Women leadership development in local governance in South and Southeast Asia: a critical analysis

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Abstract

Purpose – The main goal of the study is to participate in academic debates and explore women's leadership and related challenges and opportunities in governance, and the extent to which women's leadership has been enhanced by administrative reforms. The goal is to broaden the scope of action by promoting women's engagement and leadership in local government.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a qualitative study that uses inductive content analysis to examine the relationship between administrative reforms and women's leadership development in the context of local government in Southeast and South Asia.

Findings – There is a positive impact of administrative reforms on women's leadership development. There is evidence that women are preparing for leadership roles in administration, which is a sign of progress in political change and modernization of society. They have been empowered by political and administrative education in a transformative way.

Research limitations/implications – This article contributes to the literature that expands knowledge about governance, female leadership and administrative reform. They are interrelated because they are precursors to the development of women's leadership in countries.

Practical implications – The findings of this study can help governments in South and Southeast Asia become more aware of strategies to promote gender balance in governance. The unsatisfactory situation was found to exist because of problems related to socio-political, economic, cultural, and personal development.

Originality/value – This study is the first to highlight the relationship between administrative reform and the development of women in leadership positions in a rarely studied developing country.

Keywords Women empowerment, Governance, Administrative reform, Local administration, South and Southeast Asia, Bangladesh

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The trend toward exploring women's leadership and their role in politics has emerged (Ferdous & Islam, 2021; Holman, 2017; Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci, & Burke, 2017; Sam, 2015), and "[O]ne should undoubtedly appreciate the increasing role of women in decision making" (Ullah, 2017, p. 5). Since the 21st century, attention to gender issues among academics, researchers, and practitioners in governance and administration has increased tremendously (Azizuddin, n.d). Country governments and international development organizsations such as the United Nations (UN), the Organisation for Economic Coperation and Development (OECD), and WB agree on the need to reduce gender inequality by

promoting women's participation in governance and administration. Since its inception, the EU has emphasized gender equality as a fundamental principle and has placed the principle of gender equality at the heart of all its activities (Cretu, 2015).

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) recognizes the importance of incorporating a gender perspective into all levels and processes related to national development strategies and strengthening the role of women in the decision-making process (Hordosch, 2008; Azizuddin, n.d). The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have emphasized the elimination of gender inequality, women's participation in political and administrative leadership and their share in governance and decision-making (Holman, 2017; Sam, 2015; FCM, 2009).

Most countries of the world, including South and Southeast Asia, are parties to all major human rights treaties and major women's conventions, i.e. the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPA) 1995 (Azizuddin, n.d). They require governments to achieve a benchmark of 30% for women's representation in all public decision-making positions (Meaza, 2009; Azizuddin, 2018; Ferdaus & Rahman, 2011). Many governments in countries in South and Southeast Asia have endorsed international instruments to ensure equal participation of women and men in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the country. Considerable efforts have been made to create the "right conditions" for women's development in leadership positions in local government (Kanchoochat & Hewison, 2016; Akirva, 2021, p. 78). However, despite all efforts, women remain underrepresented in administration in developing countries (Ferdous & Islam, 2021; ILO, 2014; Kabir, 2013; UNDP, 2012; Jahan & Rahman, 2011).

Study background
The present literature review reveals a lack of thorough academic studies on female leadership in analytical rigour (Ferdous & Islam, 2021; Kabir, 2013; Mawa, Barry, & Hossain, 2011; Husu, Hearn, Lämsä, & Vanhala, 2010; Rowley, Hossain, & Barry, 2010). To date, academic studies on women in leadership have been fragmented and descriptive (Ullah, 2017). "The rhetoric surrounding such practises has tended to be masculine, and gender has rarely been considered as an element in studies of leadership" (Metcalfe & Altman, 2001). Given that women are underrepresented in leadership positions in government, this may contribute to the paucity of empirical work on female leadership issues related to governance (Husu *et al.*, 2010).

