
Review paper

The Role of Cultural Norms in Shaping Local Government Accountability in Bangladesh: A Thematic Review

Anupom Sarker ^{1*} , Purbasha Acharjee ²

¹ Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, BANGLADESH

² University of Chittagong, BANGLADESH

*Corresponding Author: anupom_18123127@jkkniu.edu.bd

Citation: Sarker, A., Acharjee, P. (2026). The role of cultural norms in shaping local government accountability in Bangladesh: A thematic review. *Journal of Law, Governance, and Management*, 1(1), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jlgm/19059>

Published: August 17, 2026

ABSTRACT

Local government accountability in Bangladesh operates within a dense web of cultural norms, social hierarchies, and historically embedded patronage arrangements that constrain or, in some circumstances, enable governance outcomes. This thematic review synthesises 62 peer-reviewed and credible grey-literature sources published between 2000 and 2025, screened through a PRISMA-informed search and coding process, to examine how cultural factors shape accountability in Bangladeshi local government institutions. Five interconnected themes are identified inductively: patronage politics and factional loyalty; gendered norms constraining women's substantive political participation; religious and communal norms mediating civic engagement; elite capture facilitated by social deference; and bureaucratic culture perpetuating weak downward accountability. Unlike earlier treatments that risk presenting culture as a fixed and determining variable, this review reads each theme through a feminist institutionalist and intersectional lens and situates cultural explanations alongside political economy, institutional design, and electoral competition, treating culture as one interacting variable among several rather than a master explanation. The review finds that these mechanisms combine into a self-reinforcing but not immutable arrangement, a cultural equilibrium of non-accountability, that formal reforms have struggled to dislodge because they rarely engage the normative environment directly. Civil society organisations, independent media, and citizen-led digital initiatives are identified as partial counterweights, though their reach remains uneven. The review concludes that durable reform requires institutional redesign to be paired with deliberate, sustained engagement with the cultural assumptions that define legitimate authority, and it offers a set of comparative propositions that extend beyond the Bangladesh case to other clientelistic democracies undergoing decentralisation.

Keywords: cultural norms, local government, governance, accountability, gender, Bangladesh

Why do elected governments so often fail to answer to the citizens who elect them? Political scientists, development researchers, and governance practitioners have circled this question for decades, and institutional explanations tend to dominate the answer. Weak electoral systems, thin legislative oversight, compromised judicial independence, and underfunded civil society are routinely named as the proximate causes of accountability failure (Blair, 2000; Gaventa & McGee, 2013). These explanations are not wrong. But they can

understate how much governance failure is embedded in, and actively sustained by, cultural norms: the shared expectations that define acceptable relationships between rulers and ruled, citizens and the state, men and women, and elites and the people beneath them.

Bangladesh is an unusually instructive case for testing this proposition. The country has sustained electoral democracy since 1991, maintains a constitutionally mandated tier of local government bodies (Union Parishads, Pourashavas, and City Corporations), and has invested in successive rounds of decentralisation reform (Ahmed, 2011; Siddiqui, 2000). Its development record over the same period is genuinely notable: sharp reductions in poverty, near-universal primary enrolment, and steady gains on gender development indices (Hossain, 2017). Yet household surveys and field research tell a less flattering story about local government itself, one of persistent perceived corruption, patronage dependency, limited responsiveness, and a durable culture of impunity (Transparency International Bangladesh [TIB], 2021; Wood, 2000).

This is the puzzle at the heart of the review: strong institutional form paired with weak functional performance. A growing body of research has begun to treat this gap as evidence that local accountability in Bangladesh is not simply a technical problem awaiting better institutional engineering, but a problem shaped by patron-client relations, gender hierarchies, religious authority, social deference, and administrative culture (Hassan, 2013; Khan, 2010; Lewis, 2011). Two things are missing from much of this research, however. First, where gender is concerned, the analysis has tended to describe exclusion rather than explain it through an explicit theoretical lens; feminist institutionalism and intersectionality, both well-developed elsewhere in comparative politics, are rarely brought to bear on the Bangladesh case in a sustained way (compare Panday, 2025; Prodig, 2022). Second, culture is sometimes treated as though it operates on its own, when in practice it interacts constantly with political economy, electoral incentives, and the design of decentralisation itself (Ehsan & Kamruzzaman, 2019). This review is built to correct both gaps.

Three research questions guide the analysis. First, through what mechanisms do prevailing cultural norms shape the accountability of local government institutions in Bangladesh, across the dimensions of transparency, answerability, responsiveness, and participation? Second, how does a feminist institutionalist and intersectional reading of gender norms change or complicate existing accounts of women's substantive political exclusion at the local level? Third, under what conditions do cultural explanations for accountability deficits interact with, rather than substitute for, political economy and institutional design factors, and what does this imply for reform strategy? The review is organised around five thematic clusters identified inductively from the literature, each examined for the mechanisms through which it operates, the accountability dimensions it affects, and the countervailing forces that qualify or contest its influence.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Accountability and its dimensions

Accountability is not a single thing. Following Schedler (1999), it can be broken into three components: answerability, the obligation to explain and justify decisions; enforceability, the capacity to sanction misconduct; and responsiveness, the degree to which citizen preferences are translated into policy action. At the local government level these dimensions are pursued through elections, public hearings, budget transparency exercises, social audits, information disclosure, and complaint redress systems (Fox, 2015; Gaventa & McGee, 2013).

A further distinction separates horizontal accountability, exercised by courts, anti-corruption commissions, and oversight bodies, from vertical accountability, exercised by citizens through elections and collective action, and diagonal accountability, exercised by civil society and media operating outside formal electoral cycles (Goetz & Jenkins, 2005; O'Donnell, 1998). Each of these channels is vulnerable to cultural influence in a different way, which is one reason a single-mechanism explanation for accountability failure rarely holds up under scrutiny.

Cultural norms, informal institutions, and political settlements

Cultural norms are treated here as the socially shared rules, expectations, and values that shape behaviour independently of formal legal codes (North, 1990): gift-giving, deference to elders and religious leaders, reciprocal obligation within kinship and factional networks, and gendered expectations about who may occupy public space. These norms are not frozen artefacts. They are reproduced through everyday interaction, contested in public discourse, and occasionally reworked by political mobilisation and economic change, which is precisely why treating them as an unchanging backdrop misrepresents how they function.

The political settlements framework developed by Khan (2010) and applied to Bangladesh by Hassan (2013) is useful here because it refuses to treat formal rules as the primary determinant of governance outcomes. Instead, outcomes follow from the distribution of power among organised groups and the bargains those groups strike with one another. Cultural norms matter within this framework because they confer legitimacy: they

determine which leaders are seen as credible, which demands are seen as reasonable, and which forms of accountability are seen as appropriate rather than intrusive.

Putnam's (1993) social capital framework supplies a complementary, though not identical, argument: communities with dense horizontal civic networks and norms of reciprocity tend to produce more accountable government, while communities organised vertically around patron-client ties tend to see accountability captured by elites and mediated through personal loyalty rather than impersonal rule. Bangladesh displays elements of both patterns depending on region and sector, a point the thematic sections return to rather than assume.

