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# Social Equity Through Women's Empowerment: Women's Participation in Local Politics, Budgeting and Decision-Making in Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

The paper explores the gender dimensions of social equity and social equity budgeting (SEB) by investigating women's inclusion in local politics, budgeting and decision-making in Bangladesh. Quotas for women representatives are reserved at each successive level of local government in Bangladesh, and their active participation in local politics and budgeting is encouraged. The data for the paper were derived from in-depth interviews with local actors and direct observations, while the findings were analyzed using the four dimensions of social equity. The findings of the study provide insights into the experiences of local community actors with gender quota requirements, the barriers they faced, the enabling strategies and agencies that female politicians have adopted to counter them, and their outcomes. It thus demonstrates how social equity can be achieved through partial empowerment in developing country contexts. In addition, the findings highlight the importance of considering the "intersectional perspective" in the study of SEB in developing country contexts, given that women's access, participation, and outcomes are contingent upon both their individual status and the status of their families within their communities. This suggests the potential relevance of an intersectional interpretation of the results, wherein social status interacts with gender to shape women's lived experiences in different ways. Recognizing the structural dynamics is, therefore, essential to current debates on SEB and how its principles can be meaningfully embedded into local governance.

## সারসংক্ষেপ

বাংলাদেশের স্থানীয় সরকারের প্রতিটি ধারাবাহিক স্তরে নারী প্রতিনিধিদের জন্য কোটা সংরক্ষিত রয়েছে এবং স্থানীয় রাজনীতি ও বাজেট প্রণয়নে তাঁদের সক্রিয় অংশগ্রহণকে উৎসাহিত করা হচ্ছে। এই গবেষণাপত্রটির মূল উদ্দেশ্য হলো বাংলাদেশের স্থানীয় রাজনীতি, বাজেট প্রণয়ন ও সিদ্ধান্ত গ্রহণে নারীর অংশগ্রহণের ফলে সামাজিক ন্যায্যতার দিকগুলি পর্যালোচনা করা এবং সামাজিক ন্যায্যতা বাজেট প্রণয়ন (SEB) এর উপযোগিতা অনুসন্ধান করা। এই গবেষণাপত্রের জন্য উপাত্ত স্থানীয় অংশগ্রহণকারীদের সঙ্গে সুদীর্ঘ সাক্ষাৎকারের মাধ্যমে ও সরাসরি পর্যবেক্ষণ থেকে সংগ্রহ করা হয়েছে এবং এর ফলাফলগুলি সামাজিক ন্যায্যতার চারটি মাত্রা ব্যবহার করে বিশ্লেষণ করা হয়েছে। এই গবেষণার মাধ্যমে সমাজে নারী কোটার প্রয়োজনীয়তা, নারীদের অংশগ্রহণের বাধা এবং এসব বাধা মোকাবেলায় নারী রাজনীতিবিদদের গৃহীত কৌশল ও ব্যবস্থা, এবং সেসবের ফলাফল সম্পর্কে বিশ্লেষণালব্ধ মতামত তুলে ধরা হয়েছে। উন্নয়নশীল দেশের প্রেক্ষাপটে নারীর আংশিক ক্ষমতায়নের মাধ্যমে কীভাবে সামাজিক ন্যায্যতা অর্জন করা যেতে পারে তার একটি রূপরেখা এই গবেষণায় দেখানো হয়েছে। এ ছাড়া, উন্নয়নশীল দেশের প্রেক্ষাপটে সামাজিক ন্যায্যতা বাজেট প্রণয়নের গবেষণায় সমাজ-সহজাত দৃষ্টিভঙ্গি (intersectional perspective) বিবেচনা করার গুরুত্ব এই বিশ্লেষণে তুলে ধরা হয়েছে কারণ, নারীর প্রবেশাধিকার, অংশগ্রহণ এবং এর ফলাফল সমাজে নারীর ব্যক্তিগত

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অবস্থান ও তাঁর পরিবারের সামাজিক অবস্থান উভয়ের ওপর নির্ভরশীল। এই গবেষণার একটি সমাজ-সহজাত (intersectional) ব্যাখ্যা হলো, একজন নারীর জীবনযাত্রার অভিজ্ঞতাসমূহ রচিত হয় তাঁর নারীসত্তা ও সামাজিক অবস্থান এ দুইয়ের মিথস্ক্রিয়া থেকে। অতএব, SEB-এর বর্তমান বিতর্ক এবং এর মূলনীতিগুলি কীভাবে স্থানীয় শাসনব্যবস্থায় অর্থপূর্ণভাবে অন্তর্ভুক্ত করা যেতে পারে তার জন্য একটি কাঠামোগত গতিশীল ব্যবস্থার স্বীকৃতি দেওয়া অপরিহার্য।

## 1 | Introduction

This study aims to extend our understanding of how women's inclusion in local politics, budgeting, and decision-making shapes social equity in developing country contexts. Social equity, one of the fundamental pillars of public administration (Guy and McCandless 2012), has attracted renewed scholarly attention, as inequalities and intersectional disparities in contemporary societies have further widened and become more visible in areas such as education, the economy, health, housing, criminal justice, and policymaking (Gooden 2017; Licsandru et al. 2025). Despite a rise in the literature addressing social equity (Gooden 2015; Cepiku and Mastrodascio 2021), it has remained relatively less implemented and explored compared with the other three pillars of public administration (efficiency, effectiveness, and economy) (Stokan et al. 2023; Guy and McCandless 2012). Scholars such as McCandless et al. (2022) and Gooden (2015) have therefore emphasized the need to promote social equity more actively, for instance, by naming (identifying and admitting), blaming (understanding causes and effects and identifying the responsible person/factor), and claiming (taking relevant steps to ensure fairness for all) inequalities.

In recent studies, traditional views suggesting that representation through elected politicians will ensure greater equity in terms of resource allocations have increasingly been challenged (McDonald III and McCandless 2025), highlighting the need to more explicitly incorporate social equity into all levels of the decisions making processes, and in particular in budgeting processes, given their centrality in the functioning of public administration, through restructuring the allocation of revenues and expenditures (McDonald III and McCandless 2025). Budget allocations are often envisaged as a lens for examining social equity as they reflect governments' policy priorities and the key beneficiaries of public spending (Wei 2024; Taylor et al. 2025). Within this context, social equity budgeting (herein, SEB) has been presented as an alternative to traditional budgeting, enabling the pursuit of redistributive and affirmative policies and ensuring fairness, due process, and justice in regard to resource allocation (McDonald III and McCandless 2025; McDonald III et al. 2024). In general, the concept of public budgeting refers to both a set of documents and the underlying decision-making processes. Far from being neutral tools through which resources are allocated, budgets and budgeting processes reflect underlying power dynamics, and, in turn, contribute to shaping them (Saliterer et al. 2017). Thus, gaining greater insight into social equity within budgeting requires not only a focus on the final allocation of resources as defined in a budget document, but also an understanding of the factors that contribute to shaping the concrete translation of social equity principles in practice, for example, through budgeting processes and citizens' engagement.

Among various social equity dimensions, existing studies show the centrality of gender at the intersection of disadvantages and the limited progress achieved in addressing gender inequalities both in developed and developing countries (Stokan et al. 2023; McCandless et al. 2022; Taylor et al. 2025). Calls have therefore been made for a greater understanding of what can be done to address gender inequalities as a key area of intervention in order to promote social equity, and to do so by exploring the direct experiences of marginalized, vulnerable, excluded citizens (Licsandru et al. 2025; Pandey et al. 2022). This paper contributes to the literature on gender dimensions of social equity and SEB by investigating women's inclusion in local politics and budgeting in Bangladesh. Specifically, it explores how social equity has been operationalized through gender representation. Drawing on in-depth interviews with local actors and direct observations, the study captures the lived experiences of women and politicians. In doing so, it advances understanding of how social equity is translated in practice within the local context, particularly in terms of access to decision-making, fairness and quality of deliberative processes, and how these dynamics shape outcomes related to resource allocation and empowerment.

The need to extend the study of social equity in the global context has been emphasized, particularly to assess the root causes of inequity (Gooden 2017; Wooldridge and Gooden 2009). For instance, as McCandless et al. (2022) point out, in South Asia, existing socio-cultural and historical factors may represent key impediments to achieving social equity. Along these lines, Bangladesh offers an interesting research context, given the constitutional requirement for women to be included in the upper echelons of government during the last few decades. Quotas for women are set out at all tiers of government and public administration in order to ensure that their voices and concerns are represented in the political processes and decision-making (Jahan 2015). Existing provisions incorporated into the Constitution of Bangladesh and the Local Government Act 2009 encourage the active participation of women in local government meetings and budgeting processes (Kaiser and Nabila 2024). However, the question of how these formal requirements have been translated into practice is a matter of empirical assessment, as initiatives for promoting women's political and budgetary participation and their empowerment have faced institutional constraints and resistance, mainly at the local levels (Prodip 2021). Our study investigates the effects of, and conditions for, implementing the existing quota system in Bangladesh, thereby exploring the extent to which it has enabled women's participation in local politics, budgeting and decision-making and resulted in the achievement of social equity. In doing so, it contributes to a better understanding of how the formal principles and dimensions of social equity and SEB have been translated into practice in the context of developing countries, highlighting the

wider conditions and effects, and experiences of those who remain excluded. Beyond the context of Bangladesh, this study aims to contribute to the theorization of social equity and SEB in terms of identifying the factors enabling or constraining the participation and agency of women in the political process and resource allocation, and the intersectionality of gender empowerment in the wider context of developing countries.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of ongoing scholarly debates concerning social equity in public budgeting. Section 3 builds on the extant literature to advance the integrated analytical framework applied in the study. This is followed by the methods section. Information about the context of Bangladesh is then provided. The subsequent section presents our findings, outlining how the women's responsibilities have been defined in society, the fairness of resource allocation and participation, and the extent to which women's empowerment has been achieved. The discussion and conclusions sections then follow, outlining the challenges that developing countries face in terms of translating social equity and highlighting the paper's contributions and practice and policy implications.