The field of female leadership research is relatively untouched, and the topic has attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners. This study is concerned with the impact of administrative reform on women's leadership development. It asks generally whether administrative reform promotes women's leadership in local government.

Objectives and research questions
The overall goal is to engage in the debate about women's participation in governance. The main objective is to explore the opportunities and challenges of women's leadership development in local government, examining women's leadership development through administrative reform in developing countries. This study identifies two research questions (RQs) as follows.

RQ1. What are the possibilities and challenges of a women's leadership role in governance?

RQ2. How women's leadership capacity is enhanced through administrative reform, examining women's involvement in the local administration?

Thus, this study attempts to answer the two research questions by describing the impact of administrative reform on women's leadership development at the local level in South and Southeast Asia.

The research on leadership with the issues women are generally carried out in the academia, however, studies on the specific issues of women leadership development at local level administration through administrative reform is insignificant. One of the original contributions of this work is initiating debate in academia in relation to administrative reform and gender balance in local administration. This research may be considered as a first-of-its-kind investigation into illuminating connection between administrative reform and women governance leadership development in a rarely studied governance setting of a developing country.

Theoretical overview
Influence of leadership to execute an efficient administration
Leadership is "a collective phenomenon that is distributed or shared among different people, potentially fluid, and contrasted in interaction", instead of "property of individuals and their behaviours" (Denis, 2012, p. 121). It involves an empowerment approach in influencing individuals as well as systems to improve their circumstances (Mary, 2005, p. 106). In their study Denis, Langley and Sergi (2012) describe that forms of leadership imply plurality in one way or another, focusing on sharing leadership in a team, clustering leadership at the top of organizations, spreading leadership across boundaries over time and establishing leadership through interaction (2012, p. 11). In his book Leadership: theory and practice, as Mary (2005, p. 107) describes, two groups of theoretical leadership traits: "trait" and "style" approaches, which focus on the leader's characteristics or behaviours and "contingency" or "path-goal" theory, which focuses on the follower and the context of leadership; and "leader-member exchange theory", "team leadership", "transactional" and "transformational" leadership, which focuses on the interaction and relationship between leader and led (Kinder, Stenvall, Six, & Memon, 2021; Gipson et al., 2017; Northouse, 2001; McKleskey, 2014; Azizuddin, n.d).

Impact of women's leadership on administrative reform
Traditionally, the characteristics associated with leadership are associated with masculinity (Rey, 2005) and women's participation is insignificant. Kabir's (2013) study of women's participation in the South Asian civil service notes that "[a] very insignificant number of women occupy key decision-making positions in the civil service. High entry requirements and certain other prohibitions have discouraged a large segment of the population, especially women, from serving society" (Kabir, 2013, p. 12). The discussion of gendered leadership, that is, whether women have particular leadership characteristics, expresses two opposing views, "there is little difference between women and men" and "women have different leadership styles" (Rey, 2005, p. 4; Gipson et al., 2017; Ferdous & Islam, 2021).

Rey believes that "female attributes can be a source of alternative leadership more appropriate to a new morality" (2005, p. 4). An examination of leadership theories from a gender perspective reveals that a particular style, i.e. transformational leadership attributes, enable women to be effective leaders (Gipson et al., 2017; Rowley et al., 2010). As women increasingly become part of the workforce, adapting an appropriate leadership learning process is an important issue for organizations (Moran, 1992, p. 476). Transformational learning engages women intellectually and emotionally (Kegan, 2000) and changes their assumptions and worldview so that they experience a significant and irreversible shift in their understanding and behaviour (Debebe, 2009, p. 5; Clark, 1993).