A feminist institutionalist and intersectional reading

Much of the earlier research on gender and local governance in Bangladesh, including in the manuscript's earlier drafts, described the marginalisation of women councillors without asking why formal rules failed to translate into substantive power. Feminist institutionalism supplies that missing question. It treats institutions themselves, not just the individuals within them, as gendered: rules, procedures, and informal norms of who speaks first, who controls the agenda, and whose expertise is assumed carry an implicit gender logic that formal quotas do not automatically dislodge (Panday, 2025; Mackay, 2008). Reserved seats change the composition of the room without necessarily changing the rules by which that room operates, which is why representation and substantive influence can diverge so sharply in the Union Parishad context (Prodip, 2021).

Intersectionality adds a second, equally necessary correction. Women councillors in Bangladesh are not a uniform category. Class position, religious minority status, rural or peri-urban location, and marital status interact with gender to produce sharply different experiences of exclusion and different openings for agency (Ara & Northcote, 2020). A landed, Muslim, majority-community woman councillor with an educated husband navigates a different set of constraints than a landless Hindu widow attempting to raise a service complaint, even though both operate under the same reserved-seat quota. Treating gender as a single undifferentiated variable, as earlier reviews of this literature have tended to do, risks obscuring exactly the variation that explains why some women exercise real influence and others do not (Prodip, 2025).

This lens is not confined to the gender section of the review. Feminist institutionalist reasoning, the idea that formal rules are filtered through informal gendered practice, extends naturally to patronage, religious authority, and bureaucratic culture as well, since each of these domains has its own gendered rules of access that are rarely made explicit in the literature reviewed here. Where relevant, the thematic sections below flag this connection rather than confining gender analysis to a single, separable theme.

Culture as an interacting, not determining, variable

A recurring weakness in earlier treatments of this subject, including in previous drafts of this review, is the temptation to let cultural explanation do too much work: to imply that patronage, deference, or religious authority alone account for accountability failure, independent of how decentralisation is designed, how elections are financed, or how administrative capacity is distributed. This review resists that temptation. Cultural norms are treated as an intervening variable that sits between structural conditions, poverty, inequality, historical legacy, and governance outcomes, transparency, responsiveness, answerability, rather than as a first cause.

Concretely, this means each thematic section below is read against at least one competing or complementary explanation grounded in political economy or institutional design. Patronage, for instance, is examined not only as a cultural inheritance but as a rational response to fiscal centralisation that leaves local officials with few resources to distribute except personal favour (Ehsan & Kamruzzaman, 2019). Elite capture is read alongside land inequality and credit market failure, not simply as a matter of inherited deference (Sobhan, 2010). The purpose of holding both explanations in view simultaneously is to avoid the deterministic reading that reviewers of earlier drafts rightly flagged, while still taking seriously that culture does independent explanatory work that purely materialist accounts cannot fully absorb.

METHODOLOGY

Search strategy and databases

This review follows a systematic thematic review protocol adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006) for governance research, reported here using a PRISMA-informed flow structure to make the search and screening process auditable (Figure 1). The approach remains qualitative and interpretive throughout: the goal is to synthesise conceptual argument and empirical finding rather than to aggregate quantitative effect sizes.

Systematic searches were run across Scopus, JSTOR, SAGE Journals, ScienceDirect, and Springer Link, supplemented by Google Scholar for coverage of sources not indexed in the subscription databases. Search terms combined 'local government Bangladesh', 'accountability Bangladesh', 'cultural norms governance',

'patronage Bangladesh', 'Union Parishad', 'decentralisation South Asia', 'gender local governance Bangladesh', 'feminist institutionalism South Asia', and 'elite capture Bangladesh', in various Boolean combinations. The search covered publications from 2000 to 2025, with selective inclusion of foundational theoretical texts published earlier where they remain the primary reference point for a concept used in the field (for example, North, 1990, on informal institutions, and Putnam, 1993, on social capital).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Sources were included if they met three conditions: substantive focus on local government, decentralisation, or sub-national governance in Bangladesh; explicit engagement with at least one dimension of accountability, transparency, answerability, enforceability, or responsiveness; and either peer review or, for grey literature, publication by a recognised research or monitoring body (for example, Transparency International Bangladesh, the World Bank, or UNDP) or a national newspaper of record with a named byline and verifiable publication date.

Sources were excluded where they addressed national-level politics without a clear local government dimension, where methodological reporting was too thin to assess the basis for the claims made, where the source duplicated a later and more complete publication by the same author, or where the material could not be verified as peer-reviewed or credibly sourced grey literature. Newspaper opinion pieces without reporting content and unpublished student theses were excluded on this basis, in direct response to the concern that the earlier draft leaned too heavily on non-peer-reviewed material.

Screening, coding, and thematic development

Title and abstract screening were conducted for all 213 unique records identified after duplicate removal, yielding 115 records for full-text review (Figure 1). Full-text assessment against the inclusion criteria above produced a final set of 62 sources retained for detailed thematic coding. Coding proceeded in three stages following Braun and Clarke (2006): open coding of recurring concepts and claims across the full-text set; axial coding to group codes into candidate themes; and a final review stage in which candidate themes were tested against the full data set for internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Five substantive themes and one cross-cutting theme, concerning civil society and counter-normative forces, were retained through this process. Figure 2 reports the distribution of the 62 retained sources across these six thematic clusters and by source type.

Table 1 summarises the reviewed literature by thematic cluster, indicating the predominant method or data source underlying each cluster's key claims and the specific contribution each cluster of studies makes to the overall argument. This table is intended to make visible, at a glance, the evidentiary basis for claims made in each thematic section, addressing the concern that literature synthesis and interpretation were not always clearly separated in the earlier draft.

Figure 1

PRISMA-style flow diagram of the literature searches and screening process (2000-2025)