## 2 | Social Equity Budgeting (SEB)

Public budgeting has remained a key process for governments to debate, make decisions on the acquisition of resources and their allocation among multiple competing demands, implement them, and reflect their policy priorities (McDonald III et al. 2024). However, public budgeting has often drawn criticisms for its failure to embrace many of the voices of the community and for creating opportunities only to certain privileged groups to participate or be represented in the budget process (McDonald III et al. 2022). Traditional public budgeting has therefore been referred to as “being equity-blind” (see e.g., McDonald III and McCandless 2025), as it continued to exacerbate inequities in communities (McDonald III et al. 2024). Increasingly, calls are made to extend an understanding of how public budgeting principles and processes intersect with social equity (Taylor et al. 2025). Within this context, the concept of social equity budgeting (SEB) has evolved and disseminated, emphasizing the incorporation of social equity principles into public budgets and the budgeting process (McDonald III and McCandless 2025; Afshan 2025).

The existing literature highlights the fact that a thorough understanding of SEB needs to go well beyond the technical features inherent in the budget, or the formal features of processes, suggesting that it is important to look at the ways in which contextual and processual features shape the final decisions, the allocation of resources, and the ensuing outcomes (McDonald III and McCandless 2025; Chen et al. 2025). For instance, Wei (2024) has suggested to scrutinize social equity in budget allocations through categorizing budget policies within developmental, redistributive, allocational, and educational domains. However, as outlined by McDonald III et al. (2024) and other scholars (see e.g., Guzman et al. 2025; Bartle and Rubin 2024), the adoption of SEB does not necessarily require the government to create a separate budget, but it is essential for them to consider “potential social equity impacts when designing, implementing, monitoring,

and evaluating expenditure and revenue policies” (p. 2). The design of SEB should consider equitable resource allocation in response to the specific challenges facing communities, as well as their constituent characteristics, which lead to inequalities.

According to Bartle and Rubin (2024), US local governments have shown a growing interest in embedding equity into their existing budgeting processes, altering tax systems and financing several equity-related initiatives. Reflecting on the attempts made by US local governments, they identified two different but not mutually exclusive budget orientations—an outcome orientation and a process orientation (p. 95). While the former focuses on regularly measuring progress towards achieving social equity goals and adjusting budgetary allocations as required, the latter is concerned with promoting citizen participation in the budgeting process to facilitate more democratic decision-making. A general argument for citizen engagement suggests that public budgeting is inaccessible in a representative democracy and, therefore, governments should pay particular attention to developing and designing budget systems that are responsive to all members of the public (McDonald III et al. 2024). However, several studies provide evidence on how access and opportunity affect citizen participation, and how this results in partial empowerment, as well as a further exacerbation of inequality in certain contexts (McDonald III and McCandless 2025; McDonald III et al. 2024; Taylor et al. 2025; Kuenneke and Scutelnicu 2021; Lofton and Guzmán 2026). In their study of participatory budgeting (PB) for social equity, Taylor et al. (2025) outlined several prerequisites for the successful implementation of socially equitable PB programmes, including, among others, targeted intervention, well-designed procedures, open communication and organizational learning.

Studies have also attempted to explore the factors that are necessary for the successful embedding of social equity in the budgeting process, both in the US and internationally (see e.g., Afshan and McDonald 2024). For instance, in their study of US local governments, Bartle and Rubin (2024) identified several key steps that local governments can take to successfully implement an equity-focused budget, including the prioritization of its adoption by elected officials, high level administrators and lead budget officers, by making it part of their administrative routines, promoting inter-agency communication and support, and continued feedback, training and learning. In his study on the role of local institutions in SEB, Wei (2024) argues that local institutions that focus more on promoting politicians' political accountability to citizens tend to prioritize redistributive social welfare and foster social equity in public budgeting. In a more recent study of US local governments, McDonald III and McCandless (2025) identified five themes associated with the successful incorporation of social equity in the budgetary processes, that is, grassroots efforts, leaders' receptivity, community engagement, administrators' buy-in, and effective measurement. In the UK context, Ferry and Ahrens (2025) examined SEB at Newcastle City Council (NCC) and argued that its success depends on a transition from rigid proceduralism towards the facilitation of a dynamic approach to interactions among policymakers, administrators and citizens.

Recent studies on SEB have argued that incorporating equity into the budgeting process, as well as identifying an

appropriate format for SEB, have yet to be fully explored (McDonald III et al. 2024; Bartle and Rubin 2024; Gooden 2015; Chen et al. 2025). In their polyphonic debate on social equity, McDonald III et al. (2024) argue that the absence of a unified approach to SEB has further contributed to its limited exploration. For instance, while it has been referred to as, among other things, SEB, gender-responsive or gender-based budgeting, and racial equity budgeting in public administration, several accounting studies have contextualized it within the remit of critical tax theory and public value generation (Ferry and Ahrens 2025). Within these variants of SEB, gender-responsive budgeting has been studied more widely across countries, particularly in terms of its design, as well as its efficacy in addressing gender disparities (Wei 2024; Galizzi et al. 2023; Steccolini 2019). Studies delineating attempts to achieve social equity through budgeting, in particular women empowerment, in developing country contexts are, however, scarce (see e.g., Licsandru et al. 2025, highlighting the importance of conducting more studies on emerging economies). Moreover, it has been highlighted that past studies on social equity and inclusion have often focused more on bureaucratic representation and perspectives, or the mechanisms for participation, for example, the participatory budgeting processes (see e.g., Kuruppu et al. 2016), than on linking them to the concrete experiences of the inclusion or exclusion of citizens (Licsandru et al. 2025; Afshan 2025). Consequently, there have been calls for further qualitative studies to be conducted within this field. In addition, Wei (2024) emphasizes the need to uncover the subjective perceptions of socially disadvantaged groups regarding their access to designing social equity measures within the budgeting process. In this paper, our aim is to address these knowledge gaps by illustrating the extent to which the social equity principles and measures relating to women's participation in local politics, budgeting, and decision-making, as set out in the rules and regulations, have furthered women's empowerment in Bangladesh. This seems particularly salient as Ara and Northcote (2020, 266) argue that socio-economic, institutional, and historical factors have built up a "gender wall" in Bangladesh, preventing women from actively participating in the political process, amid legislative reforms.

### 3 | Dimensions of Social Equity and an Integrated Analytical Framework

Our analytical framework for the study is built upon by integrating the four dimensions of social equity, as outlined in the extant literature (Svara and Brunet 2004, 2005; McDonald III et al. 2024; Gooden 2017; Johnson and Svara 2015; Taylor et al. 2025). Contextual variations and different translations of social equity still persist (see e.g., Stokan et al. 2023; Young et al. 2023). The importance of differentiating between the notions of "egalitarianism" and "necessities" is particularly emphasized in defining social equity (see e.g., Wei 2024). The notion of egalitarianism implies treating individuals and communities equally and uniformly, regardless of their peculiarities and intersections of disadvantages. In contrast, the notion of necessities focuses on the achievement of social equity by pursuing redistributive policies and affirmative actions where the greater benefits flow to disadvantaged

individuals and communities (Wei 2024; Cárdenas and de la Cruz 2017).

Combining those two perspectives, four dimensions of social equity have generally been identified, that is, access, procedural fairness, quality, and outcomes, which are used to provide a basis for its measurement (Johnson and Svara 2015; Svara and Brunet 2004, 2005, 2020; McDonald III et al. 2024; Gooden 2017). These four dimensions of social equity have been applied, both separately and collectively, to analyze problems (prevailing inequalities) in a multiplicity of areas within public administration and management, ranging from public transportation to immigration and to co-production of knowledge and the curriculum (Stokan et al. 2023; Svara and Brunet 2004, 2005; McDonald III et al. 2024; Gooden 2017) and, more recently, have also been applied to public budgeting (Taylor et al. 2025).

Access refers to how citizens get access to services and processes, including more marginalized categories that come to be included and represented. This requires the distribution of benefits equally, or in such a manner that results in less advantaged citizens and marginalized groups receiving greater benefits. Reaching out to those who are eligible, but who face special conditions, requires eliminating barriers, as well as exercising legal discretion to include rather than to exclude those whose eligibility is on the borderline. Special attention should therefore be paid to promoting equal distribution, compensatory redistribution, and rectifying past discrimination when formulating new policies (Johnson and Svara 2015; Svara and Brunet 2004).

Procedural fairness emphasizes that the voices of marginalized citizens are included and adequately considered. Due process, equal protection, and equal rights for all individuals regardless of their personal traits are therefore particularly emphasized. Fairness can also be seen in terms of representation, quotas, and formal procedures in place. A continued examination and evaluation of new and existing practices under consideration is therefore required to ensure that procedural fairness has not been disproportionately denied to any individuals or groups (Johnson and Svara 2015; Svara and Brunet 2005). At the heart of this dimension is the pursuit of corrective measures in case of any discrepancies and unfair treatment of individuals and/or groups.

Quality is concerned with ensuring individuals and groups' consistency in the quality of services and benefits delivered to them, and that these services and benefits comply with the prevailing standards of acceptable practice. For instance, in the case of budgeting processes, as suggested by Taylor et al. (2025), it may refer mostly to the substantial implementation of equity beyond "procedural fairness" and can be reflected (p. 4) "in the program's level of formality, the frequency and transparency of meetings and outreach events, and the extent to which marginalized groups are empowered". Implicit within this dimension is the idea that differences should not exist in the way that services are offered across diverse groups (Rivera and Knox 2023).