Status of women's leadership at South and Southeast Asian countries
Women in South and Southeast Asian countries comprise of half of the population and is considered half of the human resource with a significant gender imbalance (UN, 1995;

ILO, 2014). The most of them are both historically and traditionally patriarchal society. The essential feature which is the domination and supremacy of men and the powerlessness and invisibility of women in sphere of life (Rahim, 2021; Ferdous & Rahman, 2019; Kabeer, 2011). Gender equality and empowerment of women are the key to the UN 2030 Agenda for SDGs and the Community Vision 2025 of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). South and Southeast Asian countries have "committed to achieving women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities in leadership at all levels of public decision-making" (OECD & ADB, 2019, p. 62). Despite the linguistic and cultural differences in South and Southeast Asian nations, they are characterized by a relatively favourable position of women in government and administration (Apriani & Zulfiani, 2020). Although it is claimed that significant development toward gender equity has taken place (Sinpeng & Savirani, 2022), progress has not been as satisfactory. The percentage of women in public administration has increased from 39% in 2000 to 41% in 2020 and women hold 22% in political leadership (UN, 2022). Overall, South and Southeast Asia observed 25% women representation in local government (UN, 2021). Women are making progress, but real opportunities and achievements in local governance and administration are still evolving (Apriani & Zulfiani, 2020). A general region-wise scenario of women representation in local governance can be shown in Figure 1 below.

Like most other developing countries in the South that are enmeshed in a web of autocratic, corrupt, [traditional] religious or military regimes, Bangladesh has repeatedly managed to sidestep the issue of women's rights by resorting to various excuses such as religion, tradition and political stability, etc. (Hasan, 2007, p. 10). Although the constitutional provisions and the country's legal endowment provide a guarantee for women's rights to
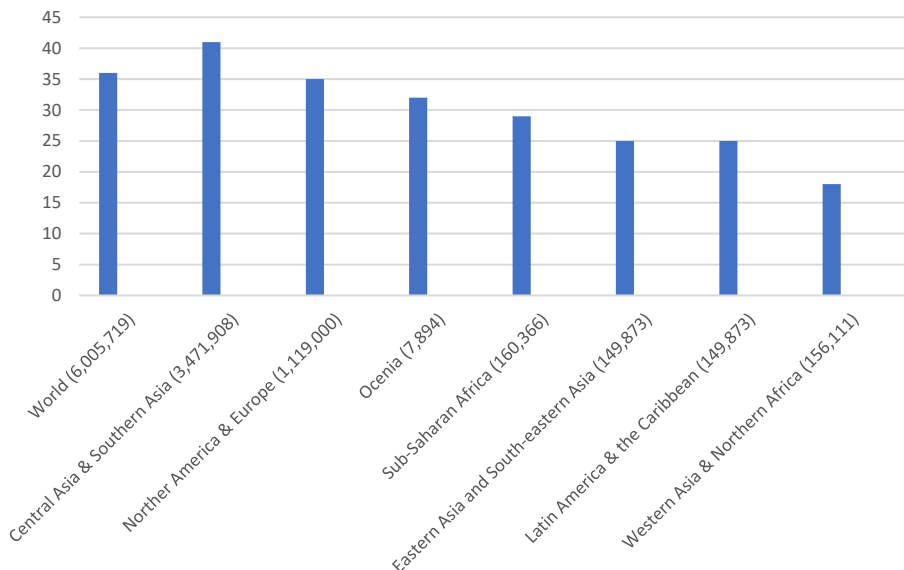

Figure 1.
Population of Women representation in local governance

Note(s): Averages weighted in number of local government members. Number of local governments in the world and each region shown in parenthesis

Source(s): UN (2020). https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Womens-representation-inlocal-government-en.pdf

improve the situation of women, the situation is still unsatisfactory, but it is making progress (Ferdous & Islam, 2021). The reformed legal framework ensures that the country's government and administrative apparatus, whether at the national or subnational level, should include a certain number of women in their work. Many development organizations in the country, such as BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), Grameen Bank, Gono Sahajya Sangstha (GSS) and Association for Social Advancement (ASA), have implemented programmes to strengthen women's social mobilization, increase social status and political awareness (Azizuddin, n.d) (Table 1). The Table shows that the rates in administration, education and medical services are generally increasing at a slow pace, while the rate in politics is remarkably high.