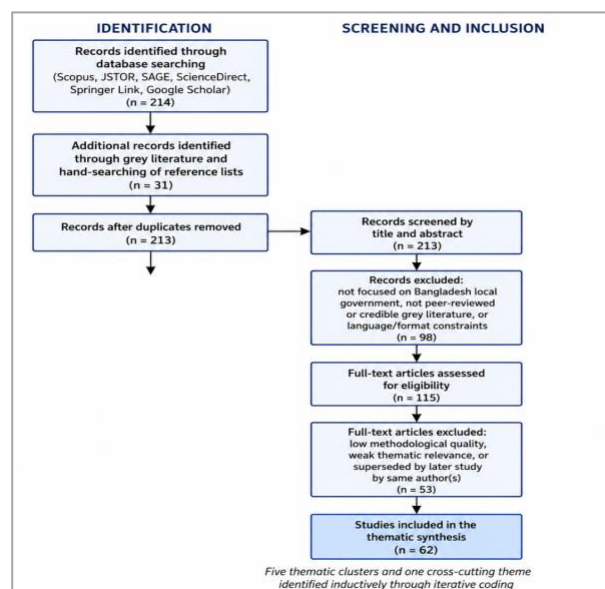
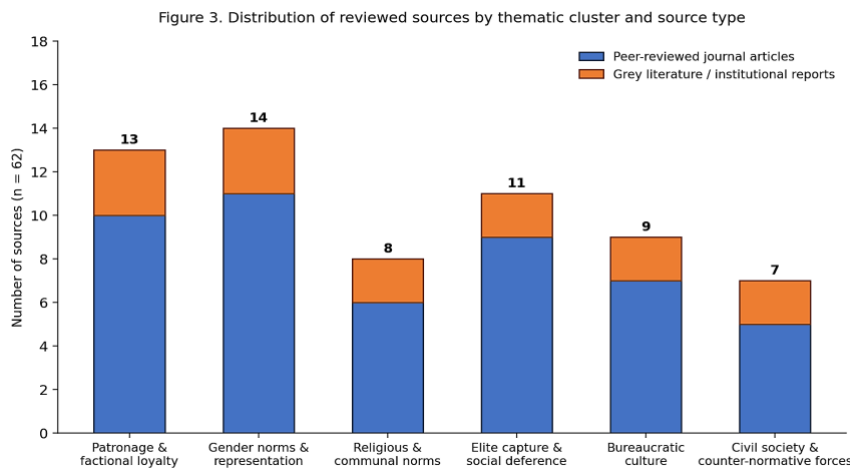


Figure 2*Distribution of the 62 reviewed sources by thematic cluster and source type***Table 1***Summary of Reviewed Literature by Thematic Cluster (N = 62)*

Thematic Cluster	Representative Sources (Year)	Predominant Method / Data Source	Key Contribution to the Argument
Patronage and factional loyalty	Kochanek (2000); Wood (2000); Hassan (2013); Ehsan & Kamruzzaman (2019)	Qualitative case study; political settlements analysis; fiscal policy review	Establishes patronage as both cultural inheritance and rational adaptation to fiscal centralisation
Gender norms and substantive participation	Panday (2011, 2025); Nazneen & Sultan (2009); Ara & Northcote (2020); Prodip (2021, 2022, 2025)	Semi-structured interviews with councillors and parliamentarians; comparative case analysis	Applies feminist institutionalist and intersectional lenses to explain the representation-influence gap
Religious and communal norms	Lewis (2011); Riaz (2016); Sobhan (2010); Askvik et al. (2011); Jahan (2014)	Ethnographic and documentary analysis; institutional case study	Identifies shalish and religious authority as parallel, unaccountable governance layers
Elite capture and social deference	Jamil (2007); Kochanek (2000); Sobhan (2010);	Administrative culture survey; asset and land inequality data; qualitative fieldwork	Links deference norms to material dependency, not culture alone
Bureaucratic and administrative culture	Jamil (2007); Siddiqui (2000); Aminuzzaman (2010); Ahmed (2011); Hassan (2013)	Civil service survey; documentary and policy analysis	Traces colonial administrative legacies and centre-periphery incentive structures
Civil society, media, and counter-normative forces	Hossain (2017); Lewis (2011); Riaz (2016); Fox (2015); Gaventa & McGee (2013)	Programme evaluation; media content analysis; multi-country comparative review	Identifies NGOs, independent media, and digital platforms as partial counterweights to the cultural equilibrium

Distinguishing synthesis from interpretation

Two conventions are used consistently in the sections that follow to keep synthesis and interpretation visibly separate. Claims that restate a finding or argument from a specific reviewed source are attributed directly to that source, in the normal citation format. Claims that extend, compare, or draw an inference across multiple sources, including the review's own theoretical contribution, are flagged explicitly with language such as 'this review suggests' or 'read together, these findings imply'. This convention is applied throughout the thematic sections and the discussion, and it is intended to let a reader distinguish at every point between what the literature reports and what this review concludes from it.

PATRONAGE, FACTIONAL LOYALTY, AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF NON-ACCOUNTABILITY

Patron-client relations as cultural and material logic

Few cultural norms matter more for local accountability in Bangladesh than the deeply institutionalised system of patron-client relations. Kochanek (2000) traced how the country's political landscape is organised around personal obligation, factional loyalty, and reciprocal favour that cut across formal institutional boundaries. At the Union Parishad level, this produces a specific expectation: elected chairs and councillors are expected to behave as patrons, delivering jobs, contracts, emergency relief, and access to state services in return for electoral support and factional allegiance.

This is not simply a cultural preference that citizens could set aside if they chose. Ehsan and Kamruzzaman (2019) argue that fiscal centralisation leaves most Union Parishads with negligible discretionary budgets, so that the personal favour a councillor can broker, access to a relief allocation, a recommendation for a job, informal mediation of a dispute, is often the only currency of local politics available at all. Read this way, patronage is as much a rational adaptation to resource scarcity as it is a cultural inheritance, and the two explanations reinforce rather than compete with each other. When citizens evaluate representatives chiefly on favours received rather than budgetary transparency or procedural integrity, the incentive structure for local officials tilts decisively away from formal accountability. Wood (2000, p. 226) captured this with the phrase 'responsibility square', describing how local officials' obligations run primarily to party superiors and factional networks rather than to the citizens they formally represent.

Party politicisation: Convergence and debate

Formal law designates Union Parishads as non-partisan bodies, yet elections at this level are conducted along unmistakably partisan lines in practice (Ahmed, 2011; Siddiqui, 2000). Candidates run under visible party banners, and district and national party leaders shape nominations, resource allocation, and post-election patronage. Officials who resist this logic, by insisting on fiscal transparency or reporting corruption upward, risk losing access to the very patronage networks that guarantee their political survival.

Hassan (2013) describes this arrangement as 'competitive clientelism', in which the two dominant parties compete for power by rewarding factional networks rather than by advancing programmatic policy. Not every researcher reads this pattern the same way, however. Hossain and Habib (2021) argue that party politicisation is better understood as a symptom of an unresolved decentralisation design, specifically the absence of independent revenue authority for local bodies, rather than as evidence of a distinct cultural logic of factionalism. The distinction matters for policy: if politicisation follows mainly from fiscal design, then revenue reform might loosen its grip in a way that cultural change alone could not. This review treats both accounts as partially correct rather than adjudicating between them, since the empirical record supports a genuine interaction between institutional design and cultural expectation rather than the dominance of either alone.

Implications and contested evidence for reform

The cultural weight of patronage norms shapes how formal accountability tools actually perform. Social audits, budget hearings, and citizen scorecards introduced by development partners in Bangladesh have produced mixed results (Fox, 2015; TIB, 2021). In communities saturated by patronage relations, participants frequently self-censor for fear of retaliation from local power brokers or engage with these mechanisms strategically to secure benefits rather than to exercise genuine oversight. Blair's (2000) comparative study of decentralised governance found that participatory mechanisms in highly clientelistic settings are frequently captured by the very elites they were designed to constrain.

