

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

A qualitative assessment of women's empowerment

in the South West Area Integrated Water Resource Planning and Management Project



Report



Gender and Water Programme Bangladesh

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27-6-2016

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Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BWDB	Bangladesh Water Development Board
CAP	Collective Action Plan
DSA	Daily Subsistence Allowance
DTW	Deep Tube Well
EC	Executive Committee
EKN	Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FAP	Flood Action Plan
FCD/I	Flood Control and Drainage/Irrigation
GWA	Gender and Water Alliance
GWAPB	Gender and Water Programme Bangladesh
IWMP	Integrated Water Management Plan
LCS	Labour Contracting Society
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
O&M	Operation and Maintenance
SIP	Sub-area Implementation Project
SWAIWRPMP	South West Area Integrated Water Resources Planning and Management Project
UP	Union Parishad
WEAI	Women Empowerment in Agriculture Index
WEL	Women, Environment and Livelihood
WMA	Water Management Association
WMG	Water Management Group
WUA	Water Users Associations
WUG	Water User Group

The South West Area Integrated Water Resources Planning and Management Project (SWAIWRPMP) has been supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (EKN) with a grant of 12,5 million US dollar from January 2006 until June 2015. In the project a concerted effort was made to involve women, which according to the project staff involved, has contributed to their empowerment. Unofficial claims are made that due to the project's interventions the political empowerment of women has increased to such levels, that more women are elected in the Union Parishad. Therefore the EKN asked the Gender and Water Programme Bangladesh (GWAPB) to assess if this claim was founded.

The purpose of the GWAPB is to support water programmes co-financed by the EKN, civil society groups, water professionals, and government organisations in Bangladesh to adopt and implement a gender mainstreaming strategy in their water related policies and practices, in order to achieve measurable and positive impact on the lives of poor women and men. GWAPB has the expertise to assess empowerment of women in water related projects and programmes, and is knowledgeable on the specific context of Bangladesh. Apart from that the study will provide good information for the further work with the EKN supported programmes as well as for the next phase of the SWAIWRPMP, which started in 2016.

This report will first describe the set-up of the qualitative study. Then it will briefly describe the SWAIWRPMP and the local government system and the involvement of women therein. The report ends with the findings, conclusions and some recommendations. For matters of readability the SWAIWRPMP will be referred to as "the South West project" in the rest of this report.

Set-up of the study

Rationale

The overall objective of the South West project was to improve national water resources management by involving the local communities, both men and women, to play an expanded role in all stages, from planning and design to operations and management through a participatory approach. The project resulted in the formation of 14 Water Management Associations (WMAs) and 102 Water Management Groups (WMGs) in the two subproject areas “Chenchuri Beel” and “Narail”. Through these WMAs and WMGs poor women and men were involved in the design, management and implementation of different project activities. With a total of 25,424 members, more than 80% of the farmers in the subproject areas are members of WMGs, 40% being women (10,119 women) (BWDB, 2014). According to ADB, “the SWAIWRPMP became the first initiative to successfully incorporate beneficiary participation into all aspects of management of large-scale flood control, drainage, and irrigation systems” (ADB, 2016).

The project also aimed to raise awareness on gender-related issues and the need to empower women. Therefore a Gender Action Plan was developed to mainstream gender in different components of the project. This was done by setting quota for participation of women in the project. At least 30% of the membership in WMGs and WMAs was required to consist of women, and to ensure women’s participation in decision making also the executive committees and subgroups of these bodies had to consist of at least 30% women. Furthermore in almost all project activities, like training workshops and employment activities, a target of at least 30% was set for women’s participation. Also specific activities were implemented to increase income and livelihood opportunities for vulnerable people, especially women (BWDB, 2014).

The South West project is considered to have been successful in women’s empowerment. Thanks to the implementation of the Gender Action Plan, around 40% of the members of the WMGs and WMAs were women, and in the executive committees on average 33% of the members were women at the end of 2015. The ADB also states that “The experiences that women have gained from the project, particularly in project planning, implementation, management, and monitoring have significantly contributed to their empowerment in the project area” (ADB, 2016).

It is assumed that if women get empowered by a project or programme like the South West project, it will lead them to be more empowered in other settings as well. Furthermore it has been claimed that the South West Project has led to the political empowerment of women, and because of that more women have been elected into the Union Parishad.

Scope

This qualitative study will try to assess if more women are elected in the Union Parishad due to the SWAIWRPMP. Therefore it will establish if the project enabled the empowerment of women with a focus on political empowerment; if so, which factors have contributed to this; and if women have become politically empowered to such an extent that they have been elected in local government structures like Union Parishad.

Objective

Empowerment is a process of improving one's position, gaining self-confidence for individual development as well as to contribute towards development of others. Empowerment means taking control of one's own life and refers to increasing the economic, social, political, physical strength of any individual or group. Although all four elements are interrelated, this study will try to assess if the Southwest project has been instrumental in the political empowerment of women, focusing on their election in the Union Parishad.

Hence, the specific objectives of this study are:

- To assess women's level of involvement in decision making in the WMGs and WMAs, particularly in their executive committees and the "gender and livelihoods" sub-groups as well as in other project activities
- To identify various factors that have contributed to opportunities for women, leading to physical, economic, political and socio-cultural empowerment
- To assess if the empowerment by project activities has contributed to increased participation and decision making of women in political processes outside of the project, especially Union Parishad.

Research questions

The following research questions have been formulated:

- What kind of support did women receive in cash or in kind through the project (like any specific training, awareness raising or organisational support)?
- Why and how were women motivated to take part in those WMGs or WMAs?
- What are the key interventions/factors that facilitate women's meaningful participation in WMAs and WMGs?
- Has participation and involvement of women in different project components led to their empowerment?
- Has the empowerment by the project led to political empowerment outside the project?
 - Are they being elected into the Union Parishad?
 - Are they members of standing committees of Union Parishad?
 - Are they successful in raising their issues and priorities with the Union Parishad to act on those?

Methodology

To answer these questions a limited document review and a field visit of three days was carried out. Documents about the background and implementation of the SWAIWRPMP gave insight into how the project was implemented and its results, documents on the election of women in Union Parishad (UP) provided information on the political position of women in UPs in Bangladesh.

The three day field visit was used to interview (former) project staff, have six focus group discussions with WMGs and 2 interviews with individual women that were part of a WMG and had been elected into the UP. Also 2 women were interviewed living in the project area, but not involved in the project nor being a UP member. In the focus group discussions a total 62 women and 8 men participated.

BWDB staff always accompanied the researchers to the meetings with the water user groups and attended the discussions. As of the second day of the field visit the security forces deemed that the security of the researchers was at risk, and accompanied the team to all remaining visits in the

afternoon of that day. They prevented the team to do fieldwork on the third day, due to a hartal being called, and them not being able to provide the necessary security forces. Also on the last day of the field visit, during the individual interviews the security forces were present, to ensure the team would not go to the field and take risks.

The presence of others than only the researchers might have influenced the outcomes of the discussions, as people might not have felt comfortable to speak freely.

This draft report will be shared with the principal extension officer of South West projects for feedback on the findings. Relevant comments will be included into the final report.

Empowerment concept

Empowerment is a process of change enabling people to make choices and transform these into desired actions and results. In doing so, people, not just women, are taking control of their own lives, improving their own position, setting their own agenda, gaining skills, developing confidence in themselves, solving problems and developing self-sufficiency. It refers to increasing the economic, social, political, physical strength of any individual or group.

Therefore, when assessing the level of empowerment we look at the four elements of empowerment.

1. Physical empowerment

Physical empowerment leads to a full control over one's own body, fertility and sexuality. It means to be free from physical or sexual abuse, to have the the right to safety and security and the ability to resist violence, to be able to choose the number of children and spacing between them, to have the right to marry person of one's own choice, and also includes the right to proper healthcare, clean water, dignified sanitation facilities, etc.