Outcomes refer to medium and long-term consequences, in terms of sustained inclusion of marginalized categories, as well as increased allocation of resources to their needs. A particular emphasis has been placed on achieving an equal level of accomplishment in regard to social and economic conditions for

all individuals and avoiding variations in outcomes for groups. This requires investigating the reasons why different outcomes might have resulted and identifying approaches for intervening and addressing these disparities (Johnson and Svava 2015; Svava and Brunet 2005).

While acknowledging the significance of these dimensions, studies have also demonstrated how they are manifested differently in different contexts, as well as the attempts made by scholars to extend their scope in terms of measuring social equity (Svava and Brunet 2020; Cepiku and Mastrodascio 2021; Taylor et al. 2025). For instance, using the setting of the Community Development Block Grant, Stokan et al. (2023) have developed a polycentric extension, which they argued would enable social equity, especially when programmes are delivered in an inter-governmental context consisting of multiple decision-making units across spatial levels. In their study about defining social equity in emergency management, Rivera and Knox (2023) proposed a conceptual framework incorporating two additional dimensions, inclusivity and diversity. The former goes beyond mere representation, accentuating the actual presence and engagement of a diverse range of disadvantaged groups, whereas the latter calls for the diversification of organizations involved in emergency management beyond the typical categorization

of race, ethnicity and gender in order to include different ideological perspectives, skill sets and experience. Similarly, in their study of racial equity in regard to homelessness, Kim et al. (2025) argued “representation” as another dimension of social equity, fostering a connection between community leadership, collaboration and implementation. In a recent review of public administration literature on citizens’ inclusion in public services, Licsandru et al. (2025) highlighted how public administration research has often treated issues of representation and participation separately, whereas an emphasis on social equity and inclusion may require them to be considered jointly and for attention to be refocused on inclusion. Similar attempts to extend the equity framework are evident in the work by Taylor et al. (2025) in which the intersection between participatory budgeting and social equity has been explored using the integrated framework consisting of Johnson and Svava’s (2015) four equity dimensions along with the concepts drawn from gender-responsive budgeting, racial equity budgeting and Lerner and Secondo’s (2012) economically distressed group.

The conceptual integrated framework adopted in this study (and presented in Table 1) draws on the four social equity dimensions (Johnson and Svava 2015) and their adaptation to the context of public budgeting by Taylor et al. (2025) to explore how the

**TABLE 1** | Social equity dimensions and the summary of findings.

Social equity dimensions	Definitions	Research questions	Our findings
Access	How citizens get access to processes, including how marginalized categories come to be included and represented.	How is access to positions and processes designed and implemented?	Access as shaped by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Socio-cultural norms defining women’s responsibilities</li> <li>– Family links and the power of husbands and male members</li> </ul>
Fairness	Fairness of processes requires that the voices of marginalized citizens are represented and adequately considered (e.g., through forms of representation, quotas and other formal procedures in place).	How are processes of participation and decision designed and implemented to ensure equity and fairness? What are the concrete experiences of women with them?	Fairness and quality shaped by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Structural barriers in participation</li> <li>– Continued patriarchal domination and marginalization of women</li> <li>– Political support, networking and status</li> <li>– Women’s strategies and agency</li> </ul>
Quality	In the case of budgeting processes (as suggested by Taylor et al. 2025), quality refers to the substantial implementation of equity, beyond “procedural fairness”, encompassing dimensions such as the frequency and transparency of meetings and outreach events and the extent to which marginalized groups feels represented and included.		
Outcomes	Medium and long-term consequences, in terms of sustained inclusion of marginalized categories, increased allocation of resources to their needs and empowerment.	What are the results in terms (for example) of increased sense of belonging, sense of self-efficacy, increased resources for marginalized people and sustained inclusion of marginalized citizens’?	Partial empowerment in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Sustained inclusion, self-belonging and self-efficacy</li> <li>– Trust building with the community through agency and increased resources</li> </ul>

quota and reservation systems for women in Bangladesh have facilitated their participation in local politics, budgeting, and decision-making and led to the achievement of social equity in terms of women's empowerment. In particular, using the framework, we analyze how access to political positions and budget processes is designed and implemented for women, how the processes of participation and decision-making are facilitated to ensure equity/fairness, and what the results are in terms of increased sense of belonging, self-efficacy, increased resources and sustained inclusion, issues which are central to achieving women's empowerment. In so doing, we highlight the concrete experiences of women, providing an understanding of both the barriers they face and the enabling strategies they adopt, as well as the extent to which social equity and empowerment have been achieved.

#### 4 | Research Methods

The data for the study were collected from semi-structured interviews and observations. Between 2022 and 2025, we interviewed 47 informants, both at the central and local levels of Bangladesh; almost half of our interviewees were women. Those interviewees at the central level approached through the professional contacts of a native co-author (also a local academic) included a national policy analyst, a government official, and representatives of international organizations. At the local level, interviews were conducted with former and serving councilors, mayors, NGO officials promoting gender equality, and individuals who had participated in at least one budget meeting or regularly dealt with both male and female councilors in an effort to resolve personal and community-related issues.

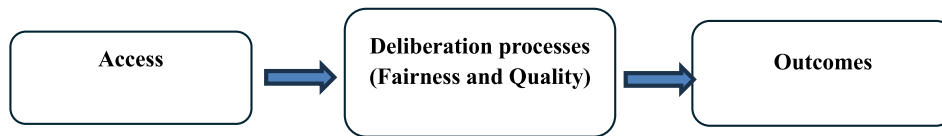
Given the sensitivity of the topic to many potential interview participants at the local levels, building a rapport was important prior to the interviews. At the outset, the native co-author visited the selected municipality in the Southern region of the country (the name of the municipality is kept anonymous), in which the co-author had resided for some time. Using the personal and professional networks, the potential informants—both male and female citizens and councilors, who were either directly or indirectly involved with or participated in local budget allocation and decision-making processes or affected by the decisions—were invited to a meeting. The purpose of the research was explained to them in the meeting. This initial meeting helped identify a wide range of potential interviewees at different levels, statuses and positions and plan the interviews as we were able to generate preliminary insights into the role of women both in the family and wider society, their participation, representation and inclusion in local politics and budgeting, their influence on resource allocations and budgetary decision-making and their empowerment in society. Being a university lecturer, the co-author was warmly welcomed and respected by the interview participants. However, this reputation also may have led some interviewees to be cautious in terms of referring to the abusive language and behaviors that some male councilors used to female citizens or councilors during their participation in the budget allocation meetings.

With a view to mitigating potential bias in designing and conducting the interviews, all interview questions were

thoroughly reviewed by all co-authors. In addition, the interviewer (native co-author) consistently requested feedback from early interviewees, confirming that the interview approaches pursued were relevant and the choice of wording was appropriate. In fact, on a few occasions, female interviewees accompanied the co-author, helping explain to other potential interviewees the purpose of the research and making them comfortable to participate in the interview. Given the importance of personal connections in reaching out to the individuals, the snowball sampling approach was mainly used to identify and contact the relevant individuals (citizens) and local councilors and ensure the representativeness of our informants. Appendix A provides details of our interview participants—their gender, status, positions, and organizations.

All our interviews were conducted by a native co-author in Bengali. Prior to interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and assured that their anonymity would be maintained. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min; they were audio-recorded and later transcribed. We commenced the interviews with more informal and open-ended questions, reflecting on the dimensions of social equity: access, procedural fairness, quality and outcomes, prior to focusing on the specific questions embedded in our interview guide. For instance, the participants were asked about their experience with regard to access and processes involved in designing and implementing local policies, budget allocations and decision-making, wider engagement and participation in the budgeting processes, the extent to which they believe that the processes have been fair and inclusive, and what results have been achieved. A few participants who were still hesitant to open up were allowed to discuss whatever aspects of women's participation in politics, budgeting and resource allocation decision-making that they deemed relevant to share. In so doing, we were able to develop a rapport with the participants. The participants were provided with a summary of their statements and the approval received. Both the interviews and the transcripts were cross-checked by another co-author, also a native Bengali speaker, to ensure that the key ideas expressed by the interviewees had not been misinterpreted during the transcription process. As part of further ensuring the accuracy of transcriptions, the two native co-authors independently translated a small sample of interviews and discussed if there is any discrepancy between them. For any doubts between the two co-authors, the first co-author reached out to the interviewees to cross-check that the interview transcripts truly represented their views.

Our interviews were supplemented by field-level observations of two relief campaigns by a native co-author in the same municipality (see Appendix A). The first campaign was held to undertake decisions about providing monetary support for organizing community and religious festivals, whereas the purpose of the second campaign was to provide winter clothing to community members, particularly disadvantaged groups. Along with the locals/villagers, 6 councilors (3 male and 3 female), a mayor, and the Upazila executive officer (Upazila Nirbahi Officer—UNO) attended the first campaign. The second campaign was attended by 2 councilors (1 male and 1 female), a mayor, and the UNO, in addition to villagers/locals. The co-author attended these campaigns as a volunteer observer, having explained to public officials in advance the



**FIGURE 1** | The integrated analytical framework: dimensions of social equity (see e.g., Johnson and Svava 2015; Taylor et al. 2025). [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/padm.70052)]

purpose of the research. The observation of these two campaigns enabled us to experience the extent to which the female councilors are valued and/or marginalized in day-to-day activities, as well as their capacity to counter socio-cultural and other structural barriers they face in their everyday lives. Detailed field notes were developed after each observation and shared with all co-authors. The field notes provided us with an additional source to reconfirm our interview data and supplemented the process of developing codes.