This resilience is not absolute, however, and the literature is more optimistic on this point than a purely cultural account would predict. Mahmud et al. (2008) identified pockets of comparatively accountable local governance in Bangladesh where competitive elections rewarded performance-based legitimacy and where civil society organisations generated enough public voice to make non-performance politically costly. The decisive variable, in their account, was not the disappearance of patronage as such but whether citizens had alternative channels for accessing services and alternative criteria for judging their representatives. This finding is important because it identifies a lever, competitive elections combined with civil society voice, that does not require patronage norms to vanish before accountability can improve.

GENDER NORMS, FEMINIST INSTITUTIONALISM, AND SUBSTANTIVE PARTICIPATION

Formal inclusion, substantive exclusion: A feminist institutionalist reading

On paper, Bangladesh's record on gender inclusion in local government compares favourably with much of the region. The Local Government (Union Parishads) Act 2009 reserves one third of Union Parishad seats for women, building on 1997 legislation, and over 14,000 women contested reserved seats in the 2021 Union Parishad elections (Election Commission Bangladesh, 2021). The substantive picture looks very different, and a feminist institutionalist reading helps explain why the gap persists rather than simply describing it.

Panday (2011, 2025) shows that women councillors are routinely excluded from key deliberative spaces, denied access to financial information, and confined to 'soft' portfolios such as women's affairs and social welfare, while male colleagues retain control over planning, infrastructure, and budget allocation. Feminist institutionalist theory explains this pattern as a mismatch between formal and informal rules: the formal rule (a reserved seat) changes who occupies the room, while informal rules, who speaks first at a *shalish*, whose signature is treated as authoritative, which portfolios carry real budget discretion, continue to encode a male-default assumption about who exercises legitimate authority (Prodip, 2021, 2022). Quotas therefore change composition without necessarily changing the institutional grammar that determines whose voice counts, a distinction the earlier draft of this review did not make explicit.

Purdah, public space, and intersectional variation

The institution of *purdah*, a set of norms regulating women's visibility, mobility, and speech in public space, continues to shape women's political agency in Bangladesh, though its force varies considerably by class, religion, and region (Nazneen & Sultan, 2009). This variation is precisely where an intersectional lens does analytical work that a single-axis account of 'gender norms' cannot. Ara and Northcote's (2020) interviews with women parliamentarians and councillors describe what they call a 'gender wall' built from institutional, historical, socio-economic, and cultural elements simultaneously, not from cultural norms in isolation. A landed, well-connected Muslim woman councillor typically negotiates *purdah* expectations through family status and an existing male patron, whereas a landless woman, and especially a woman from a religious minority, faces the same normative expectations with none of the resources to offset them (Prodip, 2022).

Nazneen and Sultan (2009) document adaptive strategies that women politicians use to work within these constraints: projecting a dutiful, family-endorsed persona, cultivating a male patron within the local hierarchy, or invoking religious legitimacy for a public role. These strategies allow individual women to exercise some influence, but they also reproduce the broader normative structure that conditions women's political participation on male approval, which is one reason gains achieved this way tend not to transfer automatically to the next cohort of women councillors.

Violence, intimidation, and normative enforcement

Gender norms in local politics are not only reproduced through social expectation; they are, in extreme cases, enforced through violence and intimidation. Women candidates and councillors report harassment, threats, and physical violence at levels sufficient to deter capable women from seeking or retaining office (Jahan, 2014; TIB, 2021). The Daily Star (2022) documented cases of women councillors being physically barred from Union Parishad meetings or having their signatures forged by male colleagues who did not regard their presence as legitimate.

This coercive dimension matters analytically because it exposes the compulsion beneath what might otherwise look like voluntary cultural compliance. When women who challenge patronage networks or report corruption face a heightened risk of gendered violence, the effective space for accountability-demanding behaviour narrows for half the population, a point with direct implications for how reform interventions are sequenced and protected.

Contingent gains and the limits of quota reform

The picture is not uniformly bleak. Hossain (2017) documents cases where women local officials have exercised genuine influence over service delivery, particularly in maternal health, primary education, and girls' secondary enrolment. These cases cluster where women officials have organisational backing from NGOs such as BRAC, where literacy is higher, and where electoral competition gives male politicians an incentive to court women voters by demonstrating responsiveness.

Recent comparative work qualifies how much weight this optimism can bear. Prodip's (2025) qualitative study of quota-elected Union Parishad women asks directly how far reserved seats translate into substantive influence

over decisions, and finds that socio-economic constraint, more than the design of the quota itself, predicts whether that influence materialises, which suggests that further expanding reserved seats without addressing the underlying resource gap is unlikely to close the substantive representation deficit on its own. Panday's (2025) comparative analysis of Bangladesh and Australia introduces the idea of 'subversive institutional bricolage', women adapting existing institutional openings in ways not anticipated by their designers, as a more durable path to influence than formal quota expansion alone. Taken together, this literature suggests that normative change in this domain is real but conditional, and that it depends on resource access and organisational backing as much as on the cultural climate itself.

RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNAL NORMS IN MEDIATING CIVIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Islam, consensus, and public authority

Religion is a powerful normative framework in Bangladeshi public life, and its relationship to local accountability is genuinely contested rather than settled. Islam as practised in Bangladesh spans syncretic folk tradition and stricter reformist orientations associated with movements such as Tabligh Jamaat and Hefazat-e-Islam, and across this spectrum certain assumptions about authority, obedience, and community governance recur in ways that bear on accountability (Lewis, 2011; Riaz, 2016).

One recurring assumption is a strong cultural premium on consensus and social harmony, traceable to Islamic norms of shura, or consultation, and to older Bengali traditions of village governance through shalish, informal arbitration. This premium can work against accountability by stigmatising dissent and legitimising deals struck between local officials and religious leaders outside formal channels. Riaz (2016) found that local religious leaders frequently serve as informal legitimating authorities for local government decisions, lending a cultural patina of respectability to arrangements that, on independent scrutiny, may involve real conflicts of interest.

Minority communities and structural disadvantage

Religious minorities, primarily Hindus, who make up roughly nine percent of the population, experience local government access differently, and this deserves treatment as its own dimension rather than a footnote to the majority pattern. Lewis (2011) and Sobhan (2010) document structural disadvantages minority communities face in accessing local services, particularly around land disputes and communal tension. Hindu community members frequently report reluctance to file formal complaints against local officials or Muslim neighbours for fear of escalation, police indifference, or reprisal. Cultural norms of communal deference, reinforced by memories of historical dispossession and periodic communal violence, effectively place a significant category of local government misconduct outside the reach of accountability pressure altogether.

Shalish and the governance layering effect

Informal shalish proceedings, typically convened by elders and religious leaders, handle land, marriage, and commercial disputes that formally fall within the jurisdiction of local government or the courts. Shalish offers accessible and fast dispute resolution, but it operates entirely outside formal accountability frameworks, is susceptible to gender bias and elite capture, and has no mechanism for consistent application of legal rights (Jahan, 2014).