2. Economic empowerment

Economic empowerment leads to equal access to and control over means of production and economic independence. It is the right to have the same income for the same work, and right to decide about spending benefits and income. The right to choose one's education and to work that one enjoys. Sometimes women have access to income but have no control over it, for e.g. handing over salaries to husband, son, brother or mother in law.

3. Political empowerment

Political empowerment leads to a political say and self-determination, and the creation of a power base in a self-determined direction.

Political empowerment is the right to organize one self and take part in democratic processes. It is the right to influence wider development efforts: to be allowed to vote and to be voted, to take active part in Water User Associations (WUA), and Water User Groups (WUG) to participate at the decision making levels (Executive Committee of the WUG, etc.), to be a member of the Union Parishad, etc.

4 Socio-cultural Empowerment

Socio-cultural empowerment leads to the right to one's own independent identity and a sense of self-respect and implies a respected social status. It signifies how people perceive themselves and how others perceive them. Is their voice heard? Are their opinions and suggestions taken seriously? Do they feel proud or good about themselves?

All these four elements are interrelated and together they indicate the degree of empowerment of an individual or group. These four aspects should not be seen as empowering in isolation as they intersect and influence each other. Nevertheless, this study will focus on the aspect of political empowerment as this is the aspect that is most related to the election of women in Union Parishad.

Groups and individuals who are on the lower side of the hierarchy, empower themselves if they are convinced, and if they are able. Programmes and projects can provide an enabling environment and opportunities that women can use to empower themselves, but if the opportunities are not used the project or programme cannot ensure empowerment. This study therefore looks at the strategies used by the SWAIWRPMP to provide opportunities for women to empower themselves. And specifically if these have indeed resulted in political empowerment of women inside and outside the project, leading to more women being elected into the Union Parishad.

Background

In Bangladesh about 70% of the poor live in rural areas, and gain a livelihood from agriculture and other rural activities (World Bank, 2014). As Bangladesh is in the low-lying floodplains of the Ganges-Jamuna-Meghna river system, this poses enormous challenges that affect the lives and livelihood of the rural poor. These include massive monsoon floods, river erosion and sedimentation of water courses, severe water shortages in the dry season, periodic natural disasters such as cyclones and widespread groundwater arsenic affecting over 30% of the population. As these problems tend to coincide with high-poverty areas, effective water management is essential for sustainable agriculture and rural development in large parts of Bangladesh.

The Southwest of Bangladesh, comprises 4 million hectares (ha) or 27% of the country's total land area. With 28.6 million residents, this area accounts for 23% of Bangladesh's total population, and approximately 51% of them are considered poor (BBS & UNICEF, 2015). While agriculture is the main way of gaining a livelihood in the Southwest, agriculture productivity is lower than in other parts of the country. This is primarily due to the dominance of traditional low-yielding crop varieties, vulnerability to flooding, and slow expansion of irrigation facilities compared to other regions in the country (ADB, 2016).

Even though women play an important role in agricultural growth, they tend to be "invisible" in the agricultural sector in Bangladesh, owing to the assumption that women are not involved in agricultural production, and because of cultural norms that value female seclusion and undervalue female labour. The Women Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) shows that 22,6 % of the women in rural Bangladesh can be considered empowered in agriculture. Taking into account those that are



Women weeding

partly empowered the index comes to an index number of 0,647 for women as compared to 0,802 for men (with a maximum score of 1 possible). Including the level of gender parity within the household the WEAI for rural women comes to a number of 0,664. For Khulna division the figures are even lower, with only 20% of women being empowered in agriculture and the WEAI value being 0,621.

The main disempowering factors for women are lack of leadership and resources. The main inhibiting indicators are not being member of a group, not feeling confident to speak in public and the lack of control over use of income (Sraboni, 2013).

Apart from agriculture, water is also essential as drinking water and used for fisheries, boat transport, different types of industry, and a broad range of non-farm activities. The Southwest faces acute water management problems, including: water shortages due to the reduced flows in the Ganges tributaries, salt water intrusion, environmental degradation resulting in loss of economic activity, monsoon flooding, deterioration of existing flood control, drainage and irrigation systems, congestion of drainage facilities due to sedimentation, reduced tidal sweep volume, arsenic contamination and vulnerability to cyclones and tidal surges.

After the massive flooding of 1987 and 1988 the Government of Bangladesh initiated the Flood Action Plan, which was to systematically address the country's flooding and other water management problems, of which the Southwest area was one. The FAP-studies revealed that in the past interventions had not been very effective due to overemphasis on a structural approach, insufficient stakeholder participation and agency coordination, lack of attention to diverse social and environmental water concerns in different livelihood activities, poor operation and maintenance (O&M) and overall institutional weakness (ADB, 2003).

Project description

The South West Area Integrated Water Resources Management and Planning Project (SWAIWRPM) was formulated, to address the water problems of the area while also applying the lessons from the FAP-studies. The project area included selected areas in the southwest areas of Bangladesh, covering the districts of Faridpur, Gopalganj, Jessore, Magura, Narail, Rajbari and Shariatpur. Its overall objective was to enhance economic growth and reduce poverty in rural areas in the selected districts of the southwest of Bangladesh. Its specific objective was to enhance the productivity and sustainability of the selected Flood Control and Drainage/Irrigation (FCD/I) systems from low performance and to reduce incidence of poverty along with strengthening relevant institutions delivering appropriate services to stakeholders.

This led to the following 3 specific objectives:

- Participatory Integrated Water Management Plans (IWMP) for the selected FCD/I schemes
- Enhanced livelihood and livelihood opportunities impacted by integrated water resources management as a result of increased user participation and improved decentralized service delivery
- Strengthened institutional and project management capacities for planning, implementing, operating, maintaining and monitoring demand driven, participatory, integrated water resources management plans



Canal at Mulia

The project started its implementation from January 2006 and came to an end in June 2015 after 8 and half years of interventions. It was initially meant to run for 5 years, from 2005-2010, but as progress was slow during the first 5 years, the project was extended for another 5 years until 2015. Recently the second phase of the project has been approved by the government at the beginning of 2016.

Within the project the area was divided along hydrological boundaries in 14 different sub-area implementation projects (SIP). For every SIP a IWMP was developed and a Water Management Association formed (WMA). Every SIP was again divided along hydrological boundaries and for every of these smaller areas a Water Management Group (WMA) was formed, which are represented in the WMA. Because the WMGs are formed on the basis

of hydrological boundaries, they intersect with UP and villages boundaries, it also means that the IWMP crosses UP and village boundaries.

These Water Management Organisations form the backbone of the project as the objective of the WMGs is ownership development & management transfer of flood control and drainage/irrigation structures, and the main task of the WMAs is to operate and maintain large hydrological works that were constructed or rehabilitated by the project.

Water Management Organisations

Formation

The key concept of the South West project was to include as many beneficiaries as possible in all aspects of the project. To this end the project used a participatory approach in developing Water Management Organisations.

In the first years of the project a consortium of 6 NGOs under the name of 'Esho Samaj Gori' was hired to involve beneficiaries in the programme, but progress was very slow. This was partly because the beneficiaries were convinced that due to the project their lands would be disowned and therefore it would not be in their benefit to participate. Therefore consultants were hired to explain what the programme was intending to achieve and to motivate and mobilise the beneficiaries in 18 unions. Simultaneously a baseline survey was conducted in 2008/2009 to map the overall water situation of the locations where the project would be implemented, on the basis of which the programme was developed. This led to people changing their ideas and becoming motivated to join the programme.

