



Helvetas/K. M Asad

APARAJITA: WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT IN BANGLADESH

Undefeated, invincible, unified, empowered and free are a few words voiced by the women who call themselves Aparajitas in Bangladesh. Who are they? They are over 9,000 women engaged in local governance and politics, supported by the Aparajita project, across 540 unions, 62 Upazilas, 16 districts, 6 divisions, between 2018-2024 .

THE BACKGROUND

In partnership with the Government of Bangladesh and guided by the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations, the Swiss Cooperation Programme complements the support for more trade and direct foreign investments with the promotion of key values such as good governance and respect of human rights to ensure sustainability, including for economic growth.

Democratic governance, human rights, quality basic services and targeted social protection of particularly vulnerable groups remain key pillars of Swiss cooperation. This means working with drivers of change such as women and youth, and strengthening civil society voices and participation to provide important political and societal checks and balances, which are key for sustainability and for leaving-no-one-behind. Hence, by focusing on women's political empowerment, **the project contributes to enhancing equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making.** This leads towards a more equitable governance system at the local level, where and when citizens can hold institutions accountable and voice their needs and interests with more confidence.

THE PARTNERS

Bilateral cooperation and partnership between Switzerland and Bangladesh started 50 years ago.

The **Aparajita project**, is a 14 year investment of the **Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation (SDC)**, and an alliance of implementing partners in Bangladesh.

- [Phase 1, from 2010-2015](#)
- [Phase 2, from 2015-2017](#)
- [Phase 3 \(final\), from 2018-2024](#)

The partners:

- [Democracywatch](#) (All phases)
- [Khan Foundation](#) (All phases)
- [PRIP Trust](#) (All phases)
- [STEPS Towards Development](#) (Phases 1-2)
- [Rupantar](#) (Phase 3)
- [Helvetas](#) (Phase 3 – taking over management from SDC)

All partners share in their unwavering commitment to inclusion, equality and equity, and complement each other with long term expertise enhancing democratic accountability, women's leadership, and civic & political rights and participation.



Harnessing the power of networks: a meeting of Aparajitas in Rangpur.

THE PROGRAMME LOGIC

Aparajita's **overarching goal** is to contribute to the equal participation, representation and leadership of women within local government institutions. Achieving this goal, relied on realizing three key outcomes:

Outcome 1: Potential and elected women representatives effectively participate in local government institutions and local governance processes in the selected districts.

Outcome 2: Influentials, men, and local institutions support the effective inclusion of women in local political life in the selected districts.

Outcome 3: Improved policy and legal framework and attention to hindering and enabling factors at the national level accelerates the political empowerment of women.

Our Theory of Change

To achieve the goal and objectives of Aparajita, changes are required at the individual, societal and the structural level. Overall systemic change, relies on addressing the specificities of each level, while leveraging their interconnectedness, both vertically and horizontally. The theory of change can be described as follows along these three interlinked levels and types of change:

If women have capacity, knowledge, and are networked, **then** more women will have the confidence, skills, resources, and agency to engage effectively in local governance, democratic processes and political debate. **(Individual change / Power within)**

If more families, communities, public and private service providers, local authorities are aware of and understand the social and economic benefits of gender equality, women's public and political participation, **then** there will be more positive examples and therefore positive perceptions of publicly and politically active women, and support for women's civic and political engagement will increase. **(Societal change / Power with)**

If more women are included in political parties, are elected and in leadership positions, **then** women will be able to influence policies and laws, and structural barriers will start to be removed. **(Structural change / Power to)**



Dialogue between Aparajitas and political leaders in Rangpur.

AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE & POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT: THE 5 C'S

The 5 C's are the necessary conditions for the effective and meaningful participation of women in politics, not only to enter the political arena, but remain in it.