Askvik et al. (2011) describe the resulting arrangement as a 'governance layering' effect, in which formal local government institutions compete with informal religious ones for legitimacy. Officials who enforce statutory rights against a shalish outcome risk cultural censure, while those who defer to shalish reproduce a system that structurally disadvantages women and minorities. This is not simply institutional duplication; it reflects a genuine, ongoing contest over the proper source of authority in community governance, one that formal reform has generally sidestepped rather than addressed.

ELITE CAPTURE, SOCIAL HIERARCHY, AND DEFERENCE AS CULTURAL NORM

Social stratification and governance access

Bangladeshi society retains substantial hierarchies of class, landownership, education, and status that shape participation in local governance in ways formal institutional design routinely fails to address. Elite capture of local government, the systematic redirection of public resources toward locally dominant groups, is extensively documented (Hassan, 2013; Khan, 2010; Sobhan, 2010). What is less often foregrounded is the cultural dimension of capture: the degree to which deference norms toward educated, wealthy, or high-status individuals reproduce elite dominance even where formal participatory mechanisms exist.

Jamil (2007) traces this to an administrative culture shaped by centuries of Mughal, colonial, and post-colonial governance, one that retains a strong orientation toward hierarchy and status. Citizens from lower economic strata, rural areas, or marginalised groups often experience interactions with local government as encounters with a superior social class whose decisions are not expected to be questioned, which means that even where formal voice mechanisms exist, effective influence remains concentrated among those already well represented in local power structures.

The 'Big Man' and informal authority

The figure of the 'big man', locally referred to as *matabbor*, *nabab*, or *shomaj neta*, community strongmen combining social standing and political connection, is central to accountability dynamics at the Union Parishad level. Big men combine economic resources, status, political access, and a reputation for delivering patronage into an informal authority that runs parallel to, and often overrides, formal local government structures (Kochanek, 2000; Wood, 2000). Their authority rests partly on wealth and political connection, but critically also on cultural norms of social respect that make open challenge both socially costly and personally risky.

Lewis (2011) documents how big men mediate access to state resources, resolve disputes, and provide emergency assistance in ways that create durable dependency. Citizens who benefit from this mediation incur cultural obligations of loyalty and gratitude that constrain their capacity to hold that same individual accountable through formal channels. The accountability relationship is effectively inverted: rather than citizens holding officials to account, officials draw on norms of gratitude and obligation to build client-dependent constituencies that insulate them from oversight.

Landlessness, poverty, and the material basis of deference

The structural basis of deference is importantly economic rather than purely normative. Sobhan (2010) argues that extreme asset inequality, especially in land ownership, fundamentally shapes accountability capacity. Landless and near-landless rural households, a substantial share of the rural population, remain structurally dependent on local elites for access to land, credit, wage employment, and emergency assistance. Demanding accountability from officials who are themselves significant landowners, or closely aligned with them, carries genuine material risk in this context. Ehsan and Kamruzzaman (2019) reach a similar conclusion from a different angle, tracing weak local accountability to resource scarcity and administrative dependency on the Upazila-level bureaucracy rather than to deference norms as a stand-alone cause, a reminder that the cultural and material explanations for elite capture are best read together rather than as rivals.

Fox (2015) draws on multi-country evidence, including Bangladesh, to argue that social accountability mechanisms work best when backed by well-resourced civil society organisations capable of protecting participants from retaliation. Without that protective backing, social accountability processes in highly unequal settings tend to reproduce rather than challenge existing power structures, because the costs of deviating from deference fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable participants.

BUREAUCRATIC CULTURE, ADMINISTRATIVE NORMS, AND ACCOUNTABILITY DEFICITS

Colonial legacies in administrative culture

The administrative culture of Bangladesh's local government bureaucracy carries clear legacies of colonial governance that continue to shape accountability norms today. British colonial administration in Bengal institutionalised hierarchical control, social distance between administrators and the administered, and a governing ethos closer to command than service (Askvik et al., 2011; Jamil, 2007). These dispositions were reinforced during the Pakistani period (1947 to 1971) and have been substantially reproduced in post-independence Bangladesh, adapting to new political circumstances while retaining their core features.

Jamil's (2007) study of administrative culture identifies three dominant norms among civil servants and local officials: orientation toward superiors rather than citizens, a risk-averse disposition that favours procedural compliance over substantive service delivery, and a felt sense of social superiority relative to the rural poor. Together these norms create a structural predisposition against downward accountability, meaning accountability of officials to the citizens they serve, even within a functioning electoral democracy.

Corruption as normalised administrative practice

Corruption at the local government level in Bangladesh is extensively documented (TIB, 2021; World Bank, 2010), but what matters analytically for this review is how far certain corrupt practices have become culturally

normalised within administrative settings, to the point where participants no longer experience them as departures from a legitimate norm but as standard operating procedure. Siddiqui (2000) found that speed money, locally termed *ghush*, for expediting routine administrative services has become so embedded in many local offices that citizens who refuse to pay face indefinite delay, while officials who refuse to accept it face social censure from colleagues.

Aminuzzaman (2010) observes that this normalisation creates a distinctive accountability problem: citizens who experience corrupt officials are reluctant to file formal complaints, not only from fear of retaliation but because they themselves participated in the transaction. This mutual complicity, grounded in normalised administrative culture, produces a collective action problem that formal anti-corruption mechanisms struggle to resolve without also addressing the underlying normative environment.

Centre-periphery relations and accountability distortions

Administrative culture's accountability deficits are compounded by the centralised structure of Bangladeshi public administration. Ahmed (2011) documents how local officials remain heavily dependent on central government for resources, personnel management, and policy guidance, which creates a structural situation in which upward accountability to bureaucratic superiors matters far more for career advancement than downward accountability to local citizens. The prevailing norm within the bureaucracy is to 'face upward', cultivating relationships with district and national officials rather than investing in citizen responsiveness.

Hassan (2013) calls this the 'ruling coalition' logic of Bangladeshi governance: senior civil servants align with whichever party controls national government, exchanging political loyalty for career protection, favourable postings, and rents. Local officials embedded in this system experience accountability to citizens as structurally secondary to accountability within the ruling coalition. Administrative reform that does not address these incentive structures, including the cultural norms that legitimate them, is unlikely to produce durable change in local government performance.

Civil society, media, and counter-normative accountability forces

NGOs and the reframing of accountability norms

Bangladesh has one of the world's most extensive NGO sectors, spanning large organisations such as BRAC and Grameen Bank alongside thousands of smaller community-based groups. This sector has, unevenly but genuinely, served as a counter-normative force in local governance, challenging patronage norms, promoting women's political agency, and building the civic capacity underlying accountability claims (Hossain, 2017; Lewis, 2011).

BRAC's community empowerment programmes have, over decades, built the organisational capacity of poor rural women to engage local government institutions, demand access to public services, and navigate bureaucratic processes without relying on elite intermediaries. Hossain (2017) argues that this NGO-facilitated normative shift, partial and geographically uneven as it is, is one of Bangladesh's most underappreciated governance achievements. The same research cautions, however, that NGO effectiveness in building accountability capacity depends heavily on whether government resources exist for citizens to claim in the first place; where local service budgets are already captured by elites, capacity building can produce informed but disappointed citizens rather than accountable government.