Subsequently ADB decided to employ project staff and appointed community facilitators for an awareness raising campaign, explaining to the residents of the project area how the project would be beneficial to them, as it would increase their livelihoods. The selected staff was more competent than the NGO staff and highly motivated to engage as much people as possible, leading to much more progress being made. It took about 2 years to mobilise and motivate the beneficiaries to get involved, but the awareness raising turned out to be essential to achieve any success in the project.

First the community facilitators would go house-to-house to explain about the project. After that they would organise a general meeting where the community facilitator would discuss with those present what their (water related) problems were and prioritise them. Then they explained that you cannot address these problems individually, but that you have to do this jointly with others, and that for that purpose the South West Project was forming Water Management Groups (WMGs). At the village meeting a formation group would be formed, and together with UP members they would start enrolling people that wanted to be part of the WMG. When 50% of the households of the area would be enrolled into the WMG the group would receive training on how to manage a WMG. Once this training was completed the WMG would be registered at the Department of Local Government and Cooperatives.

Only after the WMG would be registered at the Department of Local Government and Cooperatives, a needs-assessment of the members of the group would take place. Based on their priorities the South West Programme would start providing needs-based training. These trainings would first focus on increasing livelihoods, then on water management and lastly on O&M of water structures.

Afroza Begum - Senior Community Facilitator

Afroza is a widow who lives with her four brothers in law. She has 1 son and 1 daughter and her daughter studies in Dhaka. Afroza got married in her 12-level HSC, but she completed her bachelor in 1990 while she was married. Her husband passed away four years ago. He was a landlord and a merchant, as well as a freedom-fighter. As he got injured he received an allowance. Her husband was always very supportive of her and she misses him very much.



Afroza joined the programme as a junior facilitator, but managed to get promoted to senior facilitator. Being a senior community facilitator means you have the same work and responsibilities as a community facilitator, but apart from that you also supervise some community facilitators. The objectives for community facilitators were:

1. Sustainable Water Management
2. Organise people in Water Management Groups

After the formation the community facilitator (CF) is also active in guiding the group. They also form the main means of communication between the water management group, the project officials and the government departments. The CF is also stimulates networking of WMGs amongst each other and with the UP, and is also responsible for the creation of the Water Management Association. The CF needs to have good networking skills and has to be active everywhere in the district.

Afroza was very committed to involving women in the WMGs, and she put a lot of effort into motivating women to join the project. She also made an extra effort to increase the number of women in the EC to become more than 30%. She did this because she was convinced this is important, not because it was part of the programme. She also stimulated women to take leading positions in the EC, and now slowly this effort is bearing fruit. Over the last years the women in leading positions have been gradually increasing, and at the moment women are more trusted as treasurer than men.

Afroza herself faced two challenges in her job:

1. In the beginning she was not well-known in the villages, and because of that there was not much acceptance for her as a community facilitator. But by leading all training programmes herself, and visiting them regularly she managed to increase her acceptance.
2. When she was appointed as a senior Community Facilitator, the officers within the office did not have much faith in her nor trust in her because she is a woman. By going out and visiting many locations "I proved myself". She kept increasing her responsibilities. Because of her leadership skills she managed 11 WMGs, while her colleagues only managed 5. But even though she is very talented, the responsibility was too much. After bringing this up with her superior, her workload was reduced again to the management of 5 WMGs.

Afroza is very active in local politics as she is the General Secretary of the Women's Awami league since 2009 in Narail. "Because of my work as a community facilitator I have become so empowered I could become a chair of the UP, because many people know me now. But I do not want to compete for a UP seat, I want to compete for an MP seat reserved for women in the next elections."

The inventory and prioritisation of water related problems in the general meetings (organised by the community facilitator during the formation of the WMGs) were used by the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) to draft an IWRM plan for the SIP. This draft would be presented to the villagers in the SIP, who would comment the plan and correct any mistakes. On the basis of their comments the IWRM-plan would be adjusted by BWDB and once more presented in the SIP in a big meeting. There final adjustments would be made by the Chief Executive Engineer and he/she would then include the IWRM plan into the Annual Plan of BWDB and the IWRM-plan finalised. The Annual Plan would be submitted to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), main donor of the Southwest project for their final approval and budget allocation.

Tasks and organisational structure

The main task of the WMA is to operate and maintain the hydrological structures and canals, the WMGs however have a much broader palette of activities in which water management in fact is only a small part.

The WMA consists of representatives from the WMGs in its area. From every WMG 2 members are represented in the WMA. Initially the WMG members would select 2 members of their group to be their representatives in the WMA, but the procedure has changed recently and now the chair and co-chair of the WMG are automatically the representatives in the WMA. In case there is a regulator, the WMA appoints a gate operator who is paid by the fees collected by the WMA through the WMGs. The gate operator is responsible for opening and closing the gate at appropriate times and measuring the salinity of the water.

The WMGs consist of members that live within the hydrological boundaries of the area where the group is active. In principle any resident of the area can become a member, although some groups have limitations to membership as otherwise the group would become too big. For example Barsha WMG allows only 1 member per household to be a member of the group. Other WMGs that are running for some time now have closed, meaning that they do not allow any new members into the WMG anymore. In practise it is difficult for people to join WMGs that exist for some time as the members have been saving money through the group (see below). If somebody would like to join the WMG, they must match the savings of the individual members accumulated through the group, at once. For example if a group has existed for 1 year, and members have been saving 20 Taka per month, the new member has to pay $12 \times 20 = 240$ Taka to contribute to the savings account before joining the group. The longer the group is operating, the higher this amount will be, making it a for many a too high a threshold for joining the group.

The members of the WMG elect an executive committee (EC) which consists of 12 members: chair, co-chair, secretary, treasurer and general members, which governs the WMG. The committee has a quota of at least 30% being women (4 members). They hold their seat for 3 years. Before their election an



Intake and regulator of Mulia canal

election committee is formed. These members can file their nomination to be elected in the EC. First an attempt is made to distribute the functions through consultations of the nominees. In that process they try to decide who will be the most suitable candidate for the function, and if everybody agrees on the division made, no elections will need to be held. If however there are more candidates that wish to compete for seat, then elections are held. In a meeting all members then choose by open vote (through raise of hands), which member get elected into the EC.

Furthermore in every WMG the following 6 sub-committees are established that each have a specific task:

1. Agriculture
2. Fisheries
3. Gender and Livelihoods
4. Environment
5. Internal Auditing
6. O & M

These groups all consist of 6 members, whereby the convener should be a member of the EC. The internal auditing group consists of only three members, and no EC member is allowed to be part of that group as it checks expenditure and takes care of internal auditing.

The convener of the Gender and Livelihood sub-committee should be a woman. All groups should have at least 30% women (2 out of 6), but the Gender and Livelihood committee, should have minimum 4 women (60%). The task of the Gender and Livelihoods group is to motivate women to join the programme and the WMG, to identify topics and organise livelihood trainings and select participants for those trainings, as well as organise gender trainings, and to link with other government departments.

The WMG also has a “representative for destitute women”. The representative is a destitute woman herself, who should represent all destitute women of the village, even though they are not part of the WMG. Her task is to ensure that poor women will profit from the project.

The WMG has two separate bank accounts; one is a general account and one is for the Operation and Maintenance (O&M) of the hydrological structures and canals. All members of the WMG save 20 Taka per month which is deposited in the general account. The WMG then makes collective action plans (CAPs) to decide on how to use these savings. The South West Project supports these plans by providing the necessary training to implement them. For example if the WMG decides that duck-raising would be a good activity the project provides training on duck-raising and the savings are used to buy ducklings. Although the money is deposited in a general account, the savings remains the personal savings of a member. This implies that an activity can only be started in there are sufficient people interested in an activity who are willing to invest their savings into it. Those are the ones that invest their money in the activity.