Status of women's leadership on local government and administrative reform in Bangladesh
Bangladesh shares common characteristics representative of other developing countries, such as high levels of poverty, economic dependence, a historical heritage and outdated traditional administrative practices with a male-led administration (Azizuddin, n.d). The country's system of public administration has been handed down from ancient Bengal, British colonial India and post-colonial Pakistan. The current scenario is the result of numerous reform efforts aimed at changing and adjusting the relationships between time and space (Azizuddin, 2018; Rahman, 2010; Zafarullah, 1998). Women's participation in local government and administration is increasing but is still insufficient.

Government and administration in Bangladesh are a two-tier system consisting of national and subnational administration (Azizuddin, n.d). The national administration follows an "orthodox pyramidal pattern" and "is simple in form but complex in style" (Zafarullah, 1998, p. 97). It includes the legislative, executive and judicial branches, with the president as the country's administrative head and the prime minister as the functional head of government. At the national level, there is a central secretariat called "Bangladesh Shachibaloy" that includes ministries and departments for policy and clearinghouse functions (Zafarullah, 1998). The other level consists of departmental directorates attached to ministries and departments, which are mainly responsible for general administration, providing [public] services to citizens and implementing various government development programs at the sub-national level (Ahmed, 2002, p. 327, Kabir, 2013, p. 5).

Upazilas and unions represent the lowest local levels of local government, respectively, and have directly elected local authorities. Upazilas are the traditional "field administration" of the country, reorganized as a lower level of local government and as a local level administrative unit, with a directly elected local administrative authority called "Upazila Parishad", which mandatorily provides for a woman vice chairperson and three nominated women councilors (Azizuddin, n.d). It is a special combination of state administration and local self-government. The Union does not have a full-fledged local administrative apparatus. It had a democratically elected local authority known as the "Union Parishad" in which one-

Year	Admin		Bus & Fin		Edu service		Medi service		Politics	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
2000s	85%	14%	0.83%	0.3%	74%	26%	84%	16%	91%	09%
2010s	78%	22%	1.2%	0.6%	65%	35%	71%	29%	79%	21%
Growth rate	−0.008%	0.057%	0.046%	0.1%	−0.012%	0.035%	−0.016%	0.011%	−0.013%	0.013%

Source(s): Author's calculation in 2021 from different reports of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, http://www.bbs.gov.bd/

Table 1.
Gender-wise
professional scenario
in Bangladesh

third of the council members are women and in which apolitical democracy is practiced (Azizuddin, n.d). They have been reorganized both structurally and functionally through administrative reforms and have made room for women's leadership in local government (Azizuddin, n.d).

The Constitution of Bangladesh and other relevant laws provide a guarantee for the rights of women in the country to improve their situation (GoB, 2009). However, there is a lack of functioning initiatives to strengthen the leadership role of women in the local administration of the country. It was the last quarter of the 19th century and the government of Bangladesh had taken initiatives to formally enable women's participation in governance and administration at the local Upazila level through successive reform efforts by the Commission for Review of Structure of the Local Government, 1993, the Local Government Commission, 1997, the Upazila Parishad Act, 1998, the Public Administration Reform Committee, 2000 and finally the Upazila Parishad (Amendment) Act, 2009 (Azizuddin, n.d). They made recommendations for women's participation in different strata and women could play a significant leadership role in local administration and governance. An intermediate position is that administrative reform is the end point on the path to women's empowerment.

Socio-political activities support the social status of women in the country as a functional unit of government. Administrative reform and government legislation provide opportunities for women to participate in local government and administration (Azizuddin, n.d). Thus, the role of women in the local administrations of Upazila and Union Parishad is clearly visible in the country. Upazila local government is a good example for this study. Upazila is the second lowest level of field administration in Bangladesh with a special combination of state administration and local self-government. It is the central point of local governance where women have the opportunity to play a functional role in local governance and public service management (Azizuddin, n.d).