CONFIDENCE	CHILD/CARE	CASH/ CAPITAL	CULTURE	CONSTITUENCY/ CANDIDACY
Self-empowerment/ individual change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self worth • Awareness of own rights • Sense of purpose • Having the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources • Having a support system, a network, sense of security 	Social empowerment/ relational change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having recognition for unpaid work • Being able to reduce • Being able to redistribute • Having support from family and community 	Economic empowerment/ social change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being financially literate • Being financially included • Having decision making on finances • Having access to income and/or financial support/ services (informed and responsible) 	Cultural empowerment/ norms change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender norms are more inclusive, equal and equitable • Social inclusion, participation and cohesion are more the rule than the exception • Perceptions, attitudes and behaviours are more open to women in leadership, public and political spheres 	Political empowerment/ structural change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More representational than partisan politics • Quotas or reserved seats are not needed • Women candidates have equal opportunity as male counterparts, to be supported and promoted by both their political party and voters • Media portrays women candidates fairly, and objectively • Gender-based violence free elections



Aparajitas have built a strong connection and learned to support one another.



“For proper implementation of existing policy and legislative provisions and for bringing about changes in policies, practices and attitudes, political goodwill is a must for women's (political) empowerment”. Is the headline of a newspaper of March 2023 reporting on a dialogue session between Aparajitas and political leaders.

WHERE WE WORK ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE & POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT IN BANGLADESH

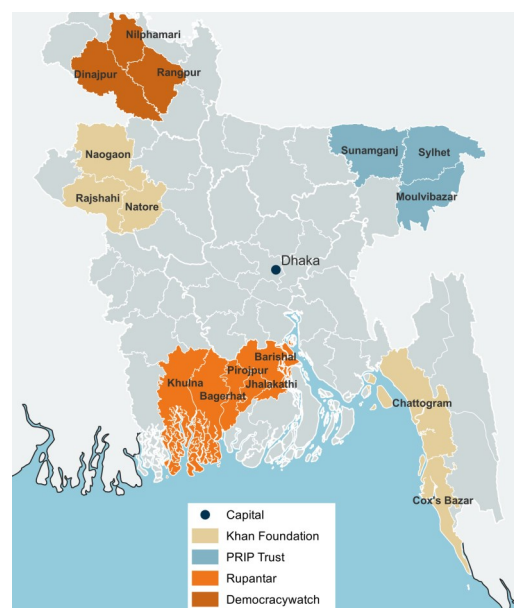


Helvetas/Zayed Siddiki

Aparajitas preparing for a meeting with local authorities in Rangpur.

Some Key Organizational Learnings and Good Practices:

- Striking a balance between wide coverage and concentrating enough to remain efficient, effective, and impactful, not spreading resources too thin.
- Regional units help coordination while reducing high overhead costs.
- While assigning regional responsibilities to each partner is effective, important to have mechanisms in place to avoid working in silo.
- Ensuring the composition of staff is representational of the localities where the project works is key for trust and relationship building with all stakeholders.
- Striking a balance between valuing the complementary areas of expertise between partners, while ensuring to invest throughout the implementation in joint capacity and knowledge development, sharing of experiences and tools, to ensure minimum quality standards and coherence.
- Striking a balance between continuing to work with the same group of primary stakeholders over many phases while integrating new stakeholders over time for more diversity and social inclusion.
- Linking and coordinating from the outset, throughout the project cycle, with similar projects and development partners supporting same or complementary sectors for more impact, scale, and sustainability.
- It is important to strategically and occasionally reach out to and involve boundary stakeholders, especially government and political actors, who may become secondary or even primary stakeholders over the course of the project life cycle e.g. government staff turnovers, elections etc. This mitigates being confronted by a 'new power', which is not aware of or familiar with the project during its implementation, which can lead to important delays or even interruptions.
- Integrate contingency planning, (co-shaped with the primary stakeholders) and have a pre-agreement with the donor(s) on reallocation of budget ad activities, in case of a crisis, whether short term or protracted.



540 UNION PARISHADS
62 UPAZILAS
16 DISTRICTS
6 DIVISIONS (2018-2024)

ABOUT THE CONTEXT

Despite the existing policies and legal provisions, and the country being headed by women for the last 33 years, women have not yet gained significant representation in national and particularly in sub-national political institutions, nor influence in decision making of the political parties. This is mostly due to the patriarchal social structures reinforced by religious, economic and political norms, which associate leadership with men, discourage women from entering the political arena and view political positions for women rather as a privilege than a right. The rise of religious extremism may contribute to further discouraging women from engaging politically. The latter translates into aggressive even violent election periods and processes, exacerbated by online hate speech and harassment. Despite the Representation of the People Order (RPO) which calls for political parties to include at least 33% women, women engaging in public and political spheres in Bangladesh continue to face not only gender bias, and various forms of discrimination, including financial, but also various forms of psychological and physical attacks, sometimes even from their own family or political party. This is why, Aparajita in name, in spirit and in practice, is significant in what it stands for, which is Undefeated.