The money for the O&M is collected from those who own land in the area, irrespective of them being a member of the WMG. The fee is 60 Taka/acre/year and is only used for the management of the FCD/I. If a person cannot pay in cash they are allowed to pay in kind: 4kg rice/acre/year. The funds that are collected in this account are again forwarded to the WMA that is responsible for the O&M of the canals and structures for the area. In fact the WMGs are not very much involved in the O&M as no labour needs to be provided for it. Sometimes when a group member sees a canal is blocked they take out

the blockage themselves, but this is done on an ad-hoc basis. According to the engineer there is not much O&M for the WMGs to do if the sluices are operated and maintained properly.

During the rehabilitation of the canals, at the beginning of the project part of the work was done through Labour Contracting Societies (LCS). These were formed by the WMGs and only members of the WMG were contracted as labourers. Care was taken to contract both men and women and that both would be paid the same wage. In case any other person wanted to be contracted for the work, they first had to become a member of the WMG.

Another activity of the South West Project has been the placement of 122 arsenic-free Deep Tube Wells (DTW). Before they are handed over to the users, the project requires the formation of a Women, Environment and Livelihood (WEL) group that will manage the O&M of the DTW. These WEL groups consists of 15 women who receive training on maintenance of the DTW, including small repairs, and are provided with maintenance-tools by the project.



WEL-group of Bhabanipur at their arsenic-free well

Local Government

Union Parishad structure

There are at present two types of local government institutions in Bangladesh: one for rural areas and the other for urban areas. The local government in rural areas comprises three tiers, i.e. Union Parishad, Upazilla Parishad and Zilla Parishad. On the other hand local government in the urban areas consists of Pourashavas (Municipalities) and City Corporations. In this study we focus on the rural areas only as the South West Project is implemented in rural areas mainly.

The Union Parishad (UP) is the lowest tier of local government in rural areas of Bangladesh, and is the body primarily responsible for agricultural, industrial and community development within the local limits of the union. Each Union is made up of nine Wards. Usually one village is designated as a Ward. There are 4,554 Unions in Bangladesh.

Every UP consists of a chairman, nine general members and three women members, who are elected by direct election every five years. Every general member represents one Ward, where-as every seat reserved for women represents 3 Wards. Hence every general member is elected by the constituents of one Ward, and the every women in a reserved seat is elected by the constituents of three Wards. Women can also contest for any of the general seats as well as for the position of Chairman.

Political participation of women

Bangladesh was one of the first developing countries to establish a Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1978, three years after the First World Conference on Women in Mexico. The government has prepared a National Policy for Advancement of Women and made some noteworthy progress in implementing the National Action Plan, prepared in response to the Beijing Platform For Action. In spite of these achievements, the majority of women in Bangladesh have yet to be empowered to participate actively in the social, cultural, economic and political life of the country. Gender discrimination is widespread in all spheres and at all levels albeit, the Constitution of Bangladesh [Article 27, 28(1), 28(2), 28(3), and 65(3)] guarantees equal rights to all citizens clearly incorporated provisions for equal status of women.

Without political presence of women in national, regional and local level, the power of men is enhanced and marginalises women further in all spheres of life. Thus, political participation contributes to the empowerment of women in general. Political empowerment is one of the four elements of empowerment and ensures women's decision making power in the policy formulation and implementation process. Therefore women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. It is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved (Khan, 2006).

Recent evidence shows that with regards to political and civic participation, women in Bangladesh are far behind compared to their male counterparts, despite access to new economic opportunities and Bangladesh having reached various levels of achievement in the human development indicators. Even after the completion of the UN declared Women's Decade (1976-85), politics in Bangladesh remains

male-dominated with respect to number, position in the party hierarchy, presence and effectiveness in the national legislature and other political structures (Rahman, 2011).

The Local Government Act of 1976 first introduced the provision for reserved seats for women in UP in Bangladesh. It was the first initiative where two seats were reserved for women in each UP. The number of reserved seats for women was increased from two to three through the Local Government Ordinance of 1983 (Shafi, 2001 and Begum, 2012). Apparently, the ordinance introduced the provision of direct election for women members reserved seats in UP. The roles and responsibilities of women members in UP were not clearly defined in the manual of local government. The constitution only assured the reserved seats for women in local government which does not refer to any specific roles and duties of women members in UP (Khan, 2006).

The Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act of 1997 created an institutional framework for women to be elected through direct votes into three reserved seats for women at UP-level. It intended to provide an opportunity to bring women to the centre of local development, enhance their political skills and develop new grassroots level leadership (Begum, 2012). There are different opinions regarding the women’s reserved seat and quota system as well as the provision of direct election. However, in conventional society women are usually not encouraged or inspired to take any leadership role and by creating this kind of quota it is hoped to encourage women to be involved in the political arena, leading to huge positive impacts in their life.

But when taking into account there are 4554 Unions, the number of women in elective positions of chairperson and general member in the Union Parishads was abysmally low even after 3 seats were reserved for women candidates (see table 1).

Year	Women Candidates			Elected Women		
	Chair	General member seat	Reserved seat	Chair	General member seat	Reserved seat
1973	-	-	-	1	-	-
1977	19	19	-	4	7	-
1984	-	-	-	6	-	-
1988	79	863	-	1	-	-
1992	115	1135	-	8	20	-
1997	102	456	180.000	23	110	12882
2003	232	617	124.000	22	79	12684
2011	225	-	90.000	22	114	-

Table 1: Women’s Participation in Union Parishad Elections 1973-2011¹

According to the Election Commission officials, in the most recent UP election, held from March-June 2016, the number of women candidates in the post of chair was not more than 100 at 4,777 unions across the country while only 20 turned out winners. Of these 20 winners, 11 women candidates were on the tickets of the ruling Awami League and nine were independent candidates.

¹ Based on data in Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC, [2014] and Khan, 2006

There are three factors that impede the participation of women in politics in Bangladesh. Firstly political participation may include activities to which women in Bangladesh are not accustomed like picketing and convincing and influencing public authorities. Secondly to be politically active in Bangladesh requires huge amounts of money. Due to unequal access to employment and education and training to develop their skills, women in Bangladesh are often economically dependent on their male family members. So they first need to convince them to support them. If they do and win the election, they will be expected to return the favour to these men by giving them preferential or special treatment. Lastly, politics is viewed as a male-dominated public activity and especially men have strong reservations regarding women in leadership and management positions as women are identified with domestic life (Rahman, 2011).

As these factors reinforce each other, they keep women's political participation low, which in turn makes them unable to keep control over the community's resources.

Even if women manage to become elected in a reserved seat they have limited decision making power compared to general seat members. Research shows that the "representation of women in the decision-making has not yet been ensured. Women still face severe socio-cultural and religious challenges which hinder their participation and they are still largely ignored by their male counterparts..... and because of illiteracy and lack of experience, Union Parishad female members are unable to discharge their duties and exercise their power in an efficient manner." (Islam, 2012)

Adding to this is that many women contest in the election with the support of their husband or powerful in-laws and in these cases trends show that they take note of the opinion of their husband, in-laws and relatives mainly instead of representing their constituents (Islam, 2012).

As a result women lack sufficient institutional status and support and have to work in a hostile environment. They face discrimination in terms of project distribution and committee memberships and are denied access to mainstream and beneficial activities (Begum, 2012). As a consequence interest for taking up a position declines (which is shown by the fall in the number of female candidates for the reserved seat positions) and by not standing for re-election again. Of the women that were elected in 1997 almost half of the women (47%) did not compete in the elections of 2003 (Islam, 2012).