We adhered to a qualitative data analysis process (Miles et al. 2014) to analyze the interview recordings, transcripts and experiences gathered during the field-level observations. At the outset, master and a few provisional codes were agreed upon deductively (Taylor et al. 2025), based on the interview guide and existing studies on citizen engagement in policy decisions, social equity and SEB, particularly the four dimensions of social equity (see Figure 1), which the study has applied as an analytical framework—access, procedural fairness, quality and outcomes (Johnson and Svava 2015; Svava and Brunet 2005). Next, the two co-authors, who were native Bengali speakers, skimmed the transcribed data in the Excel spreadsheet and translated the relevant interview quotes and statements into English, having consulted with all other co-authors. To a large extent these quotes and statements reflected women's caregiving and household duties/responsibilities, the effects of family, social and institutional settings on their political and budgetary participation and decision-making, their access to services and processes based on the status of their husbands and male family members, structural barriers and domination they countered, as well as the intended and unintended consequences/outcomes of their participation in local politics, budgeting and decision-making for themselves and the communities they represented. Next, a co-author randomly selected a small sample of data (a few interview statements), coded them by classifying their themes into any of the four dimensions of social equity (master coding) used in the study and created a list of sub-codes (Taylor et al. 2025). The other co-authors were involved in critically scrutinizing the procedures, and an agreement was reached between them. Although the discussion was focused on key codes, ideas for sub-codes were merged into each of the statements discussed. The same co-author then coded all interview and observation data and circulated it to all co-authors for further review. The second round of review, in which all co-authors were involved, led to the modification of a few sub-codes, especially their wordings, to add more clarity. Several sub-codes continued to emerge at this round of review, and therefore the sub-codes were revisited, refined and scrutinized iteratively (Miles et al. 2014). At the end, all co-authors revisited the master and sub-codes, deleting overlapping and irrelevant ones. Coding rules and procedures were further discussed by all co-authors at this stage, and both the provisional and final codes/sub-codes were again scrutinized to ensure the reliability of the selected codes/sub-codes. Finally,

the agreed codes and relevant findings were categorized, taking into consideration the social equity dimensions, our analytical framework, which resulted in the identification of the following key themes: (i) access to politics and decision-making; (ii) fairness in resource allocation and participatory mechanisms; and (iii) partial empowerment.

## 5 | Women's Representation in Bangladesh: A Contextual Overview

Bangladesh is a unitary state with three pillars of government: the Executive (President, Prime Minister and cabinet), the Legislature (a unicameral parliament of 350 seats) and the Judiciary. The country has two levels of government: a central government and local governments. The Constitution of Bangladesh, effective since 1972, recognizes and protects the right of every citizen, irrespective of their religion, caste, race, sex and birthplace (see sections 28-1 and 19-3) to participate in national, political and socio-cultural life. To address gender disparity, 50 out of the total of 350 seats in the parliament have been reserved for women through various constitutional amendments over the years (Jahan 2015) (Appendix B provides details of the seats (quotas) reserved for women representatives at each successive level of government).

The 14th Amendment of the Constitution, passed in May 2004, requires the reserved seats to be distributed based on the proportion of seats won or held by political parties (Jahan 2015). Local governments in the country are operated by sub-district councils for rural areas and villages (rural local governments) and city councils for towns and cities (see Appendix D for the country's administrative structure). Similarly to the central level, quotas for women's representatives are reserved at each successive level of local government, as outlined in the Local Government Act 2009 (see Appendix C for details of the administrative units of Bangladesh). The act has also assigned various responsibilities to local units (Appendix D provides details of the services offered by different administrative units at the local level). However, it has often been pointed out that attempts to empower women in Bangladesh remain inadequate in the country, with the exception of increasing the number of reserved seats, and the socio-cultural and political obstacles discouraging them from contesting elections against their male counterparts and engaging in political processes have persisted (Kaiser and Nabila 2024). For instance, Jahan (2015) notes that the number of women directly elected to parliament is remarkably low, with the highest figure reaching 6% in the ninth parliament, which was elected during the 2009 elections.

Similarly, women's participation in the local budgeting processes has continued to remain minimal (Kaiser and Nabila 2024). The

fiscal year for the municipal budget runs from 1st July to 30th June each year. The process starts after the administrators prepare initial paperwork at the end of March and presents it for discussion at the Town-level Coordination Committee meetings (TLCC) and the Ward-Level Committee meetings (WLCC) in April and early May. The progress achieved in current and future projects is discussed in those meetings, which are often dominated by male councilors, and the citizens' and councilors' comments and feedback are reviewed. A full-year budget, which is split into four quarters, is then prepared and presented to the TLCC meetings for approval. In June, the municipality announces the budget in an open meeting to allow citizens to express their opinions. Participation of women is particularly emphasized for the legitimacy of the budget process (Jahan 2015). Based on citizens' feedback and councilors' observations, the budget is approved by the end of June and implemented from July.

## 6 | Empirical Analysis

The section is structured discussing women's access to politics and decision-making, the fairness of the resource allocation and participatory mechanisms adopted and the extent to which social equity, as outlined in the rules and regulations, has been translated into practice, in the form of women's empowerment. The findings are summarized in Table 1 along with the dimensions of social equity/SEB, which are applied as an analytical framework.

### 6.1 | Access to Politics and Decision-Making

#### 6.1.1 | Socio-Cultural Norms Defining Women's Responsibilities in Society

Gender discrimination and inequality have endured in South Asia, a region that is home to one quarter of the world's population (UNICEF 2023). For decades, women in Bangladesh, especially those in rural areas, have faced obstacles in the form of strong patriarchal gender norms and stereotypes and have remained associated with traditional feminine traits, roles and responsibilities such as household chores, raising a family and caregiving (McCandless et al. 2022; Jahan 2015). In this context, interviews highlighted that many rural women continue to hold the view that they are religiously forbidden from participating in financial and accounting activities and must adhere to the decisions made by their husbands, fathers and brothers regarding financial matters. For instance, a female councilor commented:

Almost everyone believes that women should not discuss monetary issues. If any woman speaks in a public place, everyone assumes that she is out of hand for her guardian/husband

(FCouncilor2).

Another female participant during our interviews stated:

Our responsibility is to manage the household activities. Activities related to money are the tasks of

the males of the family, as per our religion. I can't and don't want to cross the boundary

(FCitizen1).

Interviewees confirmed that a distinct benchmark has persisted to determine the position and success of women within the family and wider society. Women are often praised for the time they spent in raising their children and creating opportunities for their husbands and children in education and employment; the following statement by a male informant serves as one example:

Last year, the Department of Women's Affairs (DoWA) presented an award to one successful woman of my district under the Joyita Onneshon (Searching for the Winner) project. The woman was selected because of her contributions to raising her children. She does not work outside of the home. From this award, we get one message, that is, a woman's main sphere of activity is to give time to her family and children

(MCitizen1).

Overcoming such social norms, expectations and predetermined gender roles, as well as pursuing a political career, has not proved easy for the women we interviewed. Not only are the women socially discouraged, but their political engagement can also cause difficulties in the everyday lives of their husbands and family members, as an ex-councilor explained:

In 2017, my good communication skills qualified me for a training programme in the Philippines to learn about the local government structure and effective governance. I got a massive shock when I saw people laughing at my husband and me on my return. Many people verbally harassed my husband by asking him why he allowed me to go abroad with some male colleagues

(ExFCouncilor1).

Our interviewees made it clear that policymakers and elites are well aware of the societal obstacles faced by women in managing financial resources and participating in politics, and that they feel powerless in questioning such structural societal and cultural norms, let alone eradicating them. As one political analyst commented:

We know our society and the boundaries for women very well. Although incremental developments are visible in terms of women's involvement, it is not possible to ignore the social norms. Our patriarchal society will not accept many things

(Analyst1).

#### 6.1.2 | Political Access Through Husbands and Family Members

In fact, our interviews suggest that the challenges for women who are keen to participate in politics and embark on a political

career start from their homes and families. In many instances, endorsement by the women's husbands and family members is indispensable, but it has proved very difficult to convince them of their potential in the realm of politics. As well as the aforementioned societal challenges, interviews highlighted that women are also faced with entering the political arena on an unequal basis due to their limited experience, competence, and expertise in politics, compared to their male counterparts. For instance, male politicians often enjoy certain privileges and access not available to women, such as selecting the parties, politics, and activities that they wish to pursue from a very early stage in their lives, building on political networks and engaging in the political processes. As a result, they can present themselves as more experienced and confident compared to their female counterparts who are entering local politics. Conversely, women's main connections are often within their families, and they also shape their access to politics. Sharing her lack of confidence about participation and a career in politics, one female citizen stated:

It is quite impossible for me to engage in politics. As per custom, I have to get permission not only from my husband but also from the senior in-laws. These seniors may include my father-in-law, mother-in-law and even brother-in-law. I can't set foot outside the permission of my in-laws

(FCitizen3).

Mentions were made during our interviews that the involvement of women in politics has, in some instances, become merely coincidental, either via the opportunities envisaged by their husbands or the failure of their husbands to continue their own political careers. Fewer women with an interest in politics, coupled with the existing quota systems, means that competition can be less intense for women in certain constituencies, compared to their male counterparts. Interviewees highlighted that this enables powerful husbands to set up political careers for their wives using their social status, family background and resources, and contribute to further advancing their own political careers. In many ways, the reservation systems and quotas have implicitly helped the women's husbands and other male family members to benefit, even reversing their own political failures, by involving their wives and female relatives and thus continuing to enjoy political privileges, as one female councilor explained:

My political career was launched because of my husband. My husband was lobbying to be a candidate for a councilor post for himself; however, the competition was very intense, so the committee proposed my name for a reserved seat. We both felt it was the right time for me to join and share the lifelong experiences of my husband in this field

(FCouncilor3).