OUTCOME 1

Power within

Potential and elected women representatives effectively participate in local government institutions and local governance processes in the selected districts.

Results Outcome 1

Tapping into and nurturing the 'power within' each individual Aparajita, and the power within and between the Aparajita networks supported across different levels, especially at community, [Union Parishad](#) and [Upazilas](#) (sub-district) levels.

- 9300 women participated and were supported to become Aparajitas.
- Aparajitas are diverse and inclusive in age, gender identity, caste, ethnicity and religion, educational attainment, economic status, political affiliation.
- 1096 Aparajitas were further strengthened to become leaders, networkers, advocates and paralegals.
- Over 600 interlinked networks formed from local to national level.
- Aparajitas self organized over 2000 coordination, planning and strategic meetings at their respective network levels.



Sushanna Rani, an Aparajita from Dinajpur district is ready to speak up.

Key Insights Outcome 1

Identify and tap into the Power Within that already exists. That is why it is the Power Within, it is innate, albeit dormant or latent, but it is there to be awoken and given the space and opportunity to grow and expand, and become self powered, self-empowered, self-sustaining, undeniable and undefeatable.

- Key is to identify those women whose inner strength and resolve are ready to be tapped into: if the women are willing to participate in a project, which challenges gender, religious, family, social and political norms, it is a good sign their inner power is ready and waiting to be ignited.
- Role models, mentoring and 'not feeling alone' are key to inspire and incentivize women to engage, to participate and to continue in the face of adversity.
- It is important to continue accompaniment, coaching and mentoring of Aparajitas and more generally elected women also after they are elected. Peer-led approaches are encouraged. 422 Aparajitas are acting mentors and 1030 are trained facilitators.
- Networking networks of women, across sectors and levels is key. While strengthening core groups initially is very important, as important is to eventually link those different groups with each

Level	Number of Networks	Number of Aparajitas
Union	540	8804
Upazila	62	1199
District	16	336
Division	6	102
National	1	28

other, but also others, not directly supported by the project for scale and sustainability.

- It is important to facilitate networking and networking of networks early enough, to ensure there is enough time to build the level of trust, self organization, and coordination required to be more sustainable post project completion.
- As a project, it is important to facilitate and support groups and networks in a politically neutral manner, and safeguard their independence and ownership by the network members themselves, to not be over reliant on, co-dependent, or even sub servant to the project.
- Focusing on issues and priorities of common concern, erases socially or politically constructed barriers and lines, between the Aparajitas first, and the Aparajitas and other women, stakeholders, strengthening their solidarity, resilience and invincibility.
- This universal commitment to unity supersedes individualism, making it much harder to divide and conquer: *United we stand, divided we fall*, one of the mottos/ affirmations the Aparajitas use.
- A testament to this are the many examples of Aparajitas abstaining from running for election themselves, instead uniting and supporting the Aparajita who they viewed as best placed to win from among them.



Learning the importance of networking in advocacy.

OUTCOME 2

Power with

Influentials, men, and local institutions support the effective inclusion of women in local political life in the selected districts.

Results Outcome 2

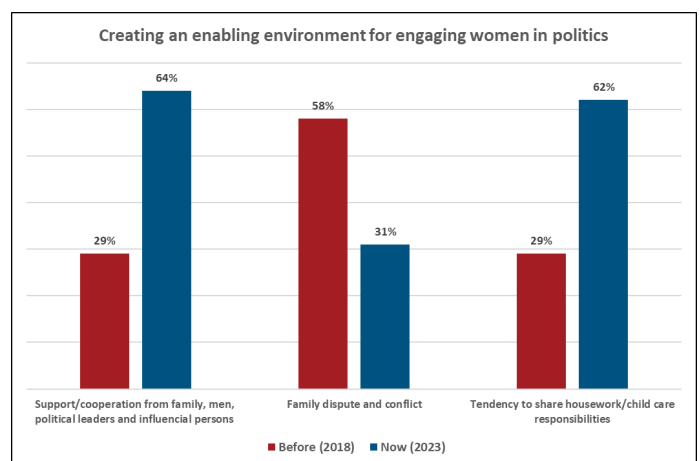
With support from family, influential men and elders, political parties, and communities, Aparajitas gain the 'power with' they require to stand for election and grow their constituency to back their candidacy.