An additional difficulty Women UP members for reserved seats face is that they represent a constituency that is 3 times as large as that of the general members (3 Wards instead of 1), but their vote still counts as 1 vote. As decisions are taken by a majority vote (7 out of 13) and in most cases the chair and 9 general members are men, women remain the minority in every decision, leaving them little possibility to influence the decisions taken in the Union Parishad. With significant absence of women from key-decision making bodies of political parties, it is clear that Bangladesh's politics indeed has women on the surface, but the decision making process is still dominated by men. Raising the question how to expect promotion of the interests of women or further their cause (Ahmed, 2016).

Findings

The findings from the focus group discussions and the interviews held during the field visit are presented here per research question.

Support received by women through the project

Women that joined the project benefitted from the project in many ways. Firstly they received training in a number of topics if they were part of the first 50% to join the group they would receive training on the management of WMG with topics like accounting. Once the WMG was active, they would receive a number of training on gender and livelihood improvement like agriculture management, livestock rearing, pest management, minimum water use, fish farming, and sewing. The topics of these trainings would be identified on the basis of their interest, and in all these training workshops techniques were used to increase the leadership skills of the participants.

If they were part of the executive committee they would also benefit from training on topics like Operation and maintenance of water infrastructure or measurement of water salinity.

Another benefit was the compensation in cash for the attendance of trainings. This money was also used by some women to invest in other activities “we sometimes financially benefit as we receive a number of trainings where we get knowledge that we later on use for better crop production and livestock rearing. In addition to that for a 3 to 4 days training we receive 350 taka per day DSA including food to attend the training and that money we can save for other household purposes”.

Through the saving of 20 Taka per month on the general account of the WMG they also had the possibility to invest this in activities that were organised through the WMGs in the Collective Action plans. So they could participate in a forestry programme as they would have the money to buy the seedlings, or after a training on fish farming they would have the money to invest in fingerlings.



Meeting with Barsha WMG members

The women also benefitted from improved water management; problems with water logging were solved, canals repaired and renovated and new hydraulic infrastructure (like sluice gates) were constructed. Even some roads have improved giving them better access to the market. As part of the WMG they could also join the Labour Contracting Societies founded for the renovation and

construction of the hydraulic infrastructure. It was ensured that also women would be hired for the work and that they would receive the same wage as men.

Some groups benefitted also through the arsenic free wells that were installed through the project. They have now access to safe water close to home. As the maintenance is organised through the WEL groups, which are only made up by women, these women also benefit from the training given to them on the maintenance and operation of the hand pump as well.

Some women also mentioned that they thought they benefitted by being organised in a group. In this way they felt they can solve the water and livelihood related problems collectively.

Also other projects and programmes used the South West project to channel their activities, so the members also benefitted from the mechanisation programme of FAO, got training on composting, small entrepreneurship and food conservation. Being part of the WMG in this way opened other opportunities as well.

Although the WMGs were organised to manage water resources, it was striking to hear that women always mentioned the improvement of their livelihoods as the biggest benefit of the project “Because of the training I received, I can now earn enough through live-stock rearing. I raise and sell cows and makes a profit with it. I also manage my own land without having to hire labour to do the work for me, I now knows how to do it myself. I can even produce a surplus which I sell at the market. I have no leisure time left, but I am now more active and happy. Before I used to sew kata (cloth), but now I do not do that anymore as my farming activities are more rewarding.”

Motivation of women to take part in WMAs or WMGs

The project made a deliberate effort to include women into the WMGs and WMAs by setting a quota. In the gender action plan the target was set that at least 1/3 (33%) of the members of every WMG should be women. The community facilitators therefore needed to ensure that also women would join the programme. To do so, they would try to convince influential women to join the project. These women in their turn were asked to convince other women in their village to join the WMGs. One of the community facilitators, Afroza Begum, was very motivated to do this and even tried to get more women involved in the Executive committees.

Most women heard about the project through the community facilitators or family members that had heard about the project. They list different reasons for being motivated to join the WMG. Some joined because they had problems with water logging and they heard the project would solve these. Others became convinced of the need for collective action to solve the water problems they had.

An even stronger motivation to join the WMG was the trainings the project would provide to address problems in for example agriculture, like pest control. Many women hoped the trainings would be helpful to gain an income and become self-reliant. This is further proven that women who had not joined the WMG yet, joined the WMG after initial training was provided to those that had already joined. Also the money-saving scheme that was said to be part of the project motivated women to join.

Some women also indicated that as the project was run by a government organisation like BWDB together with a foreign organisation, they trusted that it would be a good project and that it would be beneficial to join it.

Shandhya Rani Biswas, Vice-President Barsha WMG, and UP member Shahabad Union, reserved seat for women (consisting of 4 wards)

Shandhya first competed in the UP elections in 2003 as she was inspired by her husband who was a UP member at that time. He motivated her to stand for a elections for a reserved women's seat and she got elected. Her position is slightly special as she represents four wards instead of three. In whole Bangladesh there are only four other UP members in a reserved women's seat that represent four wards instead of three. "I am proud that I represent a larger constituency than other UP members on reserved seats do".



When Shandhya was first elected in the UP, she was not aware of all the government benefits that come through UP. She used to give her signature when asked, without reading the papers, and even signed blank cheques. Then she received training from an NGO on the roles and regulations in UP. After this training she started to raise her voice during the meetings, as then she had gained knowledge and understood better what the UP is about. Now she is the one that calls the chairman about programmes that are to be run through the UP (e.g. blanket distribution in winter), and she never signs blank cheques anymore.

Because of her new gained knowledge she is taken more seriously by other UP members. It also helps that she is relatively well educated (up to level-12), that five members of the UP are close neighbours, and that except for one other member she is the oldest of the members.

Shandhya heard about the SWAIWRPMP in 2003 and she thought that if she can join the project, it will be beneficial for her as a UP member. She wanted to serve people better and this project would help her to support women members. The platform could serve her purpose to increase her popularity and create a bigger constituency, strengthening her position in the UP. "I have benefitted from joining the project even more than I thought I would, as I got re-elected as a UP member every time. I am again standing for coming elections in March 2016 and up till date (7 March) there is not even a contestant who is willing to run against me!"

She does not want to run for a general seat in UP as she is sure to be elected on the reserved seat. If she would have to contest a general seat, she might lose from a man. Moreover, she does not want to create any problems by taking a seat that is now taken by a man.

Three women that were UP-member at the time the project started had another motivation to join the project. They all indicate that they thought the project was a good opportunity for them to increase their network and strengthen their position in the UP. They saw it as a way to increase their popularity and increase their constituency. They also all indicate they want to serve the people and thought the project was a good way to initiate various social activities to improve their lives. “I heard about the SWAIWRPMP in 2003 and I thought that if I can join the project, it will support me as a UP member. It would help me to support women members and strengthen my position in the UP. It will increase my popularity. I also want to serve people better and this platform can serve my purpose to create further constituency”.

There were also reasons why women did not join the WMGs, when asked why women did not join a WMG members explained: “Some women did not join as they thought it was a waste of time, others were from well-off families and did not need a project like this. Again others are now repenting that they did not initially join the project. Now it is difficult to join, as they would need to also put up the money that others have been saving on a monthly basis in one go.” This last argument was also used by other groups when explaining why no new members were entering the WMG anymore. At the same time the monthly savings were also a reason for not joining the programme as one women explained to us “I did not become a member as I am very poor. I am scared to become part of an organisation, as I did not know what it would entail. I cannot pay a deposit every month as I don’t have any steady income. Sometimes I do not even have money to pay for 3 meals a day. I did join a micro-credit group, and pay the contribution required for that. That is the only thing I can afford to join”.

Key interventions facilitating women’s meaningful participation in WMAs and WMGs

The gender action plan that was in place was helpful in ensuring that women would be involved and participating in the project. The community facilitators were aware of the requirement of having at least 33% women in every WMG and therefore ensured they joined the WMGs. Furthermore the quota set for women’s participation throughout all parts of the programme and in all committees ensured their involvement.