Those women whose husbands or other male family members have established strong personal networks, loyalty to, and connections with, political parties have continued to enjoy political privileges. For instance, a female candidate from an

ethnic minority group, who was denied nomination by a political party in the quota system, described her experience as follows:

Without the endorsement of either of the two established political parties, it is very difficult to win even from a reserved seat. Despite the prohibition of signs for national political parties in local elections and no formal endorsement being made, everyone knows who is backing whom. Family history and male family members' party affiliation influence the female reserved seats

(FCandid1).

As the interviews suggest, political access to women from marginalized families lacking status and resources is, therefore, limited. Mentions were made that even if such women from marginalized categories were selected by political parties and elected as a councilor, they remain powerless in the absence of a strong family background. These councilors are likely to experience social isolation as the community members envisage no benefits in approaching them for both personal and community matters. For example, as highlighted by a male citizen:

If I ever go to a female counselor, I would like to check her family background first. Family background is a big issue here. I believe a powerful family background will serve my purpose. Women from a marginalized family will not be able to play much of a role

(MCitizen6).

The existing social, religious and patriarchal norms have continued to shape the role and responsibilities of women in society. While the rules and regulations may ensure citizens' equal opportunities and access to the process of political participation, the persistence of these norms has served as a barrier, thereby limiting benefits to women or even translating into benefits accrued by men through the use of the quota system. The extent to which women enjoy access to politics and decision-making has continued to be determined by the approval and influence of their husbands and family members, creating inequalities among women in the process of executing the quota system.

## 6.2 | Fairness in Resource Allocation and Participatory Mechanisms

### 6.2.1 | Structural Barriers Facing Female Citizens and Councilors

An active participation of the citizenry and councilors (local politicians) in the meetings of the Ward-level Coordination Committee (WLCC) and the Town-level Coordination Committee (TLCC) has been mandated in the Local Government Act of Bangladesh (Jahan 2015; Kaiser and Nabila 2024). Mentions were made during our interviews that, despite regulations, women and female councilors continue to

face several structural barriers when attending such meetings and engaging in the budget process and resource allocation decision-making. As their presence is perceived to be trivial by male politicians, the importance of identifying the mechanisms that could encourage their participation was seldom felt, as illustrated by the following statement by a female citizen:

I have heard that women are encouraged to attend the (budget) meetings of the Ward-level Coordination Committee (WLCC) and the Town-level Coordination Committee (TLCC). But I have not seen any effective mechanism to ensure the participation. Though 10 years ago, the Municipality announced the meeting publicly, I have not seen any such initiatives nowadays

(FCitizen5).

The settings, venues and seating arrangements for the meetings all tend to be arranged without considering female citizens and councilors' constraints and requirements, causing them further inconveniences to participate in the dialogues and discussions and share their views. This was also evident during our observations of the campaigns. For instance, seating allocations were not reserved for female councilors, which made it difficult for them to continue attending the meetings. Another female citizen recalled during our interviews:

I went to attend a public meeting with the mayor one day. The meeting was arranged in an open space without any designated or covered space for women. The seating arrangements were inadequate. Almost all the seats were occupied, and I could not stand in the sun for very long. So, I left the meeting after a short time

(FCitizen2).

Interviews suggest that decisions relating to budget allocations and the distribution of resources tend to be made during the Town-level Coordination Committee (TLCC) and Ward-level Coordination Committee (WLCC) meetings called by the mayor. The absence of wider citizen engagement, mainly the participation by female citizens in such meetings, may, however, raise concerns about the legitimacy of the decisions made. Manipulation of attendance has therefore become a widely used practice in such meetings. A former female councilor commented:

As the first female councilor of our Paurashava, I was aware that Paurashava must include several women in various positions during the TLCC and WLCC meetings following a government order. However, general citizens are unaware of that order, and male councilors deliberately made the inclusion of women ineffective by including their relatives in the committees

(ExFCouncilor2).

Interviewees confirmed that such manipulative practices, as mentioned in the above statement, have continued to ensure regulatory compliance, and these often go unnoticed due to a lack of effective public awareness and monitoring mechanisms. Certain female community members, mainly friends and relatives of the mayor and male councilors, are enlisted as participants, and their signatures are collected to prove that they were present. A member of the town coordination committee confirmed:

I saw some female names on the list of signatories, but I've never seen their faces at any of the meetings, although the meetings are often ceremonial. Many members attend just to collect the token money. The enlisted female members may also collect their token money (attendance fees) later, or someone else will collect it on their behalf

(MCouncilor3).

### 6.2.2 | Male Domination and Women's Marginalization in Decisions and Resource Allocation

Considering the socio-cultural and religious norms defining women's responsibilities, it is perhaps unsurprising for female councilors to face the patriarchal domination of the mayor and their male counterparts in the meetings. Interviews confirmed that female councilors are often described by their male counterparts as powerless and lacking competence and authority. While they can be part of the political process, according to the mayor and male councilors, they need mentoring and training (often by men) to improve their competence and perform the roles and responsibilities assigned to them as effectively as their male counterparts. The patronizing tone of the mayor recognizing women's limits has been echoed in the following statement:

From the very beginning, we ensured gender equality. I have initiated many projects that empower women in my municipality by distributing bicycles, books, stationery, etc. We are bringing our female councilors to the forefront. My Prime Minister (former) is female, and there is no way I could be unjust to female councilors

(Mayor).

Despite the claims of women's limitations, any training or mentoring opportunities that could raise their participation and negotiation skills in the budget process are nearly nonexistent. A female councilor stated:

I have not found any training for the female councilors in terms of budget. Office staff were trained last year for budget preparation. Very few initiatives were taken to understand the proposal development for the community, except for a program that was carried out abroad. I am aware of only two such programmes initiated by the

Ministry. Only one female councilor from us was selected in one instance

(FCouncilor3).

We also observed in the campaigns how the prevalence of such a patriarchal mindset has led to the further marginalization of female councilors in the budget process and resource allocation decision-making. For instance, in one of the campaigns, a female councilor representing three wards was allocated 150 units of clothing and 40 sewing machines for distribution to impoverished groups in her wards, whereas each of the three male councilors representing a single ward received 400 units of clothing and 180 sewing machines. In fact, having a share in resource allocation is regarded as a privilege for female councilors. Such resources could easily have been used or distributed to locals by the mayor and male councilors. The following account, from a former female councilor, illustrates this point:

I remember in my first year as a councilor, the mayor gave me only 1 sewing machine allocated under a project run by the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs. He asked me to give it to anyone I chose. The attitude of the mayor was as if it were a kind gesture by him to allow me to distribute that precious resource to one of my constituents

(ExFCouncilor2).

Interviews also suggest that the entire budget process is mostly a bargaining exercise, and the female councilors often appear weak in the negotiations, as they have limited access to information and processes. In fact, the domination of male councilors in the budget meetings has become more coercive as they are all fighting for a share of limited financial resources. Seldom are the voices of female councilors taken seriously in the process of budget negotiation and allocation, as one female councilor shared her experience:

The budget is prepared based on the decisions made at TLCC and WLCC meetings. In the monthly general meeting of the councilors, we are mandated to talk about the budget and future plan of our community. But I have seen that women councilors can contribute little compared to the male councilors. What I have seen is that the committees don't assign any task directly to female councilors, nor is any information shared with us. The male councilors dominate the budgetary meetings and project selection issues

(FCouncilor3).

Mentions were made during our interviews that political parties and their members' focus on winning elections has further undermined the role of female councilors in regard to budget and resource allocation. They are regarded as incapable of approaching sponsors and contributing to political funding. As a result, the whole process of resource allocation has become a well-orchestrated political game, aimed at extending the domination of the party represented by the mayor and his male

councilors and winning the elections. A male ex-councilor remarked:

In my experience, everything you see in these meetings has been pre-planned, including the fighting and arguments between councilors and the mayor. At least 70% of the councilors have been selected from the same political party. So, it is almost impossible to make a decision about the resource distribution scenario without it being influenced by the power and domination of politics. After the first meeting about the distribution of resources, unofficial meetings take place. Female councilors can do very little in this case, and they are ignored

(ExMCouncilor1).

Interviews highlighted several strategies that the male councilors have adopted to discourage their female counterparts from attending and participating actively in such budget and resource allocation meetings. For instance, the female councilors are allocated very limited time to speak, are continuously interrupted when they are talking and their projects/proposals are continually postponed and delayed. Commenting on her struggle for resources, a former female councilor stated:

The road that you saw in our community took three years to get approval. But, during the time, other male councilors got three different projects. I was fighting for this road for our community. Every time I talked about the project (road), other councilors (male) stopped me by mentioning that this is less important. So, they omitted my budget proposal every time

(ExFCouncilor4).

As confirmed by interviewees, budget meetings have on several occasions turned out to be very intense, especially when the female councilors call for fairness in resource allocation. They can also be subject to impolite and abusive language, making them concerned about their safety and security. A female councilor commented:

It may sound offensive, but I think the mentality of society should be changed. Our male councilors ignore us in public and private meetings. I've heard abusive comments from male councilors several times. They take great satisfaction in telling me that this is not work for a female

(FCouncilor3).

