
Chapter 1: Introduction

This report presents the activities and recommendations stemming from the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Regional Technical Assistance Project 6008: Gender and Governance Issues in Local Government in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan (hereinafter referred to as the project). The project is unique in its efforts to bring the three pillars of ADB's strategic approach to poverty reduction together and apply them at the grass roots level. It was implemented over the 18-month period July 2002–February 2004 and was jointly funded by ADB, the Japan Special Fund, and the Canadian International Development Agency. Data and information in this final report were drawn from baseline surveys of women representatives, training needs assessments, quarterly monitoring reports, evaluations of training programs, exposure visit reports, workshop reports on reviews of local government ordinances, the six-month ADB review mission, a mid-term review of the project, and consultants' and participating nongovernment organizations' (NGOs) reports and analyses (see References).

Since 1999, ADB has followed a poverty reduction strategy that has been central in its activities in Asia.¹ It is built around three interrelated pillars: pro-poor, sustainable economic growth; inclusive social development; and good governance. Inclusive social development in this project developed social capital by increasing the opportunities of the poor to participate in society and by promoting gender equity by giving women more opportunities to have a voice and participate in social institutions. The following assumptions were incorporated into the framework that established the project's operational principals.

- Poverty is best fought at the local level.
- The involvement of women in local government can improve the transparency and accountability that are essential to good governance because women are as yet not involved in or benefiting from existing networks of bad management and corruption.
- Building the capacity of elected or nominated women representatives contributes to their technical knowledge and the skills they need to fulfill the duties and responsibilities of their offices and generally improves their confidence and assurance in local government.
- The participation of citizens in local government, particularly that of women and the poor, is essential in promoting good governance.
- Men's acquiescence and support is crucial for women to be effective; therefore, gender sensitivity training should be provided to male representatives of local government and government officers.

There is considerable variation in project implementation among the three countries. Rather than indicating weakness, this variation is indicative of ADB's policy of structuring assistance to meet the needs and capabilities of local societies. The attempt to include women in local government began in 2002 in Pakistan while Bangladesh has had some form of women's involvement in government since the late 1970s. Clearly one would expect differences to emerge in the implementation of the project in each setting, and indeed this was the case. This partially accounts for the differences in the types and extent of data for each country.

¹ ADB. 1999a. *Fighting Poverty in Asia and the Pacific: The Poverty Reduction Strategy*. Manila.

A Framework for Promoting Gender and Good Governance in Local Government

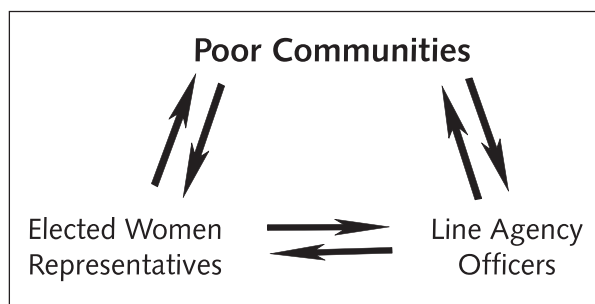
In all three countries, legislative reforms of local government bodies have led to quotas for women. There are approximately 12,000 women representatives in Bangladesh and more than 36,000 in Pakistan. In Nepal, more than 39,000 women were elected in 1997. Despite these significant numbers, women's participation in the operations and decision making of local bodies remains insignificant. Most representatives were poor themselves and many lacked the social and educational resources to adequately do their jobs. The intent of the project was to reduce poverty by increasing the participation of local people, particularly women and the poor, in local governance. Accordingly the framework was designed to assist women representatives to carry out their roles in local government more confidently and to serve their constituents more effectively. This was to be accomplished by focusing on three interrelated project components:

- creation of an interface among key stakeholders that benefits the poor, establishes the credibility and effectiveness of elected women representatives, and involves officers from line agencies in transparent and accountable interaction with community members;
- social mobilization of key stakeholders, particularly the poor, elected women representatives and women leaders, and officers of line agencies;
- capacity building of elected women representatives, male council leaders, and female community leaders.

Participants in the project included elected women members of local government bodies in Bangladesh and Pakistan and ex-nominated and ex-elected members of village development committees and female community leaders and activists in Nepal as elections have not been held there since 1997. The general terms “women members” or “women representatives” are used interchangeably throughout this report to refer to all participants.