Haimanti WMG group members

Through the gender and livelihood sub-groups gender training was given to both men and women which has led to a better understanding by all on matters related to gender. As one male WMG-

member stated: “The awareness-raising programme included to have mutual respect. This has also increased the self-confidence of women as they now realize the value of their work (which they did not before)”. Another man added: “Women are now more vocal because now they regularly interact in the WMG meeting with others. Earlier we did not accept that women would work in the field with their husband, but after receiving gender awareness training the outlook of the villagers has changed about women. They now know that woman are equal to man and they can do any challenging job when they are trained properly.”

The trainings on livelihood improvement were organised by the gender and livelihood subgroups, and as the group had to consist of 66% of women (compared to 33% for other groups), women were in the majority when deciding on training topics as well as in participant selection for the training workshops. This ensured that the views and needs of women were taken seriously in this group. In the training workshops a lot of attention was given to developing not only technical skills, but also leadership skills and public speaking skills. Women were asked to make presentations and learned how to speak in public and overcome their shyness.

As mentioned before one of the community facilitators was very motivated to involve women in decision making, hence she tried to motivate them to be part of the Executive Committee and take up leadership roles. “Although it was not part of the programme I tried to stimulate women to be part of the EC, and within the EC I pushed them to be take leading positions. Now my efforts are slowly bearing fruit, because the number of women in leading positions has been slowly increasing the last few years. At the moment women are even more trusted as a treasurer than men!”

Empowerment of women through participation in the project

The participation and involvement of women in different project components contributed to all four aspects of empowerment of the women that joined.

Physical empowerment increased for those women that were able to get access to water from arsenic free pumps that were provided by the South West project. The project had tested 20.000 wells if they contained arsenic, and provided 122 arsenic free wells in the places that were affected most. Although the project staff is aware that this is not nearly enough, those families that did get access to a safe drinking water pump did benefit by their increased health. Furthermore the women in the Falguni WMG stated that incidences of domestic violence and child-marriage have declined. Reasons being that both women and men received gender training, raising awareness on gender relations and equality between men and women, and that women also earn an income now.

This shows that the project also led to *Economic empowerment*. The activities to improve the livelihoods of the women in the programme have resulted in women gaining an income. “Our livelihood has improved and we have money in our own hand”. Even though the women admit they have to work harder, they still feel happy that they now have some money they spend as they like. “We pass through happy times now our income has increased”.

Before the project many women were confined to the household, but due to the programme they have been involved in many income generating activities like training on agriculture, but also as labourers in the Labour Contracting Societies. Working as wage labourers in the construction and renovation of water structures women worked side by side with men and got paid the same wages as men.

Epi Rani Adhikari, President of EC of Haimanti WMG, and Narail municipality councillor, reserved seat for women

Even though Epy Rani Adhikari is a successful woman now, this did not come to her easily. She was married when she was in class 9 (at 14/15 years old), and dropped out of school. When she left her parental home and started living with her in-laws, the cows of her new family started dying. Due to cultural reasons and ignorance she got blamed for this "they believed I had carried the 'Ómen' with me to my in-laws house". Because of this her in-laws and husband started to treat her badly, even hitting her. At one point she could not take it anymore and decided to run away. She went to a teacher of her old school for advice and he convinced her to try to do her SSC exam. As there was a 4 year gap since she left school she had to refresh her study again. "I did household work during the day, and studied at another place". After some time she returned to her in-laws but they did not support her. They did not want others to come to the house to study with her and made remarks like "all that studying of you is no good. Will you build us a three-story house of it?". Even though she had difficulty in paying for the exam fee, she persevered and passed the exam in second division. After that she became active in all kinds of groups, leading to better acceptance and better treatment by her husband and in-laws.



The supervisor of the "18 districts project", Ms. Afroza Begum, saw she was an active woman and motivated her to become politically active in 1999. Her father was a veterinary, so she came from a relatively wealthy family with high status, which increased her social acceptance when running for a political position. She was then as commissioner (previous name of the function of councillor), and she got re-elected twice and stayed in that position for 12 years, until 2011, then she lost her seat.

Epy used to be a general member of the Haimanti WMG whilst her husband was the EC-president. In 2015 the women in the WMG wanted her to be the president instead of her husband, and at that time she replaced her husband as EC president. Being a member of the WMG and as well as president of the WMG gave her a lot of opportunity to mobilise women and get in touch with other women. Through this she was able to regain popularity and stand for election again. This has led to her being elected as a councillor once more on 30th January 2016. At the day of our visit she was standing in the elections for the panel-Mayor, which is the substitute of the Mayor (In-charge) when he is out of town.

Because the women gained knowledge on agriculture and other ways to raise an income their *Socio-cultural empowerment* has also increased. "When we began to earn money, we gained power". Their husbands now accept that they work in the field as they realise that "If you want to lift yourself out of poverty it is important that women also lend a hand, and not to confine women only to the home.

Education is also good for women. Women now have knowledge about agriculture so they can take over the work if husband is away”.

But it is not only their husbands and society as a whole who have more respect for women. The women also feel very proud and happy themselves that they are able to gain an income. It leads to them feeling more empowered to discuss matters in the family and they also feel the respect of other people. Furthermore the women also realise the value of the work they do, which before the project they did not do. But also the men now see the importance of the work women do, like seed conservation is usually done by women, and thanks to the project men became aware of that and respect the women for that. The women also indicate that their husbands take them more seriously than before because of the knowledge and income gained. They also feel good themselves about the knowledge they have gained through the project “before we joined the WMG we know nothing, but now we are more aware and knowledgeable”.

The women in the WEL group furthermore feel proud that they are able to do their own repairs and can manage the pump. They also have gained importance within the village as they are the caretakers of the Deep Tube Well.

Before the start of the project women were more confined to the home and they would very rarely attend open public meetings. Due to joining the WMG they interact more with other members of the group and discuss their various problems on family matters and livelihoods with others. This has also lead to greater acceptance of women speaking out in public meetings. The gender training has helped a lot in increasing socio-cultural empowerment as “We have learned from the gender awareness training that women and men are equal in the eye of the law and deserve equal treatment from the society.”

Speaking in public is also contributing to the political empowerment of the women in the project. Women have become part of the decision making structures of the WMGs and WMAs through the quota that have been set by the project, making it possible to influence the developments in their own village. In the training of the project ample attention was paid to how women can raise their voice and claim their rights and how to speak in public. Women feel more free to take their own decisions “Now, we do not ask anybody’s opinion anymore, we are empowered”.

The Haimanti WMG was very successful in advocating their needs at municipality level. They managed to convince the Municipality to provide the WMG members with water supply (Tubewells) and sanitation. Most of them now have piped water connection at their home and every household now has a toilet, thanks to this joint effort. They have also successfully advocated for road improvement and culvert construction with the municipality.

The women of Barsha WMG indicate they now know where the UP is, and what it can offer on subsidies and other benefits. They now go to the UP themselves and claim these for themselves. Having a UP member as part of the group has made this more easy.

As the different aspects of empowerment are interrelated they reinforced each other in the project. Even though the activities were mainly focussed on economic and political empowerment of women, their socio-cultural empowerment has also increased largely, which again contributed to physical empowerment of the women.

Political empowerment outside the project

In the area of our field visit (Narail Sub-Project 1) 6 women were elected into local government², whom we all managed to speak to in person or by phone. One of them indicated that she was no member of a WMG group of the South West project. Of the other 5 women, four were elected in UP for a reserved seat for women, and 1 was elected as a municipality councillor (part of the local governance system for towns and cities). Of these five women, three had been elected into UP before the start of the South West project. The other two had been elected only after joining the WMG of the South West project.