At many of these meetings, the female councilors have to be accompanied by their husbands and male relatives due to the threat by the male councilors, as the following statement by another female councilor illustrates:

Male councilors try to dominate even simple issues. For example, last week, one male councilor wanted to

see my list of claimants for the relief fund. Normally, we exchange the list to stamp out any duplicity. However, male councilors never hand over their lists first. They always want to see our lists first. Last week, one male councilor was trying to snatch my list, and my husband protected me from him grabbing it  
(FCouncilor1).

In rare instances, the sustained frustration resulting from the disrespect, marginalization and threat by male politicians and community members has led to some female councilors rethinking their political career and reverting to traditional feminine roles. One ex-councilor who gave up her political career explained:

I gave up, and I also have no wish to stand again. As a councilor, I have seen that I have nothing to do with it. I was allowed to do what the mayor wished. Moreover, the opinions of female councilors are neglected in the meetings. The male councilors and the Mayor neglect them openly in the meeting  
(ExFCouncilor4).

### 6.2.3 | Differences in Access and Opportunities: The Role of the Community, Connections and Status

Even for those female councilors who actively participate in budget negotiations, limited opportunities are available to demonstrate their contribution to the citizens and convince them of the role they played in the process. This was reflected in the following statement of a female councilor:

The process of incorporating the project into the budget is not easy. Group and sub-group politics are involved here. I place my community's needs, and the same community can be represented by another councilor or influential citizens, making it hard to pinpoint  
(FCouncilor2).

Interviews suggest that the female councilors are often required to compromise with their male counterparts by identifying ways to align their projects and proposals with theirs. Such a compromise relies, however, on the attitude of the male councilors, in particular the extent to which the male councilors hold a supportive view towards the female councilors, the following statement by a male councilor serving as an example:

As the amount for the budget is limited, we bargain with each other for our project. But, I have seen female councilors as councilors instead of seeing them as female at all the meetings... I have tried to solve the problems among the male and female councilors many times in the general meeting. For example, for a road construction, there was a problem between the male and female councilors. Later, we solved the problem by extending the road that connects both

communities, which was demanded by both male and female councilors  
(MCouncilor4).

To convince the role they played in the budget negotiations, some female councilors have regularly reported the budget meetings and results to their community members. As our interviews suggest, many councilors are of the view that such reporting will help citizens become aware of the budget negotiations process and the extent to which local politicians are echoing their voices and demands. A female councilor stated:

I discuss the issues of the pre-budget and the final budget with the community. It seems to me that I have to inform them to make it transparent. Though there are some sensitive issues, like shouting with other councilors during the meeting. But I don't care. Citizens have the right to know who is playing with their fate  
(FCouncilor2).

As our interviews suggest, ensuring political and community appreciation for the contributions they made to their community is rather unusual. The male politicians can acknowledge their contributions privately, but they are often reluctant to appreciate their work/contributions publicly. Commenting on the attitude of politicians and male community members, a former female councilor stated:

The mayor acknowledged my contribution privately, not publicly. I can give one example: a high-ranked staff member was visiting the feasibility of the river embankment project. Instead of staying at the guest house of the municipality, he stayed in my house. Personally, I was with him at the time of visiting the place. All councilors know the issue. Finally, the project was approved by the ministry. The mayor later acknowledged me privately. But he has not spent a word publicly for me  
(ExFCouncilor3).

Seldom are female councilors in a strong position that enables them to fulfill the commitments they have made to their constituents and challenge the established patriarchal gender norms and stereotypes. However, the extent to which female councilors are disregarded in relation to access to resource allocation appears to reflect factors such as their family status and background and the political connections of their husbands and close relatives. For female councilors, such factors are central to the negotiations about their share in resource allocation. One female councilor offered the following example:

My husband helps me a lot through his rank in the political party. He often makes the mayor listen to me and take me seriously. That helps in bargaining and negotiation  
(FCouncilor2).

Reiterating the importance of political background and status for achieving fairness in terms of resource allocation, another female councilor stated:

I am quite lucky in this respect. My family's political background helps me a lot. My father-in-law has some power and influence. The government finance minister likes to spend some time with him if he is visiting this area

(FCouncilor1).

Despite advocating for the representation and participation of women in local politics and resource allocation for several decades, the marginalization of women has persisted in Bangladesh. In the absence of fairness and quality in the budget process, the organizational and institutional structures, access and processes designed to facilitate women's participation in local politics and budgetary decision-making have, instead, created further impediments, denying women equal access to politics and obstructing the advancement of their political careers.

### 6.3 | Translation of Social Equity in Practice—Partial Empowerment

#### 6.3.1 | Sustained Inclusion, Sense of Belonging and Self-Efficacy

Despite the challenges posed by socio-cultural, religious, and other structural factors, and the continued domination by male politicians, some of the changes brought about by the quota and reservation systems in translating social equity into practice, particularly the empowerment of female councilors and rural women, cannot be overlooked. For instance, reflecting on her first experience of entering the realm of politics and political participation, a female politician stated:

Before being elected as the councilor from the reserved seat, I never issued a public statement or was involved in making one. At my first public meeting, I was very nervous. I was searching for the right words to start with and trying to remember the previous speakers' statements. Finally, I started by appraising the party's high command, the Prime Minister, and continued by making flowery commitments as my previous speakers did. The first speech helped me to find my feet

(FCouncilor2).

The interviews suggest that the quotas and reservations systems have had some impact in motivating rural women representing different social and political backgrounds to enter the political arena. Commenting on what had inspired her to get involved in politics, an unsuccessful female candidate disclosed:

I see the quota system as an opportunity. But I think my education makes me confident that I can do something

for the community like a man. I must admit that over the last decade, there have been big aspirations from the political party for women like the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition party. Women's participation in the reserved seats inspires me. It gives me a feeling that I can contribute to society better than the current female councilors

(FCandid3).

Having become more aware of the political opportunities that exist, some women appear to have started pursuing higher education and skill development programmes to enhance their self-confidence and ease their entry into politics. This has strengthened the belief among women that they are capable of performing as well as or better than their male counterparts, as the following statement from a councilor serves to illustrate:

I am confident that if all were equal, we could fight with the male candidates in unrestricted seats and beat them easily

(FCouncilor1).

Female councilors have pursued several strategies that could reduce their dependency on husbands and male relatives and further empower them. Central to these strategies are the pursuit of higher education and academic degrees, as reiterated by a female councilor during our interviews:

The constitution makes us equal, but our daily experience tells otherwise. However, I have to say that the situation has changed over the decade to a some extent. Because of some government initiatives, the education rate of women has increased... You can take me as the outcome. I have the highest academic degree among all the councilors (male and female). Therefore, sometimes they (male councilors) think twice before shouting at me

(FCouncilor3).

As our interview suggests, through their political experiences, female councilors have become more confident and capable of dealing with the mayor and male councilors more effectively. Increasingly, they have come to understand the importance of collaborating with one another and collectively counteracting male domination. A female councilor remarked:

Before the general meeting, we discuss our issues together and ways to stick to our demands in a male-dominated environment. It is very common. Before the general meeting, I invite other female councilors to my house. Even if we achieve very little from one general meeting, we try to learn and reflect for the next meetings to gain some traction

(FCouncilor1).

Female councilors consider alliances an effective strategy to face their male counterparts, especially during the budget

negotiations and ensure their share in resource allocation. As a result, they have developed strong bonds with community women and other councilors, regardless of their varied political ideologies. A female councilor explained:

Very often, general meetings turn into male versus female councilors in resource distribution and in budget preparation. As our (male and female) wards overlap, an environment of bargaining arises among us and supporting each other (female councilors) does not look odd/pre-planned

(FCouncilor2).

Commenting on the increased self-confidence, another female councilor commented:

We are more vocal in general meetings for our community than before. Though very few of our proposals are accepted in meetings compared to the male councilors, we are getting some at least

(FCouncilor3).

It is worth noting, however, that some female councilors suggest they have learned to adapt to the situation and have started reaching out to male family members closely associated with political parties. Such direct connections to the political parties can significantly enhance their negotiating power regarding resource allocation. Similarly, informal channels have been used to reach out to the mayor through establishing friendships with relatives and friends who are in a position to influence him. A former female councilor provided examples of the benefits that she achieved by exploiting her uncle's connections:

In my first 2 years, they (the mayor and other councilors) gave me only 10 VGF (vulnerable group feeding) cards to distribute among the citizens in my area. In the last year of my term, my uncle, who was a politician for the ruling party, negotiated with the mayor. As a result of his efforts, I received a third of the VGF cards to distribute

(ExFCouncilor4).

Unlike the past, the presence of female politicians has started to be acknowledged, as our interviews suggest. Although such acknowledgements are still rare, advice and suggestions from female politicians are sought in areas and issues they are advocating in their communities. Such is reflected in the following statement by a former female councilor:

I've never received an invitation to facilitate any training and development programmes. As I can remember, no one asked (officially) for any advice or comments on our suggestions for the empowerment of women. But, informally, the former finance minister wanted to know my opinion on the issue of the work environment of female councilors

(ExFCouncilor3).

Acknowledging the contribution of the quote and reservation systems, a social activist during our interviews remarked:

It seems to me that at least women can place their demands now. At least they can talk. It was unthinkable before in our society due to the social norms

(SocWorker1).

### 6.3.2 | Increased Resources to Communities

Mentions were made during our interviews that the political experience gained by female councilors has also enabled them to improve their negotiation skills and advance their political tenure independently in recent years by reducing their dependence on the status and political connections of their husbands and male relatives. For instance, they have started reaching out to their community members more frequently and in a more informal way by visiting them at their residences. Such attempts have made them more aware of wider issues facing the community members and advocating benefits to marginalized community members. A female councilor stated:

I prefer to talk to my community. I visit their (citizens') homes very frequently. As a female, I have good access to women. Instead of a formal meeting, I like to talk to them informally. The informal discussion makes it easy for the women to communicate. I convey their demand in our general meeting... After compiling their opinion, I negotiate for them in the general meeting

(FCouncilor3).