According to the reform proposals, the Upazila Parishad must have an elected female deputy chairperson and provide for three nominated female representatives in the Parishad (As-Saber & Rabbi, 2009). The Upazila Parishad Handbook (GoB, 2013) ensures that women vice-chairs should chair the Upazila standing committees. They should be from among women of normal social status, directly elected by the local population, and contributing to the available positions through the arrangements made under the administrative reforms (Azizuddin, n.d). It appears that the leadership role of women at the local level has increased as a result of administrative reforms and restructuring in the country (Ferdous & Islam, 2021; Kabir, 2013; Ferdaus & Rahman, 2011). Although they are the direct beneficiaries of the Upazila Parishad 1998 (Amendment) Act, (GoB, 2011), which provides for two elected vice chairpersons, one of whom should be a woman, their leadership role is challenging. Despite the multiple challenges, the entry of women into politics through administrative reform with direct elections has strengthened their right and social legitimacy to participate in decision-making at the local level in politics and administration (Azizuddin, n.d). However, the potential of these changes may be limited by the broader social and political context (Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010).

Study methodology
Research design and approach
This study considers an action research approach, where one of the authors actively participated in the data collection process. During this research, the researcher enters a real-world situation with the goal of both improving it and gaining knowledge (Checkland & Holwell, 2007; Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2002; Azizuddin, 2020). The study resorted to single case was studied and analysed to answer the two identified research questions. As a part of this methodological triangulation, the literary material was used along

with the unstructured interviews and personal knowledge (Polanyi, 1964; Jick, 1979; Platt, 2002; Azizuddin, 2016; Ahmed, Haq, & Bartiaux, 2019). Furthermore, in this study, methodological filters were used to limit the literature through the exclusion of a systematic review (Ferdous, 2023; Ullah, Haji-Othman, & Daud, 2021; Gill & Meier, 2000).

Data collection and validation
In this study, primary data was collected through field survey from 2019 to 2021 through face-to-face interview selected through purposive sampling with two local administrations women leaders working in public administration division. Interviewees were the two women elites, held the position of Women Vice Chairperson at the local administration of *Upazilas* of Bangladesh: *Biswanth Upazila* under the district of Sylhet and *Gobindagonj* Upazila under the district of Gaibandha in Bangladesh during 2009-2014 and 2014-2019 respectively. Their answers were recorded in their native language. The first author became acquainted with the research participants through his previous research and gained access to them with the help of respective Upazila administrative chiefs known as UNO. Demographically, the interviewees were moderately educated and politically active, whilst also being homemakers, middle-aged and married females from traditional middle-class Muslim society in Bangladesh.

Results analysis
In the era of modernization and globalization, women's empowerment and participation in good governance and local administrative reform will have positive impacts on society in terms of equality, equity and development. Opinions from research participants in leadership also reveal a positive link between women's leadership and administrative reform. Some excerpts from respondents' case studies are below.

Case A: Biswanath Upazila Parishad, Bangladesh
Ms. "A" was a directly elected Vice Chairperson of *Biswanath Upazila Parishad* formed in 2009. She is in her late 40s, from an ordinary family of traditional and cultural values with a high school graduate. Her husband has an involvement in local politics with a connection to a national political party. She has an affiliation with the women's wing of that political party. Thus, she gained the nomination from that party to contest the election and finally secured the position.

In an interview, she describes her situation as, ". . .. it was something almost unthinkable for me that I would be in local governance as an elected Vice Chairperson. It was my husband who encouraged me to contest in the election for vice chairpersonship."

> . . .. I discovered myself as a stranger in the *Upazila Parishad* as all the members of the *Parishad* are male except the three nominated women members. I had been treated as a nominated member by others although I had been placed as a president on the different committees by the provisions of the respective government Act.

