

Nagorik Uddyog : Giving Women A Political Voice

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In the recent union elections that spanned Bangladesh, a growing harmony of female voices rang clear above the political chorus. Through the efforts of organizations like Nagorik Uddyog (NU), the women of Bangladesh have become newly aware of the invaluable contribution they can make to the electoral process, and this awareness has left them increasingly emboldened to exercise their franchise. NU is a newly organized non-governmental organization (NGO) which cultivates awareness among the rural citizenry about voting rights, political processes, and women's emerging role as key players in the national electorate. In collaboration with the Madaripur Legal Aid Association - Madaripur, Rupantar - Khulna, and Uddam - Pirojpur, NU trained field level facilitators to educate the illiterate and disenfranchised through open - space theater productions and informational presentations. Although the participants may have been exposed to the economic benefits of credit programs, through NU most were learning about their civic rights, and how effectively to exercise those rights, for the first time.

A typical Nagorik Uddyog union - wide program began with two evening, open - space Jono Goner Pala (Peoples Theater) productions. The folk theater events were attended by groups ranging from 300 to 5000 people and were met with festive anticipation in the host villages. Music, local humor and colorful costumes were used to reinforce the message that an individual vote is a powerful and inalienable right in a democratic society. Due to their late hour and open forum, custom largely prevented women from viewing the outdoor theater productions. To compensate for the proportionately small female audience during these productions, three afternoon presentations were held in the same union the following day. Each presentation (usually in a bari or local schoolhouse) drew an audience of between 30 and 80 women and their children. These presentations included an hour-long discussion and a video screening of the previous night's theater performance.

The afternoon presentations began with a facilitator asking the women to introduce themselves using their own names. The facilitator pointed out that, by identifying themselves with their own names, in a public forum, the women were taking a first important step in asserting their own individuality. This simple act was especially important given the fact that Bangladeshi women are customarily identified not as individuals, but only with terms describing their traditional roles; daughter, wife, or mother.

Having seized their attention, the facilitator directed the focus of the presentation to a colorfully illustrated flip-chart. The hand - drawn pictures portrayed rural Bangladeshi women's situation and multiple roles. The sketches were used to initiate discussions about local government and democracy; women's social position; women's constitutional and international rights; and women's voting rights. The picture that seemed to stir the largest response depicted a Bangladeshi housewife with 10 arms - each

busy with a domestic task including among them, childcare, food production and poultry raising. Following consciousness raising, the facilitator moved on to discuss voter education by highlighting a sketch of a women standing at a microphone campaigning for election. The women's interest was noticeable and some enthusiastically reminded the assembled group that prime Minister Sheik Hasina is a women. "Why shouldn't we run for office?" they asked. Such empowering exchanges were witnessed by the women's children. This next generation of voters would draw on this experience and recognize that women's participation in the electoral process was now the rural rather than the exception.

The participants voiced particular enthusiasm over the facilitator's remark that, though previous elections had been male territory, this election would be different. For the first time, she explained, women were not only expected to vote, they were especially encouraged to run for election. This message catalyzed one women to action. While participants were focused on the video, this women left the public gathering. In small circle next to the schoolhouse she met privately with the village elders and asked the men for their political support. She was the first women in this village to run for a union council position.

As a researcher here to investigate how Grameen Bank women build social capital at the village level, it was especially interesting to me that the most outspoken Nagorik Uddyog participants were women who had been affiliated with NGO credit programs. The women who convened the village elders, for example, was a former Grameen Bank member and center chief. Another women, who was the first to boldly announce her own name in one public gathering, proudly declared her BRAC membership. Thanks to Nagorik Uddyog's innovative civic education initiative, these rural Bangladeshi women found a forum to lift their veils and confidently join in the political dialogue that had previously only valued their silence. NU has done much to encourage the participation of these new voices that are essential as Bangladesh continues to prove its dedication to promote and protect the rights of all its citizens.

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