Independent media and investigative reporting

Bangladesh's print and digital media landscape has expanded considerably since the 1990s. Newspapers such as *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*, alongside television and increasingly online platforms, have opened significant new space for exposing local government corruption and misconduct (Riaz, 2016). Investigative reporting on Union Parishad land grabbing, ghost beneficiary lists for social safety net programmes, and embezzlement of development project funds has, in documented cases, prompted official investigation and dismissal.

The significance of this media accountability is symbolic as much as instrumental. When national coverage reaches local official misconduct, it interrupts the cultural normalisation of that conduct by subjecting it to public scrutiny and moral censure. *The Daily Star's* (2023) investigative series on irregularities in local government land records illustrates this dynamic, generating enough public attention to prompt parliamentary questions and government response. Media accountability in Bangladesh nonetheless faces real structural limits: advertiser pressure, political connection, and at times direct government pressure constrain editorial independence and create incentives for self-censorship on stories implicating powerful local actors.

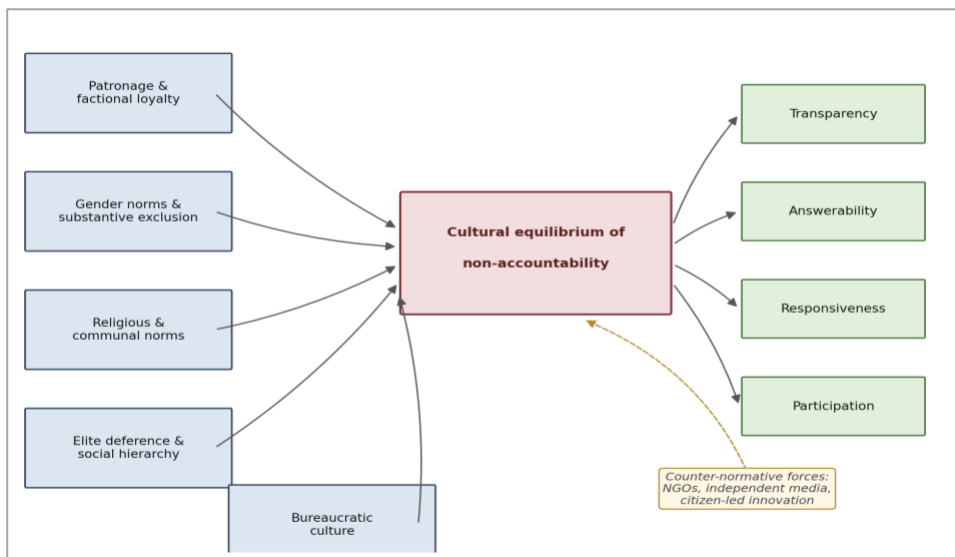
Citizen innovation and digital norm contestation

Beyond formal NGO activity and media reporting, there is evidence of grassroots normative innovation, particularly in peri-urban Bangladesh. Community groups have experimented with citizen monitoring of local government projects, participatory budgeting, and digital complaint platforms that create accountability channels outside the patronage framework altogether (Fox, 2015; Gaventa & McGee, 2013). Social media has given voice to citizens who previously had no accountability platform, occasionally producing viral moments in which local misconduct reaches a national audience.

These innovations represent genuine challenges to prevailing norms of deference and patronage, but their limits are just as real as their promise. Digital platforms do not resolve the material vulnerability of the rural poor, viral exposure is not a substitute for sustained enforcement capacity, and participatory processes operating within a patronage-saturated environment remain at risk of capture or marginalisation. Sustainable transformation of accountability norms requires more than new mechanisms; it requires new normative frameworks that redefine the citizen-state relationship at its cultural foundation, a point picked up directly in the discussion below.

Figure 3

A cultural-political-economy model of local government accountability in Bangladesh



DISCUSSION

Findings in Relation to the Study's Aims

This review set out to answer three questions: through what mechanisms cultural norms shape local government accountability in Bangladesh, how a feminist institutionalist and intersectional reading changes existing accounts of gendered exclusion, and how cultural explanations interact with political economy and institutional design. On the first question, the synthesis identifies five mechanisms operating simultaneously rather than in isolation: patronage supplies the basic relational logic of local politics; gender norms restrict who can plausibly make accountability demands; religious and communal norms create parallel authority structures that absorb disputes before they reach formal channels; elite deference concentrates voice among the already powerful; and bureaucratic culture insulates officials from downward accountability by orienting their incentives upward. None of these five mechanisms is analytically separable from the others in practice, which is itself a finding: accountability reform aimed at any single mechanism in isolation is working against a system, not a single obstacle.

On the second question, this review suggests that the feminist institutionalist distinction between formal and informal rules, and the intersectional attention to how class and minority status modify gendered constraint, together explain a pattern the earlier literature described but did not fully account for: why formal quota expansion in Bangladesh has produced steady gains in representation without a matching gain in substantive influence (Prodip, 2021, 2022). This review's own contribution is to read that gap as an institutional design problem, informal rules unchanged by formal quota, rather than as a residual cultural lag that will close automatically with time.

On the third question, this review suggests that cultural and political economy explanations are complementary rather than competing in every case examined: patronage functions partly as rational adaptation

to fiscal centralisation (Ehsan & Kamruzzaman, 2019); elite deference is grounded partly in land inequality and credit dependency (Sobhan, 2010); and party politicisation reflects both a competitive clientelist culture (Hassan, 2013) and an unresolved decentralisation design that leaves local bodies without independent revenue (Hossain & Habib, 2021). The weight of the evidence reviewed here does not support treating culture as the dominant explanatory factor, which was the earlier draft's principal analytical weakness; it supports treating culture as one interacting variable whose effects are conditional on the institutional and economic environment in which it operates.

Convergence and divergence with prior research

The findings here converge with earlier accounts of Bangladeshi local governance on the basic empirical picture: patronage, gendered exclusion, religious mediation, elite deference, and upward-facing bureaucratic incentive all recur consistently across the reviewed literature, and none of the sources reviewed here seriously disputes their presence (Hassan, 2013; Khan, 2010; Wood, 2000). Where this review diverges from earlier treatments, including its own earlier draft, is in refusing to let cultural description substitute for cultural explanation. Earlier accounts of women's exclusion, for instance, tend to stop at documenting exclusion (Panday, 2011); this review's engagement with feminist institutionalism and intersectionality (Prodip, 2021, 2022; Panday, 2025) pushes further to ask why exclusion persists despite formal reform, and finds that the answer lies substantially in the durability of informal institutional rules rather than in the persistence of cultural attitude alone.

A second point of divergence concerns determinism. Some of the earlier literature on Bangladeshi governance culture, and again the earlier draft of this manuscript, come close to presenting cultural norms as a fixed explanatory bedrock beneath institutional and economic variables. The evidence reviewed here does not support that reading. Ehsan and Kamruzzaman (2019) show that fiscal and institutional design changes, independent revenue authority in particular, would be expected to alter the material payoff structure that currently sustains patronage, regardless of whether underlying cultural attitudes shift at the same pace. This suggests cultural norms are best understood as a variable that is itself shaped by institutional design, not simply a cause that is prior to it.