- In 2016, only 37 Aparajitas contested in elections for general seats, while in 2021-2023 period, 103 contested.



Nasima Kabir campaigning to convince male voters in Khulna district.

- In 2016, only 6 Aparajitas contested for 'chairman' positions, while in 2021-2023 the number grew to 26. 12 women won.
- Overall, since 2016, the number of Aparajitas contesting for reserved seats increased by 21%.
- Support from family increased two fold, while family conflicts and disputes decreased almost by 50%.
- Aparajitas' participation in local governance and decision making processes has increased by 60%. These include community committees as well Union Parishad Standing Committees, and [Union Development Coordination Committee](#) (UDCC) meetings.
- Male chairmen, local authorities and public servants/service providers confirm that Aparajitas support them to better fulfil their mandate, that they are better aware of community's needs, and that the communities are more socially and economically engaged as a result.
- Where Aparajitas are active, women, youth, girls and other more marginalized community members are also participating more in community meetings and decision making processes.



Key Insights Outcome 2

Power dynamics can shift from power over to power with. This happens when there are mutual benefits between Aparajitas and their families, between Aparajitas and local authorities or public servants, and other 'power holders'.

- Without social capital, meaning being socially engaged, and having a certain degree of social visibility and recognition, it is difficult to become politically engaged and supported.
- Important not to compromise the voluntary, independent, and innovative initiatives of these



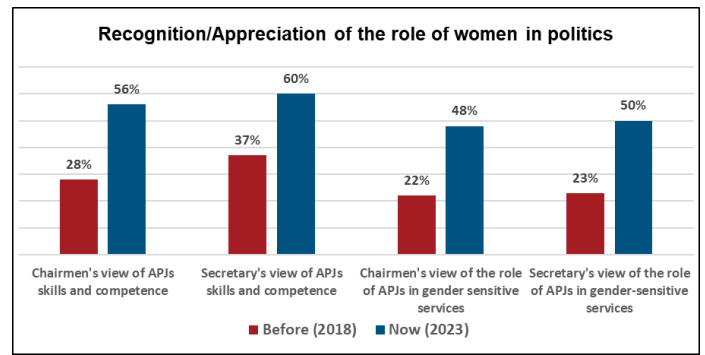
Aparajitas meeting a government officer in Rangpur.

women with project logic, funds and other resources.

- Engaging the family, not only the men is important. On one hand, it is not always only the men who may not be supportive, but can also be other influential family members or elders with more traditional or conservative positions. Engaging the family also enhances the probability reducing time poverty and unpaid care work, through redistribution among family members, which can impact a woman's participation, mobility and/or resilience in pursuing her candidacy.
- While it is very positive that many husbands and families end up supporting the Aparajita financially, this still limits her independence in pursuing her public or political aspirations.
- It is key to include a component of financial literacy and inclusion when supporting women's political participation. Having economic independence avoids reliance on spouses/family, as well the political parties who continue to fund and support more male candidates. It puts the women candidates on more equal footing with their male counterparts.
- Fostering responsible partnerships with the private sector can contribute to the financial independence of the Aparajitas and the sustainability of certain initiatives, or networks through different forms of sponsorship, like for campaign posters, mobile communications, transport, special events.
- Enhancing information access about and links with local financial institutions, helped to promote the financial inclusion and economic activity of many Aparajitas, who started their own small business, which helped subsidize their civic and political activities.
- Engaging local authorities, political parties, elected male counterparts, committees early enough and regularly is key to raising their awareness, while increasing their capacities and knowledge. This enhances their readiness, willingness and ultimately ownership to be more inclusive, and

promote better governance and more democratic accountability.