> . . .. I was not acquainted with the rules and regulations of the *Upazila* governance as I did not have formal higher education and orientation of governance. It was very difficult for me to handle the situation and I was almost dependent on my male colleagues on the committees. Having said this, I continued! (transcribed from (Sylheti- local dialect) Bengali to English).

Case B: Gobindhagonj Upazila Parishad, Bangladesh
Ms. "B" secured the Vice Chairship position of *Gobindhagonj Upazila Parishad* in 2009. She is in her late 30s, from an ordinary family of traditional and cultural values with a college

graduate. She has been in politics from her studentship, being a member of the student wing of that party, where her father was an active politician as a local council member. Her connection with the party helped to secure her nomination as a candidate of the party to contest in the *Upazila* election. She won the election with a popular majority. She was the youngest member of the *Parishad* and served the community from 2009-2014 working in local governance. In her language, she pronounces her experiences as,

> . . . it was a target in my life that I would be active in politics and serve the community. I was involved in politics throughout my college studentship. I got the learning of politics from my father who was a local councilor of a local *Union Parishad*.

> . . . though I left my studies and get involved in family life. I do maintain political activities keeping in touch with the local women's wing of a national political party. I could not do much community work actively as I have family commitments.

> . . . the provisions of administrative reform for a women's vice chairship paved the way and inspired me to lobby for nomination from the party. My family supported me socially and financially.

Although the scenarios are different, there are indeed similarities. They come from different regions of the country. Both female vice-chairmen are included in the local administration through the provisions of the administrative reform that one vice-chairman should be a woman, along with three nominated female members in the Upazila Parishad. They come from simple traditional family backgrounds. Both politically and socially, they were inferior to male members of political parties, but were favoured by senior male political leaders. They had difficulty exercising their leadership roles in local government because they were new to the position and had no previous experience in local government.

Influence of women leadership in local administration
Leadership and decision-making at the local level has traditionally been in the hands of men in developing countries. This is evident in South Asia and Bangladesh. Participation in decision making in local government has been a dream for women in Bangladesh. While there are women in politics and administration in the country, their numbers are small, and they are not active as they have a "nominated" status. Those who are active in national politics have mainly "inherited" their involvement, they are favoured by male party leaders and belong to the upper and wealthy stratum of society both economically and socially. Ordinary women have poor access to politics and the community to exercise political and administrative leadership roles because they have less experience in public life. Male-dominated politics and political parties have tendencies to discriminate against women. They seek to take undue advantage of women who want to participate in government work. The administrative reform has ensured that women can participate in politics and take part in local government by running in local elections –a political education for them through "learning by doing" to develop women's leadership skills.

Influence of knowledge and skills gaps in women's leadership
The role of women in a society like Bangladesh is mostly culturally determined, and all normative issues are culture-bound, with a "collectivist" phenomenon (Rowley *et al*, 2010). As a predominantly Muslim society, women's agency in Bangladesh has historically been largely limited. Of course, the complex interplay between religious ideology and practice, political movements and state policies, and the processes of economic and social change is intimately linked to women's lives. Above all, family and kinship structures play a crucial role. This has given rise to the "culture of lobbying" that enables women to become involved and active in the local governance of the country (Hofstede, 2005). Married women's family life often prevents

them from devoting their time and energy to community service. Generally, they need their family's approval to participate in many activities and have limited access to certain political, educational and economic assets. The dual roles of providing for the family and supporting the community are barriers to active participation in local governance.

Discussions and implications

From the previous study results, it is clear that good public administration in all areas of a country is necessary for sustainable growth. Although the current state of public administration in Bangladesh is unsatisfactory in terms of women's participation in leadership positions, it can be improved by implementing strategies such as ensuring that the recruitment system is free from illegal political interference, prohibiting politicization, eliminating corruption, improving capacity to implement policies, promoting local governance and improving sectoral governance. Other critical steps for sustainable and efficient administration include effective and strong female leadership and improving institutional capacity.