Toward a cultural political economy of local accountability

Read together, the five thematic clusters and the counter-normative forces reviewed in section 9 point toward what this review terms a cultural equilibrium of non-accountability (Figure 3): a self-reinforcing arrangement in which most actors, most of the time, find it socially and materially rational to act in ways that foreclose effective accountability. This framing carries a direct implication for reform design. If accountability deficits were primarily an institutional design failure, the appropriate response would be institutional redesign alone, stronger oversight bodies, clearer mandates, better financial systems. If they were primarily a resource problem, the appropriate response would be increased public investment alone. Because the evidence reviewed here shows deficits arising from the interaction of culture, institutional design, and resource scarcity, institutional and resource responses are necessary but not sufficient on their own; they require deliberate, parallel engagement with the normative environment in which they will be implemented.

This is not a counsel of despair. The historical record in Bangladesh includes genuine normative shifts: the expansion of women's public participation, however partial; the growing social unacceptability of certain openly discriminatory practices; and the increasing circulation of accountability-demanding discourse through civil society and media. Khan's (2010) political settlements framework suggests normative change is most likely where it aligns with the interests of powerful actors within the ruling coalition, or where counter-normative forces accumulate enough political weight to shift the incentive environment on their own. Hossain and Hickey (2019) add, from cross-national evidence including Bangladesh, that inclusive development norms are most durably established when championed by domestic political actors with genuine organisational stakes in the constituencies they claim to represent, a point with direct implications for how external technical assistance for accountability reform should be designed.

Theoretical contribution beyond the Bangladesh case

While the empirical material here is specific to Bangladesh, the analytical model developed through this review, cultural norms as an interacting rather than determining variable, mediated through political economy and institutional design, and modified by feminist institutionalist attention to the gap between formal and informal rules, is not specific to Bangladesh. It should travel reasonably well to other clientelistic democracies undergoing decentralisation with weak local fiscal autonomy, a category that includes several contexts across South and Southeast Asia and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa where similar patron-client structures, gender quota

systems, and centre-periphery fiscal dependency co-exist (compare the elite capture literature from Pakistan, for example Jacoby et al. (2021), and India, Bardhan and Mookherjee (1999), as cited in comparative reviews of decentralised governance). The specific proposition this review offers for comparative testing is that gender quota reforms will show the representation-influence gap identified here wherever formal rule change is not accompanied by parallel change in the informal institutional grammar of local deliberation, a proposition that is empirically testable outside Bangladesh and does not depend on any claim about Bangladeshi culture being unique.

Implications for policy and practice

The following implications follow directly from the analysis above and are offered as concrete propositions for governance reformers and development partners working on local accountability in Bangladesh:

- Pair fiscal decentralisation with accountability reform. Because patronage functions partly as an adaptation to resource scarcity (Ehsan & Kamruzzaman, 2019), expanding Union Parishad discretionary budgets without simultaneously strengthening oversight risks expanding the scale of patronage rather than reducing it.
- Target the informal rules of deliberation, not only seat composition. Reserved seats for women have not closed the substantive influence gap on their own (Prodip, 2021); interventions should address who controls agendas, financial information, and portfolio assignment within Union Parishads directly.
- Design accountability mechanisms with an intersectional lens. Social audits and citizen scorecards should be assessed for whether they are accessible to landless women, religious minorities, and other multiply marginalised groups, not only to women or the poor as separate categories (Ara & Northcote, 2020).
- Back social accountability mechanisms with protective civil society capacity. Participatory tools introduced without protection from retaliation tend to be captured by existing power holders (Blair, 2000; Fox, 2015); protective backing should be built into programme design from the outset rather than added afterward.
- Invest in independent media and digital complaint platforms as complements to, not substitutes for, formal oversight. These channels interrupt cultural normalisation of misconduct but cannot on their own resolve the material vulnerability that limits sustained citizen engagement (Riaz, 2016).
- Sequence reform around domestic political incentives. Normative change is most durable when championed by domestic actors with genuine organisational stakes in the outcome (Hossain & Hickey, 2019); externally designed reform that bypasses these actors is less likely to hold once donor attention moves elsewhere.

Implications for future research

Several research gaps follow from this review. Fine-grained comparative research within Bangladesh is needed, comparing accountability outcomes across Union Parishads that share similar institutional frameworks but differ in cultural context, economic structure, and civil society density. Longitudinal research on normative change is similarly needed, since most existing studies offer a snapshot of cultural norms at a single point rather than tracking how and under what conditions norms shift over time. The digitisation of local government services and the growth of social media create new empirical terrain for studying accountability that remains only partially explored. Finally, the intersection of cultural norms and legal reform, specifically whether formal changes such as expanded reserved seats for women produce substantive normative change over a longer horizon than existing studies allow, deserves sustained empirical attention, ideally using the feminist institutionalist framework developed in this review as a starting point rather than treating gender as an undifferentiated variable.

CONCLUSION

This review has examined how prevailing cultural norms shape local government accountability in Bangladesh across five interconnected dimensions: patronage and factional loyalty, gender norms and substantive political participation, religious and communal norms, elite capture and social deference, and bureaucratic and administrative culture. Its central argument is that accountability deficits in Bangladesh's local government are not reducible to institutional design failure or resource scarcity alone, nor are they reducible to cultural inheritance alone. They arise from the interaction of all three, producing a cultural equilibrium that defines legitimate authority, sanctions accountability-demanding behaviour, and reproduces existing power arrangements through the normalisation of non-accountability.

Read through a feminist institutionalist and intersectional lens, this equilibrium also helps explain a puzzle that purely descriptive accounts of gendered exclusion leave unresolved: why formal representation gains for women have not produced a matching gain in substantive influence. The answer, this review suggests, lies in the

durability of informal institutional rules that formal quota reform does not automatically change, a finding with direct implications for how future reserved-seat expansion should be designed.

The review also identifies genuine counter-normative forces, the NGO sector, independent media, and citizen-led digital innovation, that challenge this equilibrium and open possibilities for normative change. These forces are not sufficient on their own to transform the accountability landscape, but they demonstrate that cultural norms are not immutable and that sustained engagement with the normative environment can produce meaningful change over time. For governance reformers, the implication is that durable accountability reform in Bangladesh, and in comparable decentralising democracies elsewhere, requires institutional redesign and resource investment to be paired with deliberate normative engagement, rather than treated as a substitute for it.

Acknowledgement

The author(s) wish to acknowledge the scholars, researchers, and institutions whose published works form the foundation of this review. This article draws entirely on secondary sources, and the arguments presented here are built upon decades of empirical research, ethnographic inquiry, and policy analysis conducted by academics and practitioners across multiple disciplines.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethical statement

This study is based exclusively on publicly available documents and did not involve human participants, personal data, or any form of human subject research. Therefore, ethical approval and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval were not required under the applicable institutional guidelines.