- Positioning the Aparajitas as "useful" and beneficial to the work of local authorities, male chairmen, public servants, instead of a threat, was key in gaining support from these for the Aparajitas and more broadly women's public and political participation, not to mention improving local governance systems and processes.
- The Aparajitas were able to directly improve good governance because of their attention and commitment to community needs, participation and information access.
- With improved good governance, the legitimacy and therefore the "popularity" of the public servants or elected officials were increased alongside the recognition and acceptance of the Aparajitas who stayed committed to their agenda and the priorities of the communities they were a part of: win/win.



OUTCOME 3

Power to

Improved policy and legal framework, and attention to hindering and enabling factors at the national level, accelerates the political empowerment of women.

Results Outcome 3

With confidence, voice and agency, the Aparajitas have the power to influence and to advocate, on behalf of themselves, their constituents and others.

- Gender responsive budgeting was lobbied for successfully in several Unions.
- Aparajitas successfully advocated for 3% of the Annual Development Program (ADP) budget allocation to the Women's Development Forum.
- Aparajitas campaigned for the implementation of the Representation of the People Order (RPO) provision that at least 33% of registered political party committee members are women.
- Aparajitas raised awareness on the existing legal framework and people's rights related to Gender based violence, including child/early and forced marriage; dowry, and domestic violence among others.



Demanding the application of laws on women's representation in parties

Key Insights Outcome 3

Women's political empowerment is not limited to women pursuing politics. Women leaders across sectors can both benefit from and contribute to women's political empowerment. This is why linking women leaders beyond the political sphere is important for women to have and share power with each other, to have power to mobilize, influence and change society, policy and structures to be more inclusive, equitable and just for all.

- Linking with the government and public/private sector including Departments of Women's Affairs, and/or the Women's Chambers of Commerce contribute to more government backed actions, including improving access to services, not only for women, but the communities they are a part of.
- Linking and networking with other women's networks, associations, organizations, and leaders from across sectors, including MPs, CEOs, lawyers, doctors etc. is key. This can and does lead to mutual benefits, including mutual capacity and resource development.
- Important to do this as early as possible, for trust and sustainability building, while paying attention to maintaining the independence of the Aparajitas. This is to mitigate the 'hijacking' of the Aparajitas' agendas and followers, by 'more powerful or influential women.
- Linking the Aparajitas with lawyers was important to enhance their understanding and analysis of laws. This helped them to better know how to use these laws and/or promote their implementation, or in the case of discriminatory laws/policies, how and what to lobby for in their review.
- Advocacy topics need to be prioritized and jointly agreed for more coordinated advocacy initiatives from local to national level and across target areas. If there are too many advocacy topics and too many isolated initiatives, the investment and results risk being diluted, scattered and not noticeable enough to build the momentum and attention required for successful, influential and impactful advocacy.
- When dialogue and advocacy are issue based and not politically or religiously driven, it helps to stay focused on social priorities and advancing all women's public and political participation, no matter their political or religious or other affiliations. This in turn also strengthens the outcomes and the resilience of the Aparajitas' and similar networks of women.

- **Political Economy and Power Analysis (PEPA)** helps to better map, identify and leverage entry points, optimize opportunities, and manage risks, by deepening and expanding the pool of stakeholders with interests, influence, will and power to navigate complex contexts and sensitive issues. PEPA helps to challenge what we think we know, and therefore broaden our perspectives and options.

HOW PEPA WORKS

By **making the invisible visible**, PEPA helps to better understand the reality of the local context.

- Based on this information is possible to:
- Better grasp potential implications
- Make ideas explicit on how to steer change
- Experiment, see what works and what doesn't, adapt

To better define programming priorities, influence, solve problems, manage and minimize risks.



What is 'below the water'

- The role of structural factors in shaping incentives and constraints to what is possible
- The role of formal and informal institutions (rules of the game) in shaping human interaction and political and economic competition
- Drivers of political behaviour
- How political behaviour shapes particular policies/ programmes
- Who are the main winner/losers
- Distribution, organisation, contestation of power/ resources
- Drivers/inhibitors of development

<https://somaha-stiftung.ch/en/transparent-and-effective-governance-helvetas-knowledge-series/>



Tahmina Khatun, grassroots woman leader from Rangpur.

CROSS CUTTING KEY INSIGHTS

Added Value

The Aparajitas, Helvetas and the partners introduced innovations and initiatives not originally planned, which added value and enhanced results across all three outcomes.

