chowkidars safe. Often we have to stay out late at night for our work. It would be a big help if I could have female chowkidars with me. I also think upazilas should have female TNOs. Our TNO is a woman, and she is very good. If we go to her with a problem she listens carefully. No male TNO would ever do that.





Name: Bulu Roy

Location: Gangarampur Union, Botiaghata Thana, Khulna District

Age: 35

Education: Bachelor of Arts (BA)

Marital status: married

Children's Ages: 6, 9

Husband: 42, BA, works in a bank

Household income: III

Landholding: II

Religion: Hindu

Family's socio-political engagement: her father was a UP member

Woman's social memberships and links: Rupantar central committee member and school committee adviser in the past, now member of the Thana Development Committee

Woman's leadership and work experience: none

BULU ROY

Women in the villages cannot work because of fatwabaz (people who declare religious edicts), dirty politics and antisocial activities. I don't have problems myself, but I have to speak on behalf of my sisters.

Bulu, both graceful and spirited, is highly committed to the cause of women. Motivated to protest a violent killing of a prominent woman in her village, Bulu proved to have the convictions and skills of a powerful leader.

I delivered the first speech of my life in the meeting to protest the murder. After hearing me speak, the people understood my potential. I decided to run for elections, but my husband and family were against it. But the villagers almost forced me to go for it. No one knew me before, but after the procession against the murder, everyone knew the name Bulu Roy. My name appeared in many newspapers. During the elections people would come with a candle in their hand to see me and would tell me, "You are an Indira Gandhi."

Bulu laughs heartily.

I think that procession turned me into a politician. Already I am one of the female leaders in Bangladesh.

Bulu considers herself a social worker. Her main priority is to free women from oppression.

I enjoy being a social worker. I want to fight for women's rights. Most women in our country have chains on their feet. They will remain in bondage forever if we who are educated don't come forward to free them. I realized this just by looking at my mother. Already as a child I could tell that she was being ruled over. I could also tell that my brother and I were treated differently and I understood that women have no rights in the family. This inequality is

present at all levels. The most important step is to make women at the grassroots level aware of their condition. Those who are educated can enjoy limited freedom, but those at the grassroots level are totally helpless. We have to free them first.

Bulu has had to face significant opposition to fulfilling her duties as a UP member, both internally and externally.

Whenever we start a project, we find an opposition group in the village. They don't approach me directly. It's all village politics. As an urban girl, I was naive about these things, but now I've figured it out and I can usually anticipate potential problems. Now I have ways to deal with them. In offices and courts women are treated like toys, but they can't behave like that with me. I argue. I even broke a chair in the UP once.

No one knew me before, but after the procession against the murder, everyone knew the name Bulu Roy.

Despite these obstacles, Bulu carries out her duties with determination to improve the lives of women.

I go from house to house to encourage uneducated "sisters" to get education, so that they don't have to remain imprisoned at home. I also try to convince their husbands. I go from village to village to organize women and to invite them to women's rights programs. I try to motivate them and I deliver speeches at public gatherings. The situation has improved a lot in just three years of UP work. Women are more conscious than before. They go to meetings, shalishes and Total Literacy Movement centers in addition to looking after their household and agricultural work. I encourage village women to speak at public meetings. We discuss all sorts of things at these meetings. We share information about cases of women's oppression. We make plans to resist it. My women sometimes say each of them will donate a handful of rice, so that we can start a fund for our women's rights movement. They were suffering, but then they found me and I have helped them change. They were captive and numb, but I liberated them. This is why their husbands sometimes scold me.

Bulu remembers an encounter with a woman from her community that made a big impression on her.

I was going home from the UP one day when I saw a woman riding on a rickshaw van all by herself. The van was loaded with vegetables. I congratulated her and told her I was astonished to see a woman riding a van all by herself and on her way to the market to sell vegetables. It was beyond the realm of my imagination. I can't tell you how happy I felt. By talking to her, I learned that she had been abandoned by her husband, so she was doing this for survival. She was also providing for the education of her children. I was really stunned, because not even I can do so much for my children. I encouraged her, and now I go see her whenever I'm in the bazaar.

Bulu also believes that her work on the UP has increased the participation of women and thus improved the shalish process and the quality of other meetings.

The shalish has improved a great deal. When we go to a shalish or a meeting, ten or more village women usually come with us. Thanks to our efforts, these women come to listen, which they wouldn't have done in the past.

When asked if she wants to run for the next elections, Bulu replies:

Yes, I want to run in the next elections, but for either a UP or Upazila Chairman post, no longer for this low post. I think I have the ability to do higher level work. If we really want equal rights we can't be satisfied with reserved seats. We have to compete with men. We are not inferior to men.

If we really want equal rights we can't be satisfied with reserved seats. We have to compete with men. We are not inferior to men.