Another female councilor commented on the continuity of the political tenure and her increasing negotiation skills:

I am serving the municipality for the second time as a female councilor. Although there have not been any dramatic changes, we have brought about some changes at least. Last time, I got a tiny share of resources for our community. But this time I have managed to get more resources than last year, although the amount is still only one-third of my male counterpart's

(FCouncilor1).

Some of the female councilors and candidates have also started engaging with wider societal and community-related issues with a view to enhancing community trust. Such attempts have contributed to achieving their goal of entering politics and serving communities. A female candidate explained:

River erosion in our area is very common, and we asked our councilor to build a barrier. Instead of taking immediate steps, the councilor asked for money. I was

very vocal against him. In the following election, my community members mandated my candidacy  
(FCandidate2).

Interviews suggest that the trust in the female councilors has started to build on as the community members become aware of their contributions. The empowerment of female councilors has resulted in several benefits to the lives and livelihoods of community members. Commenting on her contributions to her community, a female councilor stated:

My community always acknowledges me. I fight for them always. The road that you use to come here is a result of my efforts. My community knows the details of the project approval scenario. Another one that I have done not only for my community but also for others is the river embankment project. Many people have benefited from this project. Many people know that I have contributed to this project  
(FCouncilor3).

A former female councilor recalled the community appreciation she received:

I miss the old days of my tenure. People of my community were suffering from water blockages. There was no drainage system. Under my initiatives, a drainage system has been established here. People acknowledge me for this drainage till now, though I am not a councilor now  
(ExFCouncilor3).

However, as our interview suggests, changes in the perceptions of the mayor and male politicians and citizens towards women and female politicians have occurred rather slowly. Despite a rise in rural literacy and awareness on women's empowerment, many of them are still reluctant to reach out to female councilors and politicians, especially when they lack political backing and status, as they have continued to be associated with traditional feminine roles and considered less powerful. Higher-level male politicians and mayors are often approached, if there is an opportunity to do so, as a senior citizen confirmed:

To influence the decision-making of the municipality, you must have a political identity. I don't have any, so I cannot be part of those decision-makers. Probably, female councilors have potential and are hardworking. But I am a realist. If I need anything, the mayor must be on board. Even male councilors are not enough sometimes. Therefore, I have to ensure that there is someone who can dominate the mayor  
(MCitizen7).

Despite some improvements, the findings show that the quotas and reservation systems appear insufficient in terms of altering the prevailing patriarchal gender roles and socio-cultural

norms and overcoming the structural barriers and domination. In many instances, women's political and family backgrounds and husbands' status have continued to play a central role in determining their political career, agency and their access to budget and resource allocation. The achievement of social equity, in the form of women empowerment, has therefore fallen short of expectations due to a limited embedding of equity in the budgeting process (see e.g., McDonald III and McCandless 2025; McDonald III et al. 2024; Taylor et al. 2025), except the provision of participation, intersectionality and the failure to take into account the socio-cultural contexts of the country. Women's inclusion in the actual budget process has still not been achieved, as discrimination regarding the budget and resource allocation persists in being what McDonald III and McCandless (2025) describe as "equity-blind" (p. 11) (see e.g., McCandless et al. 2022). However, partial outcomes are evident in the form of sustained inclusion of women in politics, the rise of self-belonging and efficacy of female politicians, and their success in increasing their share of resources to their communities (see Table 1).

## 7 | Discussion

Drawing on the four key dimensions of social equity (see Figure 1)—access, fairness, quality, and outcomes (Johnson and Svava 2015), the paper has explored the translation of social equity into practice from a gender perspective within the context of a developing country, Bangladesh. Gender inequalities have continued to pose a challenge from the perspective of achieving social equity, and thus calls have been made for further intervention (Pandey et al. 2022; Licsandru et al. 2025). In this regard, the findings presented above illustrate the concrete ways in which social equity has been applied within local communities in Bangladesh, revealing that efforts aimed at empowering women do not necessarily translate into tangible outcomes in resource allocation and budgeting, particularly in the absence of a clear mandate for implementing SEB (McDonald III and McCandless 2025, 11; McDonald III et al. 2024). As illustrated in Table 1, the interviews provided insights into the experiences of local community actors with gender quota requirements, the barriers they faced, the enabling strategies and agencies that female politicians have adopted to counter those barriers and their outcomes.

With reference to outcomes, the experiences shared by the interviewees highlight that the provisions for gender-related quotas, reservation, and budget participation have led to certain changes and marginal improvements in terms of women's empowerment. These include heightened awareness of women's political rights and formalized access to political forums through sustained inclusion, self-belonging and efficacy, as well as community trust building. Yet, this formal presence often does not translate into meaningful and sustained participation, influence over decisions or equitable distribution of resources. Women continue to face practical barriers to attending meetings and being heard, and they are frequently perceived as unsuited to financial discussions. Consequently, they tend to have less bargaining power and receive significantly fewer resources than their male counterparts.

In terms of barriers, prevailing social norms and structural factors appear to significantly limit women's influence in

decision-making and resource allocation processes. The findings highlight that socio-cultural, political, and religious factors shape women's involvement in local politics and their inclusion in decision-making (see e.g., Afshan 2025; McCandless et al. 2022). Interestingly, such factors specifically hinder the recognition of their voice on financial matters, as they are perceived as traditionally belonging to the male realm. Although gender quotas have been implemented in Bangladesh to guarantee political representation (which should also imply involvement in budgeting processes), our findings suggest a considerable gap between regulatory representation principles and political access, procedural fairness and quality and their practical enactment. Despite constitutional and regulatory provisions, patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes remain deeply entrenched. Women continue to be viewed as politically incapable and are frequently associated with traditional, subordinate roles. Their political success is often linked to the status or influence of their husbands or male relatives. In many cases, the quotas have failed to guarantee women equal access to political power, making them reliant on male family members for both entry into and continuity in political life.

The study also highlights how women navigate these difficulties through emergent strategies, for instance, by (a) forming alliances, such as teams of female politicians to collectively encounter the domination of their male counterparts; (b) pursuing higher education and other opportunities for enhancing their resource negotiation skills; (c) leveraging their family status, the family connections, or the help of friends and relatives of male politicians; and (d) reaching out to the community and elucidating community members on the efforts they have put in ensuring resources, thus building a community reputation. All these strategies signal the importance for them to strengthen their position either by gaining competencies or leveraging networking and relevant connections. Among the latter, however, the results seem to suggest that women face a double-edged sword, as to gain more relevance in processes, they need to seek or accept the support of husbands, male relatives and male politicians. Moreover, the findings indicate that women's access, participation, and outcomes are contingent upon both their individual status and the status of their families within their communities. This suggests the potential relevance of an intersectional interpretation of the results (Crenshaw 1989), wherein social status interacts with gender to shape women's lived experiences in different ways.

Overall, the analysis shows that the representation system in place has yielded only partial empowerment outcomes. Even when nominated or elected as councilors, women are frequently excluded from key decision-making and resource allocation processes. Without the political weight of their husbands or male relatives, their presence often becomes negligible. Thus, while women's representation has improved in formal terms, substantive inclusion in political processes and decisions remains elusive. As Licsandru et al. (2025) note, attaining social equity through inclusion requires both diversity and a sense of belonging to be actively fostered. This study, therefore, questions the extent to which quotas, reservations, and provisions for political and citizens' engagement in the budget process have truly enabled the realization of social equity in practice. Although the quota system has contributed to certain gains in women's

empowerment and gender equity, it remains insufficient to challenge deeply rooted patriarchal norms or to establish equitable mechanisms of participation and decision-making. A persistent problem is their disconnection from public budgeting, which continues to be designed, implemented, and assessed without adequate consideration of social equity impacts. As previously noted, women are still perceived as less competent than men in managing financial resources, are restricted in accessing decision-making spaces, and often receive disproportionately fewer resources. While women's political representation has been formally ensured, their substantive inclusion remains absent, as budgeting and resource allocation processes continue to reflect equity-blind practices (McDonald III and McCandless 2025; McCandless et al. 2022). Male councilors, mayor, and senior political figures often reinforce traditional gender roles, thereby marginalizing female councilors and impeding broader progress towards women's empowerment, despite the intentions set forth in the Constitution and regulatory frameworks.

## 8 | Conclusion

While the importance of embedding equity into public budgets and operationalizing it through citizen engagement is widely recognized (McDonald III et al. 2022, 2024; Kim et al. 2025; Bartle and Rubin 2024; Guy and McCandless 2012; McDonald III and McCandless 2025), such integration remains limited in contexts like Bangladesh. Through the voices and experiences of the actors involved, this study assesses the extent to which gender quotas and the provisions of citizens' and political participation in the budgeting process have led to meaningful equity outcomes. In the case under analysis, while such measures and provisions have played a role in building women's self-belonging, efficacy, and community trust, and ensuring sustained political participation, their effectiveness remains limited. Our study contributes to the literature on social equity, in particular gender equity, and SEB by highlighting the enabling and constraining factors that shape women's empowerment. First, it provides empirical insights into how inclusion and exclusion are experienced in local communities, illustrating the concrete dynamics of how social equity is translated, or resisted, in developing country settings. In particular, the study highlights both the agency of women in overcoming socio-cultural norms that limit their roles and responsibilities, and the patriarchal and family domination, as well as structural barriers, in their political and budgetary participation. It thus demonstrates how social equity can be achieved through partial empowerment in developing country contexts.