Creation of an Interface

Creating an interface means formalizing routine interactions among key stakeholders delivering services in rural communities. Their relationships and interdependencies form the triangle of elements essential to good governance pictured below.



Past experience with poverty reduction and local development projects suggests that when only one stakeholder in a complex social environment is provided training, assets, or resources, the results are often not effective. For example, line officers are often trained to deliver services more effectively, but reaching their target populations may be hampered because locally elected officials responsible for providing accurate recipient lists are not involved. Moreover, the groups targeted for assistance often are unaware of resources designated for them, miss out on benefits to which they are entitled, and can't act as pressure groups to hold government officials and locally elected members accountable. When key stakeholders have access to information, the capacity to understand and deliver resources, and the ability to monitor and facilitate pro-poor activities, local government is likely to improve, and poor constituents are more likely to be included in programs designed for them. Through the interface, women members were able to mediate the needs of their poorest constituents with government poverty and social sector programs.

Social Mobilization

Key participants were brought together in local forums that provided women representatives visibility and status. The forums were held at monthly ward and *upazila* (subdistrict) meetings in Bangladesh while in Nepal and Pakistan, special women's forums were held to gain recognition from village development committees and to establish roles in union council administration, respectively. The forums established links for women representatives with government line agencies, NGOs, and private sector corporations in all three countries. They also provided support networks and opportunities to discuss experiences, problems, and issues and to plan actions to increase the accountability of both government officers and women members to their poor and other constituents.

The forums made local people aware of various programs like development schemes or the *zakat* (charity funds) and community development projects in Pakistan and the poverty and social protection programs provided by the *union parishads* (local government bodies) in Bangladesh. In Nepal, the forums demanded and received funds for development projects from village development committees (VCDs) and other agencies.

Capacity Building

Capacity building was provided by local NGOs in each country to enhance the knowledge and skills of local women members so that they could be more effective in their roles in local government and forums. The goal was to provide women with basic knowledge about local government (their roles, budgets, meetings, record keeping, agendas, projects, monitoring committees, council project funds); about how to run meetings, mediate disputes, and negotiate for development programs and local resource mobilization; and about gender issues.

It was recognized that without the acquiescence and support of their male counterparts, women representatives would not be able to accomplish very much. Each country created a training program for women and men, but in all cases, training in gender sensitivity was provided to male representatives and in some cases to other male stakeholders.

The combined effects of project activities did a great deal to improve the confidence and ability of the elected women to represent the interests of all their constituents. The women representatives made significant contributions to the well being of the poor in their constituencies. Women's forums in Bangladesh made it possible for 7,511 poor women and children to receive vulnerable group program cards, for 646 widows to get pensions, and for 623 elderly men and women to receive their old age allowances. In addition, through the cooperation of government officers, NGOs, and women

representatives, 2,833 poor women and young people were trained in various government skill development and extension programs. Moreover, 6,128 poor women gained access to income generating activities in various poverty programs of government and nongovernment agencies. The women members were also involved in mediating 628 dowry, 526 early marriage, 677 polygamy, 1,993 land, and 3,254 family disputes. They also mediated in 1,545 instances of woman and child repression, 1,091 divorces, and 30 instances of theft.

In Nepal, the forums were able to mobilize funds from VDC budgets for 55 projects ranging from human resource development to forest and environmental management. Women's forums promoted citizenship certificates and the registration of births, deaths and marriages. Active links were made with government line agencies, with other NGOs, and with community-based organizations (CBOs) in health, education, hygiene, and savings and credit cooperatives. The women's forums also mediated 72 gender and social disputes related to domestic violence against women, polygamy, and witchcraft and were active in campaigns against alcoholism, drugs, and child trafficking.

In Pakistan the women's forums have made links with government departments, with NGOs, and with savings and credit programs. They have been responsible for implementing a total of 49 development schemes including water supply, a telephone exchange, a vocational center for girls, a pipeline, stipends for books, schools for girls, and a graveyard. A total of 1530 poor women were referred to zakat committees by 104 trained women councilors, and 59 councilors referred 1201 poor women to *baitulmal* (social security fund) committees. Fifty-five poor women were provided with income generating opportunities and 285 got jobs through government, private, or NGO sources. Sixty-seven percent of the women members resolved cases of domestic violence and 41% were able to resolve cases of divorce. Women were also involved in cases of land disputes, fights between neighbors, child custody, provision of education for young girls, and waiving school fees for poor students.