LIST OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND TERMS

AC	Assistant Commissioner; deputy appointed official at district level
Adarsha Gram	government housing project for the landless
ADP	Annual Development Programme, government budget for development projects
Ahsania Mission	NGO based in Dhaka
Apa	literally, "sister"; common term used to address a woman
ASA	Association for Social Advancement; NGO based in Dhaka
ASANNITA	literally, "hopeful"; NGO based in Shitakundo, Chittagong
Asrayon	government housing project for the landless
Ayesha	Prophet Mohammed's wife
Awami League	political party led by Sheikh Hasina
BA	Bachelor of Arts degree
Bazaar	market
Begum Rokeya	prominent historical figure promoting women's education and rights
Bigha	approximately one third of an acre
BLAST	Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust; NGO based in Dhaka
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party; political party led by Khaleda Zia
BNPS	Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha; NGO based in Dhaka
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee; NGO based in Dhaka
BRDB	Bangladesh Rural Development Board; government board
Banchte Shekha	literally, "learn how to survive"; NGO based in Jessore
BSCIC	Bangladesh Small Cottage Industries Cooperative; government board
Burka	cloak covering the entire body, including a hood for the head and flap to cover the face; worn by women going outside to keep strict purdah
CARITAS	NGO based in Dhaka
Chanachur	salty snack
Chowkidar	village police/security guard
CODEC	Community Development Centre; NGO based in Chittagong
DC	District Commissioner; highest appointed official at district level
Denmohoor	dowry given by the groom instead of the bride
Dhol	a special type of drum
Eid	major religious festival in Islam
Fatwa	religious edict
Fatwabaz	people who declare religious edicts
Food for Work	government food project
GUP	Gono Unnayan Prochesta; NGO based in Dhaka
Haat	market
Hadiz	word of Mohammed
Hilla marriage	traditional Islamic custom: before a couple can re-marry after having been divorced the woman first has to enter an intermediate marriage with another man, often the mullah himself
Hunger Project, The	NGO based in Dhaka
HSC	Higher Secondary Certificate
Huzur	Islamic priest
Imam	Islamic priest
Inshallah	literally, "God willing"
Jatiya Party	political party led by General Ershad
Jhata procession	sweepers procession
Khaleda Zia	woman leader of the BNP political party
Khas land	government-owned land intended for public distribution
Kodal	axe-like earthcutting tool
Koran	holy script of Islam

Krishi	farmer
Krishi bank	agro-credit bank
Lakh	measurement of 100,000
LGED	Local Government Engineering Department; government department responsible for construction of roads, bridges, etc.
madrassa	Islamic school
mastaan	thug, gangster
MLAA	Madaripur Legal Aid Association; NGO based in Madaripur
MP	Member of Parliament
Mohila Samiti	national women's organization
Mullah	traditional rural Islamic priest
Nauzoobillah	literally, "Save me from the devil"
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
Open University	government-run education program. After completing the curriculum, students can take an exam to earn an SSC.
PMUK	Padakhap Manobik Unnayan Kendra (literally, "step towards development"); NGO based in Dhaka
Proshika	NGO based in Dhaka
Purdah	traditional Islamic practice of seclusion of women from outsiders
RDRS	Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service; NGO based in Rangpur
Regular Matenance Project	development project that employs poor women to maintain rural roads
Rickshaw	three-wheeled passenger vehicle pedaled by one man
Rupantar	literally "transformation"; NGO based in Khulna
Sahib	term used to address an important man; "sir"
Samiti	village group
Sari	dress worn by adult women
Secretariat	national government administrative offices
SSC	Secondary School Certificate
Shala	literally, "damn it"
shalish	village council, composed primarily of male leaders, that arbitrates disputes
shantibahini	separatist militant group in the hill tracts
Sheikh Hasina	woman leader of Awami League political party, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman
Sheik Mujibhur Rahman	first President of Bangladesh; referred to as "Father of the Nation"
SSKS	Sylhet Samaj Kallyan Sangstha; NGO based in Sylhet
Sugandha	fragrance
Taka	Bangladeshi currency (approximately 55 Taka = 1 US\$)
Talak	divorce
Thana	sub-district government level; also called upazila
Thana Development Committee	committee at thana level that disburses development funds to unions
Tip	decorative spot on the front worn by Hindu women to indicate their caste, nowadays worn as a fashion item
TNO	Thana Nirbahi Officer; chief appointed administrative officer for a thana
TR	Test Relief Project
Tribal headman	chief of a group of villages in the hill tracts
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UP	Union Parishad; elected council at sub-thana level
Upazila	sub-district government level; also called thana
VARD	Voluntary Association for Rural Development; NGO based in Sylhet
VGD cards	Vulnerable Group Development cards; distributed to provide food and relief payments to the poor
VISION 2000	NGO based in Comilla