In line with McDonald III et al. (2024), the study therefore underscores the need to interpret political decisions, including those on resource allocation, through the lens of broader socio-political, cultural and structural factors. The persistence of equity-blind budgeting (McDonald III and McCandless 2025, 11) and the absence of institutional mechanisms that integrate gender equality and women's empowerment into financial processes (McDonald III et al. 2024) have continued to negate the translation of social equity in wider contexts. Our findings reinforce the argument that regulatory guarantees of equality and empowerment do not necessarily produce equitable outcomes. Socio-cultural, religious and political factors, each context-specific, play a critical

role in either enabling or hindering the achievement of social equity. Recognizing these structural dynamics is essential to current debates on SEB and how its principles can be meaningfully embedded into local governance. In addition, our study has highlighted the importance of considering the “intersectional perspective” in the study of SEB in developing country contexts, given that certain women from powerful families with political connections are more likely to be empowered due to their access to political positions and resources, whereas the women from less affluent families are continually excluded.

Gender imbalance remains a persistent issue in both developed and developing contexts. Despite widespread advocacy for gender-responsive budgeting, there is limited field-level evidence of its practical success (Steccolini 2019; Galizzi et al. 2023). In this regard, this study also adds to extant literature by demonstrating the importance of social, political and institutional environments in shaping the operationalization of equity policies and, in doing so, bringing to the fore the concrete experiences of the key actors, whose voices are often left unheard (Licsandru et al. 2025). This also has important practice and policy implications, as these findings underscore that regulatory instruments such as gender quotas must be accompanied by supporting mechanisms, at the organizational, institutional, financial and procedural levels, that are explicitly designed to deliver equity outcomes. Government policies must be operationalized through tangible practices and technologies to generate real-world impact. Without a full “chain” of transmission, translating the abstract principle of quota representation into concrete institutional organizational mechanisms facilitating access and participation in meetings (e.g., from the availability of seats, to the possibility of women to express their own voices and not being seen as representatives of their husbands and families), and budget rules and formats that focus on a fair allocation of resources from a gender (and intersectional) perspective, among others, gender quotas may remain abstract principles but then lack a concrete practical translation.

The study also highlights that the success of social equity interventions, and in particular SEB, lies not merely in technical budgeting formats, participatory provisions or resource allocations, but in understanding the structural and contextual conditions that govern how equity principles are enacted. Decision-making contexts, participation processes, and broader inclusion all shape the effectiveness of equity-oriented budgeting and other interventions. We therefore urge public administration scholars, practitioners and policymakers to shift their focus towards addressing structural conditions, that is, the root causes of inequity, as emphasized by Gooden (2017). Otherwise, the provisions and dimensions of social equity may ensure partial benefits and empowerment, embedding only certain groups of people who are resourceful and politically connected, whereas the vulnerable and marginalized groups will continue to be deprived of social equity. Building awareness of SEB and social equity through education, training and institutional reform is essential. Otherwise, as several scholars have warned (Gooden 2017; Svava and Brunet 2020; Rivera and Knox 2023), in countries like Bangladesh, inequitable practices may continue to persist, rendering regulatory provisions ineffective and leaving the goal of gender-based social equity largely unfulfilled. Having said this, our study is not without limitations. We have, to some extent,

mitigated such concerns by discussing our findings with both national and international analysts, consultants, social workers and NGO officials and obtaining assurance that the findings represent the Bangladeshi local government in general. However, given the unitary nature of Bangladesh and to some extent socio-cultural and religious homogeneity, further studies are warranted exploring the translation of social equity and SEB in achieving gender empowerment in the settings of other developing countries. Lastly, we suggest that future research could fruitfully build on our findings by incorporating feminist and gender mainstreaming approaches, especially in relation to intersectionality and the interplay between formal and informal institutional practices.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## Appendix A

### Details of Interview Participants (2022–2025)

	Designation	Number of interviews		Code
		Male	Female	
1	Mayor	1		Mayor (Mayor)
2	Female councilor (panel mayor)		1	Female councilor1 (FCouncilor)
3	Deputy director of the Department of women affairs, Ministry of women and Children affairs.		1	Deputy director (DD)
4	Councilor		2	Female councilors 2–3 (FCouncilor)
		4		Male councilors 1–4 (MCouncilor)
5	Candidates for councilors (who failed)		4	Female candidates 1–4 (FCandid)
6	Former councilors		4	Exemale councilors 1–4 (ExFCouncilor)
		2		Ex-male councilors 1–2 (ExMCouncilor)
7	NGO officials		1	Official—NGO 1 (ONGO)
		2		Officials—NGO 2–3 (ONGO)
8	Citizen (including people from minor groups)	9		Male citizens 1–9 (MCitizen)
			9	Female citizens 1–9 (FCitizen)
9	World Bank consultants	2		Consultants-WB 1–2 (WB)
10	National policy analyst		1	Analyst 1
		1		Analyst 2
11	Local social workers	2		Social workers 1–2 (SocWorker)
12	Administrative staff	1		Administrative staff 1 (AS)
	Total- 47	24	23	

#### Details of the field-level observations

Campaign	Participants	Relief purpose	Date	Major observation
First	Three female councilors, three male councilors, a mayor, and an Upazilla Executive Officer (UNO)	Monetary help for celebrating the festival	June 25, 2023	Attitudes towards and behavior of both male and female councilors. For instance, it was observed that a female councilor arrived late for the meeting and was very nervous. Male councilors attending the meeting complained about the female councilor's late arrival in front of her husband, which created a very uncomfortable situation for her.
Second	A male councilor, a female councilor, an Upazilla Executive Officer (UNO), and a mayor	Distributing warm clothing	Dec 18, 2023	The proportion of the clothes distributed by male and female councilors varied significantly. For instance, female councilors were allocated just 1/3 of the total clothes provided to male councilors for distribution.

## Appendix B

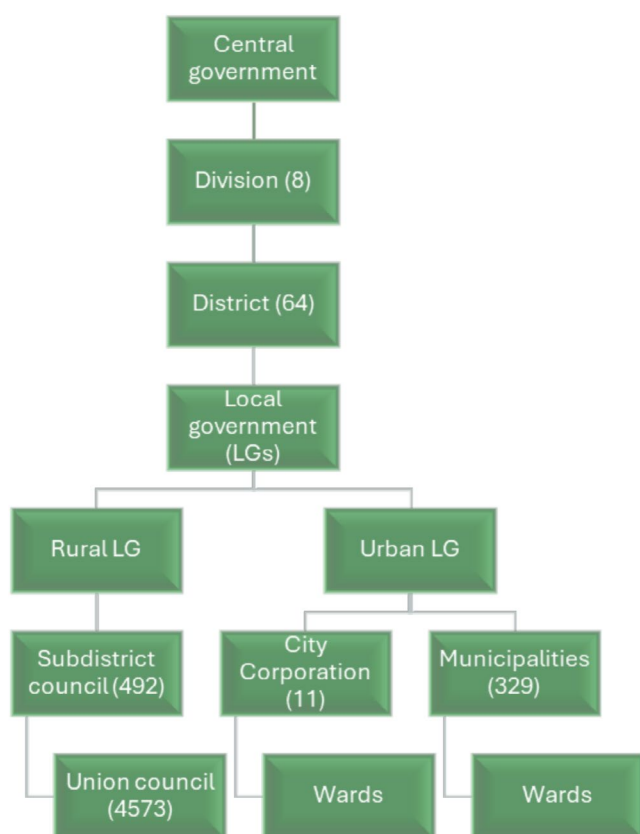
### Percentage of Reserved Seats for Women at Different Administrative Levels

Level	Source	Quota	Position	Notes
Parliament	Constitution	14%	14%	Selected

Level	Source	Quota	Position	Notes
Councils (elected for 5 years)	Local Government Act (LGA), 2009			
Sub-district council		33%	1 Chairperson. 1 Vice-Chairperson (general). 1 Vice-Chairperson (reserved). All councilors from the union.	Elected
Union council		25%	1 Chairperson. 9 councilors (general). 3 councilors (reserved).	Elected
Urban council (city or municipality)		25%–33% (depending on the number of wards)	1 Mayor. Councilors elected from each ward.	Elected
Ward			1 councilor (general). 1 councilor (reserved).	Elected Each ward elects 1 general councilor, but 3–4 wards elect 1 reserved councilor.

## Appendix C

### Administrative Units in Bangladesh



## Appendix D

### Services Offered at the Local Levels

Services	Delivering authority				City corporations and municipalities
	National government	District	Sub-district	Union	
General administration					
Police	✓			✓	✓
Fire protection	✓				
Civil protection	✓				
Criminal justice	✓			✓	
Civil status register				✓	
Statistical office	✓				
Electoral register	✓				
Education					
Pre-school (kindergarten and nursery)		✓	✓	✓	✓
Primary	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Secondary	✓	✓			
Vocational and technical	✓				
Higher education	✓				
Adult education	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social welfare					
Family welfare services	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Welfare homes	✓				
Social security	✓				
Public health					
Primary care	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hospitals	✓	✓			✓
Health protection		✓	✓	✓	✓
Housing and town planning					
Housing	✓				
Town planning	✓				✓
Regional planning	✓				
Transport					
Roads	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Transport	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Urban roads	✓				
Urban rail	✓				
Ports	✓				
Airports	✓				
Environment and public sanitation					
Water and sanitation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Refuse collection and disposal		✓	✓	✓	✓

Services	Delivering authority				City corporations and municipalities
	National government	District	Sub-district	Union	
Cemeteries and crematoria					✓
Slaughterhouses					✓
Environmental protection	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Consumer protection	✓	✓			
Culture, leisure and sports					
Theaters and concerts	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Museums and libraries	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Parks and open spaces	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sports and leisure facilities	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