Two women had a reserved seat in the UP at the time the South West project started. Shandhya Rani Biswas has held a reserved women's seat since 2003 representing 4 wards, instead of three. She indicated that she saw the project as a good way to do something positive for their constituency and increase their popularity. "I heard about the SWAIWRPMP in 2003, and I thought that if I can join the project, it will support me as a UP member. It would help me to support women members, strengthen my position in the UP and increase my popularity. I want to serve people better and at the same time serve my purpose of creating a bigger constituency". Charabula Bishas has held a reserved women's seat in UP since 2005. She also mentions that the project gave her a bigger platform "I thought that by joining this kind of collective working group I can extend my network. For the next UP elections (March 2016) I expect at least 1000 votes from the WMG members and their households".

Epy Rani Adhikari had recently been elected as councillor in January 2016. She had already been elected as commissioner (previous title of the function of councillor) in 1999 and was two times re-elected until she lost her seat in 2011. "Being a member of the WMG as well as president of the WMG gave me a lot of opportunities to mobilise women and get in touch with other women. Through this I was able to regain popularity and stand for election again. I am now in a position where I am better able to connect the WMG to local governance".

Tahmina Begum played an important role in the establishment of the WMG, as she was the second member to join the group, she was very keen to join the programme as she had heard that money would be saved collectively. Because she also heard that it would be run jointly between the government and a foreign organisation, she trusted it would be a good programme. Tahmina is not only an EC member of her WMG but also elected into the WMA where she represents her WMG. She received leadership training through the programme, and by taking a leading role in the WMG she got to know a lot of people. "I did not want to join politics as I had no idea this was possible. But at one point people asked me to represent them in the elections at UP level. They do most of the campaigning for me, I do not do much of that myself. In 2011 I got elected by more than 1500 votes, which was 364 votes more than my opponent. In 2016 I will stand for elections again."

Bithikia Parveen is a primary school teacher who always has been active in supporting women and the mothers of her students. When she got to know about formation of the WMG she got very interested to join and play an active role in initiating various social activities through the WMG. "I already was interested to be a UP member and serve my village in a better way. I was already popular but then I joined the WMG because I thought that this would serve me to extend my network and receive

² See annex II, list of Local government representatives of NSP-1

appreciation as well as acceptance from organisational perspective. I managed to increase my popularity through the WMG. I also learnt to perform different duties other than teaching, through the trainings provided in organisational development and management.” Once she obtained the support from the WMG, she decided to compete in the local UP election, and contested in the 2011 election. She got elected to a reserved seat women UP member. “Joining the WMG has been very beneficial for me to get elected and I will contest again in this year’s election. I am confident I will win again”.

Tahmina Begum, EC member of Sraboni WMG, UP member Shahabad, reserved women’s seat

Tahmina is married to a farmer and has no children. Together they have six cows and produce vegetables. For an NGO she teaches other women in sewing and tailoring at the training-centre in her village. She also teaches women livelihood skills, and sometimes earns some money by tailoring. She used to have a small shop, but she cannot manage that anymore as she is now too busy and people also regularly refused to pay because of poverty.



Tahmina heard about the SWAIWRPMP for the first time from the community facilitator, Ms. Afroza Begum, and wanted to join immediately. She was motivated as she had heard that money would be saved collectively and as a foreign organisation would work together with the Bangladeshi government she was convinced that it would be a good programme. She was important in establishing the WMG as she was the second person to join the group.

The WMG members elected her as to be their representative in the WMA. Previously every WMG would select two members to represent them in the WMA, but the procedure now has changed to the chair and co-chair automatically being the representatives in the WMA. Tahmina, however, is selected by the WMG-member.

Before joining the project she had no idea that she could become active in politics. “I did not know that was possible”. But by taking a lead-role in the WMG she received leadership training and got to know a lot of people. At some point they asked her to represent them in the elections at UP level. “They are the ones that do the campaigning for me, I do not do much of that myself”. Tahmina got elected in the Shahabad UP in 2011 for the first time with over 1500 votes, which was 364 more votes than her opponent. She is also competing again in the upcoming election of March 2016.

Both Charubala and Shandhya Rani stimulate other women to also become a UP member, but the women in the WMG of Shandhya Rani are not interested. “We are too busy and have no time to be a UP member” they say. They also find that Shandyha is doing a very good job, and that they could not perform as well as she does. Also the women from the Falguni WMG state they are far too busy to be

standing as a candidate for the UP. If one of them would be interested, they would give them their full support, as they are convinced any of them would do a good job.

The Kalmilata WMG has no female representatives in the UP and they are now considering to support one of the group members to run for elections. This will be beneficial for them as it will give them direct access to the UP. The lady in question is a trainer in Integrated Pest Management and she admits that because of her trainings she is known to many people and that the work in the WMG has widened her network further, giving her a better chance to win the elections.

Also the Gandharaj and Surjamukhi WMGs do not have a female representative in the UP, but the chairman of the Surjamukhi group is a UP chair, giving them good access to the UP anyway. Two women mentioned they would like to run for the next UP elections (a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law), as they felt they had built up a good network and had obtained the necessary knowledge through the South West Project. The other women indicate that they will support whichever one will be a candidate for the elections. Also the WEL group of Bhabanipur have a member that would like to stand for elections. Mumtaz Begum was a UP member for 5 years from 1998-2003, and the WMG provided her with an opportunity to create a platform and enlarge her network. Hence she thinks she has a good chance again when she stands for elections. The other women of the group all support her in this ambition, as they feel they will benefit as well if she gets elected.

Even though there are only a few women that are elected or standing for UP elections, the women in the WMGs know more about their rights and have started claiming these from the UP. All women interviewed indicate they are more aware about what the UP is for and what they can expect from it. They go to the UP and ask for credit and benefit schemes, like the different social safety-nets and relief funds, which they previously were unaware about. In this respect it is also helpful that many WMG groups have a UP member (be it male or female) as it provides the women easy access to information about the different schemes available. Furthermore it makes the UP and its decision making approachable as well as accountable as they now know their representative(s) personally.

The women of the Barsha WMG explain that they are not very interested to be a member of the standing committees of the UP as the work has to be done voluntarily without remuneration, which is also confirmed by women from other WMGs.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The objectives of this study were:

- To assess women's level of involvement in decision making in the WMGs and WMAs, particularly in their executive committees and the "gender and livelihoods" sub-groups as well as in other project activities
- To identify various factors that have contributed to opportunities for women, leading to physical, economic, political and socio-cultural empowerment
- To assess if the empowerment by project activities has contributed to increased participation and decision making of women in political processes outside of the project, especially Union Parishad

Based on the findings of this research it can be concluded that women have been involved in decision making through-out the project. Due to the quota system which was applied through-out all activities, women have been involved in project activities, have become active members of WMGs and WMAs and their subgroups and have been elected into executive committees. As members would be trained on the management and organisation of WMGs as well as water management, made it possible for women to make meaningful contributions to decision making.

Due to the training programme of the project men and women in the area got a better understanding of gender relations which provided an enabling environment for the empowerment of women. Although the main objective of the programme was improved water management, the women benefitted mostly from the livelihood activities. The possibility to earn or increase their income through the project was mentioned time and time again as the greatest benefit to them; be it through training, through doing work as a labourer in the LCS, or by using the savings to start up small enterprises. This economic empowerment also contributed hugely to the other aspects of empowerment; physical, political and socio-cultural.

The combination of a quota system for women's involvement, a training programme addressing gender-relations, organisational aspects, water management as well as income generating activities proved very efficient in increasing the empowerment of women. It targeted the economic, socio-cultural as well as the political aspects of empowerment at the same time, which resulted in these factors reinforcing each other as well as physical empowerment.