Competing interests

There is no perceived, potential, or actual conflict of interest exists.

Author contributions

AS: Conceptualization, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, writing – original draft, critical revision, and final approval of the manuscript. PA: Conceptualization, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, writing – original draft.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of publicly available documents cited throughout the article.

AI disclosure

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to assist with language editing, stylistic refinement, and improving the clarity and presentation of the manuscript. The authors were responsible for all conceptual development, research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of the findings, and the final content of the manuscript.

Biographical sketch

Anupom Sarker holds an MSS in Public Administration and Governance Studies from Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Bangladesh. His primary expertise lies in public administration, governance, and development research. Key research interests include women's political participation and empowerment in local government, gender equality and inclusive governance, anti-corruption and e-governance reforms, and the socio-economic impacts of crises such as COVID-19 on marginalized groups.

Purbasha Acharjee holds an MSS in Anthropology from the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. Her primary expertise is in anthropology and youth-focused development practice. Key research interests include adolescent and young women's reproductive health and rights, engagement with marginalized communities, and youth leadership and community coordination.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note

The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Lectito Publications and/or the editor(s). Lectito Publications and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to persons or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, N. (2011). Decentralization and the local governance system in Bangladesh. In J. Bhattacharya (Ed.), *Local governance in developing countries* (pp. 203–230). World Bank Publications.
- Aminuzzaman, S. M. (2010). Innovation and best practices in local government of Bangladesh. *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, 6, 108–115. <https://doi.org/10.5130/cjlg.v0i6.1680>
- Ara, F., & Northcote, J. (2020). Women's participation in Bangladesh politics: The gender wall and quotas. *South Asia Research*, 40(2), 266–281. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728020916915>
- Askvik, S., Jamil, I., & Dhakal, T. N. (Eds.). (2011/2013). *In search of better governance in South Asia and beyond*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-7372-5>
- Blair, H. (2000). Participation and accountability at the periphery: Democratic local governance in six countries. *World Development*, 28(1), 21–39. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(99\)00109-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(99)00109-6)
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Election Commission Bangladesh. (2021). *Union Parishad election results and gender statistics*. <https://ecs.gov.bd/>
- Ehsan, M., & Kamruzzaman, M. (2019). Fiscal centralisation and the political economy of patronage in Bangladeshi local government. *Public Administration and Development*, 39(4–5), 210–224. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.1860>
- Fox, J. A. (2015). Social accountability: What does the evidence really say? *World Development*, 72, 346–361. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.03.011>
- Gaventa, J., & McGee, R. (2013). The impact of transparency and accountability initiatives. *Development Policy Review*, 31(S1), s3–s28. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12017>
- Goetz, A. M., & Jenkins, R. (2005). *Reinventing accountability: Making democracy work for human development*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hassan, M. (2013). *Political settlements in Bangladesh* (ESID Working Paper No. 22/23). Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre, University of Manchester. https://www.effective-states.org/wp-content/uploads/working_papers/final-pdfs/esid_wp_22_hassan.pdf
- Hossain, A., & Habib, A. (2021). Decentralisation and democratisation in local government: Focusing key development programs in Bangladesh. *Journal of Governance and Development*, 17(2), 1–18. <https://journal.cenraps.org/index.php/cenraps/article/view/58>
- Hossain, N. (2017). *The aid lab: Understanding Bangladesh's unexpected success*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198785507.001.0001>
- Hossain, N., & Hickey, S. (2019). The politics of inclusive development: Interrogating the evidence. In N. Hossain & S. Hickey (Eds.), *The politics of inclusive development* (pp. 1–26). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198835332.001.0001>
- Jahan, R. (2014). *Bangladesh politics: Problems and issues* (New ed.). University Press Limited.
- Jamil, I., Askvik, S., & Dhakal, T. N. (Eds.). (2013). *In search of better governance in South Asia and beyond*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-7372-5>
- Khan, M. H. (2010). *Political settlements and the governance of growth-enhancing institutions* (Research Paper Series on Governance for Growth). SOAS, University of London. https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/9968/1/Political_Settlements_internet.pdf
- Kochanek, S. A. (2000). Governance, patronage politics, and democratic transition in Bangladesh. *Asian Survey*, 40(3), 530–550. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3021155>
- Lewis, D. (2011). *Bangladesh: Politics, economy and civil society*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511997990>
- Mackay, F. (2008). 'Thick' conceptions of substantive representation: Women, gender and political institutions. *Representation*, 44(2), 125–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344890802079607>
- Mahmud, W., Ahmed, S., & Mahajan, S. (2008). *Economic reforms, growth, and governance: The political economy aspects of Bangladesh's development surprise* (Working Paper No. 22). Commission on Growth and Development, World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28039>
- Nazneen, S., & Sultan, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Voicing demands: Feminist activism in transitional contexts*. Zed Books.

- North, D. C. (1990). *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808678>
- O'Donnell, G. (1998). Horizontal accountability in new democracies. *Journal of Democracy*, 9(3), 112–126. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1998.0051>
- Panday, P. K. (2011). Representation without participation: Quotas for women in Bangladesh. *International Political Science Review*, 32(4), 489–512. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512110389222>
- Panday, P. K. (2025). Nested feminisms: How institutional designs shape women's activism in Australia and Bangladesh. *Politics & Policy*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.70096>
- Prodip, M. A. (2021). Exclusion through inclusion: Institutional constraints on women's political empowerment in India and Bangladesh. *World Affairs*, 184(2), 213–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00438200211013017>
- Prodip, M. A. (2022). Cultural obstacles to women's political empowerment in India and Bangladesh: A comparative perspective. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 7(3), 449–465. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891121990742>
- Prodip, M. A. (2025). Gender quotas and women's substantive representation in local-level government in Bangladesh. *Politics & Policy*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.70053>
- Putnam, R. D. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton University Press.
- Riaz, A. (2016). *Bangladesh: A political history since independence*. I.B. Tauris. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350985780>
- Schedler, A. (1999). Conceptualizing accountability. In A. Schedler, L. Diamond, & M. F. Plattner (Eds.), *The self-restraining state: Power and accountability in new democracies* (pp. 13–28). Lynne Rienner.
- Siddiqui, K. (2000). *Local government in Bangladesh* (3rd ed.). University Press Limited.
- Sobhan, R. (2010). *Challenging the injustice of poverty: Agendas for inclusive development in South Asia*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9788132107347>
- The Daily Star. (2022, March 14). Women councillors face barriers in Union Parishad functioning. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/governance/news/women-councillors-face-barriers-2993841>
- The Daily Star. (2023, August 7). Irregularities in local government land records trigger parliamentary questions. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/governance>
- Transparency International Bangladesh. (2021). *Governance trends in Bangladesh local government: Annual survey report 2021*. TIB. <https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/>
- Wood, G. (2000). Prisoners and escapees: Improving the institutional responsibility square in Bangladesh. *Public Administration and Development*, 20(3), 221–237. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.124>
- World Bank. (2010). *Bangladesh country governance assessment*. World Bank Group. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/2931>