In Bangladesh, a number of women have overcome challenges and reached top positions in public administration, especially in local government. However, there is little research on what happens to these women when they reach higher levels of leadership. Do they face new problems despite their success? There are strong arguments that women in leadership positions in local government are evaluated less favourably than men, receive less support from their peers, are excluded from important networks and face more scrutiny and criticism, even when they perform the same leadership roles as men. Faced with these hurdles, women in leadership positions have an uphill battle.

From this study, it is clear that women in leadership positions in Bangladesh face various challenges in managing local authorities. Since women in traditional societies such as Bangladesh are mainly responsible for household chores, participating in local governance and assuming a leadership role means a double responsibility for them. To overcome the existing challenges, the respective government departments should take training initiatives with the support of academicians in the field of governance, development practitioners and experienced local government administrators. At the local government level, there should be an active training department that identifies training needs and conducts regular refresher training for council and committee members, including women. Mentoring and peer group support can be seen as useful tools for leadership training in this context (Azizuddin, n.d). Newcomers to local councils and committees can take classes and receive support to help them perform well in their roles as emerging leaders. This can be an opportunity to engage in the leadership role through "learning by doing" (Azizuddin, n.d).

The participation of elected women members in local government bodies is largely minimal, as they are not assigned special roles. One of the most essential things to explore in the fight for women's empowerment is their involvement in decision-making. Empowerment is a valuable notion because it emphasizes the idea of women as active agents in, rather than passive recipients of, development methods. As a result, participation is regarded as a necessary first step in empowering women. This study also noticed that systematic inclusion of women strengthens the democratic foundation and efficiency. If local government is to address the requirements of both men and women, it must build on the experiences of both men and women by ensuring equal representation at all levels and in all disciplines of decision-making across a wide variety of responsibilities.

Conclusions

The study provides a qualitative answer to two research questions. The study shows that the development of women in leadership positions is underway and that ordinary women are being prepared for leadership roles in administration. A positive relationship was found

between administrative reform and the development of women in leadership positions, which is a sign of progress in professional status. This is a sign that women are making progress in social modernization in addition to their traditional role as housewives (Azizuddin, n.d). It was an opportunity for ordinary women to gain power and participate in the decision-making process of local administration and governance in the country. They were empowered with political and administrative education through transformation experiences (Debebe, 2009), learning from experiences that are the heart of practical wisdom (Rhodes, 2016). However, the unsatisfactory situation is based on social, political, economic, cultural and personal development issues such as socialization, career structures and scheduling combined with the traditional male-dominated gender roles prevalent in society that prevent women from advancing to leadership positions in the community.

Although the study is based only on qualitative information with a small sample size, the research can contribute to the literature on public administration, governance and local government and provide an understanding of local governance and women's development in public administration with a micro-focus on South Asian Bangladesh (Azizuddin, n.d). The small sample size raises the possibility of a lack of representativeness of the population. On the other hand, respondents often indicated that they reported what they had discussed with their subordinates and colleagues at work. Therefore, we can assume that the research findings reflect the perspectives of a larger group of women in local government in Bangladesh. The study has broader implications for public administrators and governments in South and Southeast Asia, as well as in countries with similar socioeconomic situations around the world, as it provides information on local governance and women's leadership development (Azizuddin, n.d).

Women's leadership development in local governance across Southeast Asia has witnessed significant strides in recent years. Efforts to empower and uplift women within the political sphere have led to increased representation and participation at the grassroots level. Through targeted training, mentorship programs and advocacy initiatives, women leaders are gaining the skills, confidence and support needed to effectively address community issues, promote inclusive policies and drive sustainable development. As these women continue to break barriers and assume leadership roles, they are not only shaping more equitable and responsive local governments but also inspiring future generations to actively engage in shaping their communities.

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