Assessing the increased participation of women in Union Parishad a few issues come to the fore. Firstly all women that had been elected in the UP were elected in reserved seats for women. None of them stood for election for a general seat or for the position of Chair. They all indicated they did not want to compete with men for a seat as they thought it would be much harder to win the election.

Secondly, apart for 1 exception, the women that were elected as UP members, were already a UP member or had been so in the past, or had the ambition to run for UP member anyway. Only Tahamina was inspired to stand for elections after she became active in the South West project.

Furthermore it seems that it is not so much the empowerment of women by the project that leads them to stand for elections, but the possibility the project provides of creating a platform for increasing their constituency. This proved to be the main benefit to all elected women as it increased their network, people knew them and what they were doing for the project, and this increased their popularity. Also women that are not a UP member yet, but would like to stand for elections next time, mention the importance of the platform the project provides them.

Even though women in the project area have become more aware about the work of the UP and claim their rights, this qualitative research shows no indication that because of the South West Project more women have been elected into UP.

The SWAIWRPMP has been successful in involving women in their project and facilitating their empowerment. Women have managed to increase their income and the mind-set of both men and women have changed leading to socio-cultural empowerment. In the new phase it would be beneficial if the project would continue this development. We would like to recommend the programme to take the following actions to build further upon the successes so far:

- Continue to work with community facilitators that are gender sensitive, ensuring that women are included in the programme
- Continue to raise awareness on gender relations of both women and men in the WMGs by providing conceptual training on gender and empowerment including the different legal rights and responsibilities of women as guaranteed by the state.
- When working with quota, raise the quota of women to be in decision making positions in the EC to 50%
- Support women to improve their leaderships skills and encourage them to take up leaderships roles also outside of the WMG, inspiring them to contest for UP election not only for reserved women's seats but also as general member or for the position of Chair
- Focus more on including destitute and landless men and women in the WMGs or in their different activities

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Annex I: Programme of Field Visit to South West Project

Date	Place	Activities	Remarks
07.03.2016 (Monday)	Narail BWDB rest house	Introduction, Pre-briefing meeting with Southwest Project officials.	Present: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masud Karim – Principal Extension Officer, Southwest project and now based in Dhaka (involved in Project since 2010) • Mohammad Abdur Razzak - Assistant Chief Sociology- Jessore (involved in project since 2008 (6 years)) • Shah Ahmed Ali Khan – Consultant of ADB for Water Management Organisation Development (involved in project since 2007, Former Chief Extension Officer of BWDB) • Mohammed Aminul Ehsan - Assistant Chief officer for fisheries (involved in programme since 2010) • Hafizur Rahman – Deputy Chief Extension Officer (involved in programme since 2007)
	Barsha WMG	Focus group discussion	10 Participants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President of executive committee (male) • Vice-president of executive committee (female), also UP member for reserved women’s seat • Secretary of executive committee (female) • 2 members of the executive committee (female) • 5 general members of the WMG (female)
	Haimanti WMG	Focus group discussion	9 participants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President of EC (female), also elected as Narail municipality councillor (Reserved seat for women) • Treasurer of EC (female), she is a school teacher • 2 EC general members (female) • 5 general members of WMG (female)
	Falguni WMG	Focus group discussion	8 Participants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President of EC (male), also elected as UP chairman of Mulia Union, also President of WMA-8 SIP • Secretary of EC (male), also sluice-gate operator • 2 general EC Member (female), one being environment sub-group member • 4 general EMG members, one being sub-group member

Date	Place	Activities	Remarks
08.03.2016 (Tuesday)	Gandharaj & Surjamukhi WMGs	Focus group discussion	19 Participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President of the executive committee of the Water Management Association (male) • Secretary of executive committee of Water Management Association and gate operator (male) • President of executive committee of Surjamukhi WMG (female) • 6 members of both executive committees (female) • 10 general members of both WMGs (female), of which 1 convener of the gender and livelihood subgroup, and 1 member of the environment subgroup
	Bhabanipur	Focus group discussion	16 Participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All 15 members of the WEL group (female), of which 1 is the caretaker • President of executive committee of WMG (male)
	Kalmilata WMG	Focus group discussion	8 Participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President of executive committee (male) • Secretary of executive committee (male) • 4 members of the executive committee (female), including the representative for destitute women, 1 member of the environment committee • 2 general members of the WMG (female)
09.03.2016 (Wednesday)	Jessore	Reporting and telephone interview with Female UP members.	Due to hartal, security officers insisted we did not leave Jessore, so we worked from the hotel
10.03.2016 (Thursday)	Narail BWDB rest house	Individual interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 interviews with women UP members • 2 interviews with women that did not join the project • Interview with Community Facilitator Afroza Begum

Note: 4-5 no. of project officials accompanied the GWAPB-team during the first 2 days of the visit.

Southwest Area Integrated Water Resources Planning & Management Project
Narail Sub-Project-1

Local Government Representatives OF NSP -1

Name of WMCS	Name Of WMCS Member	Name Of UP	Position in WMG	Position in UP
Balaka WMCS (SWN-8/1 A) Chamrul & Betenga	Md Mofizur Rahaman	Tularampur	Member	Member
Borsha WMCS (SWN- 8/ 2), Gopikantapur & Sadanandakhati	Mrs Shandha Rani Biswas	Shahabad	Vice President	Member (Ladies)
Sraboni WMCS (SWN- 8/ 3), Bishnupur, Sahidpur & Mohazon	Mrs Tahamina Begum	Shahabad	EC Member	Member (Ladies)
	Md Tikka	Shahabad	Member	Member
Sapla WMCS (SWN- 8/ 4), Chanpur & Nayanpur	Mr Haider Ali Molla	Shahabad	Member	Member
Mollika WMCS (SWN- 8/ 5), Sitarampur & Hizoldanga	Mr Probir Bagchi	Mulia	Member	Member
Agrani WMCS (SWN- 8/ 8), Durbajuri & Ichorbaha	Mr Kanai lal Adhikari	Mulia	Member	Member
	Mrs Charubala Biswas	Mulia	Member	Member (Ladies)
Falguni WMCS (SWN- 8/ 9), Saliarvita, Baliadanga & Mulia	Mr Rabindranath Adhikari	Mulia	President	Chairman
	Mr Ashit Biswas	Mulia	Member	Member
Swarnalata WMCS (SWN- 9/ 1) Mulia, Satghoria, Goaldanga & korgram	Mr Bipul Biswas	Mulia	Member	Member
Madhobilata WMCS (SWN- 9/ 4) Raipur & Ujirpur	Mr Kalu Sha	Narail Pouroshava	Member	Councilor
Torulata WMCS (SWN- 9/ 5) Birgram & Mushuria	Mr Tapon Biswas	Mulia	Member	Member
Jhular khal WMG (SWN9/6) korgram, Bahirgram	Mrs Kanon Bala Biswas	Mulia	Member	Member (Ladies)
Suvarghop, Gobra WMCS(SWN-16/1) Suvarghop, Gobra (Part)	Md Azizur Islam	Singasholpur	Member	Member
	Md Solaiman Islam	Singasholpur	Member	Member
Borogati,-Netra WMCS (SWN-16/2) Netra, Borogati	Md Alomgir Kabir	Singasholpur	Member	Member
	Mrs Bithika Parvin	Singasholpur	Member	Member (Ladies)
Borokula WMCS(SWN-16/4) Borokula	Mr Uttam Kumar Mondol	Singasholpur	Member	Member
Jamrildanga WMCS(SWN-21/2) Jamrildanga	Mr Golam Robbani	Prruli	Secretary	Member

Haimoti WMCS: Bahirdanga-Durgapur

Mrs. Epi Rani Biswas ✓ Narail Pouroshava President Councilor.