1) Information and Connection

Information and connection are key, for the Aparajitas themselves but also between the Aparajitas and their constituencies. The added value benefits include:

- More inclusive and reliable information about social, economic, environmental and/or political issues for all.
- Aparajitas can own more what is communicated about them and how; author their own narrative, counteracting misinformation about them or defamations against them.
- Broader outreach and potential for enhancing their profile and therefore constituent base.
- Broader alliance building and therefore more support, protection, and agency of Aparajitas.
- Journalists and the media benefited from having stories to report on, which are of interest to their followers. This resulted in win-win benefits, whereby the journalists gain easier access to content for their work, they can increase their popularity with their audience, while the Aparajitas and the broader benefits of women's public and

political participation are more reported on and therefore known. All journalists interviewed confirmed that they will continue their collaborations with Aparajitas after the project concludes, because it helps them in their work, their audience likes the stories, and the issues they raise are important.

What did the Aparajitas do:

- They launched their own Messenger & WhatsApp group platforms, which they use to share information, ask for and provide advice to each other, signal security issues or other problems, and more.
- The project did support digital literacy and safeguard awareness raising in light of online risks and digital harms including online harassment, stalking, defamation, misinformation and violence.
- They networked their networks, and with other networks; creating a directory of contacts, for referrals, for support, for mobilization, outreach and coverage at different levels.

What did the Partners do:

- The project facilitated awareness raising among media actors and linking journalists to the Aparajita networks at different levels. 250 journalists were engaged through various outreach events.

APARAJITA ON AIR

The Covid-19 pandemic limited the possibility of organizing awareness raising session, therefore partners came up with the idea of launching a **radio program** called **Nari Kotha** (women’s voice), which featured Aparajitas and their stories, their engagement in social causes, community affairs and improving services for their constituencies.

The radio program was highly successful. The episodes were always interactive, informative, and covered women’s, men’s & youth perspectives, issues and experiences. Overall over **668,000 listeners (50 per cent women, 29 per cent men, and 21, per cent young women and men)** check-in via project events, but especially the radio program on YouTube and Facebook channels. The radio program reached residents in all working districts, 10 key cities and more in Bangladesh, and even found listeners in India, Malaysia, the UK, Denmark and the USA among others.



The poster of the Nari Kotha radio program.

Reduction in Gender-Based & Domestic Violence

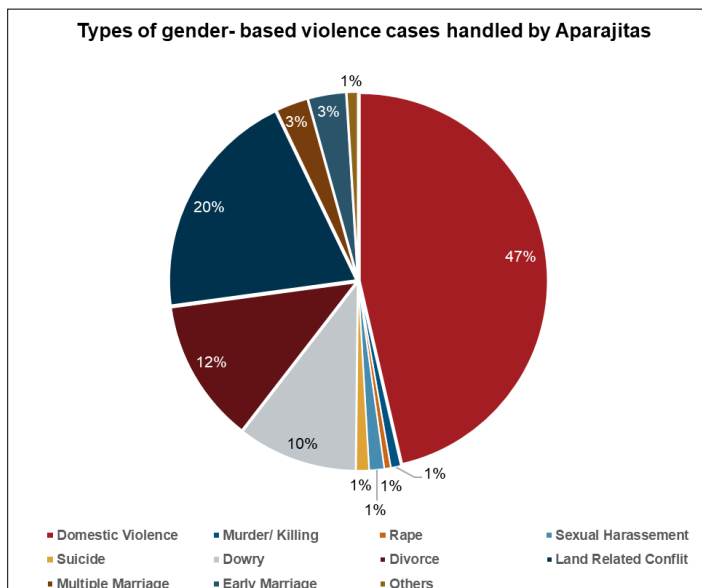
Unfortunately Bangladesh like many countries around the world faces high instances of different forms of Gender Based and domestic violence. Many Aparajitas engaged in actions and initiated activities in their communities to mitigate and/or respond to this violence, and did so successfully.

- Between 2019-2023, 14,772 cases/ incidents were intervened on by Aparajitas
- The types of violence Aparajita’s reported to be most prevalent, included domestic violence, early/child marriage, divorce and dowry.
- Due to Aparajitas being more capable, more in numbers, and more active addressing GBV, more people are reporting.
- Aparajitas play a key role in facilitating the submission of incident reports to the police, arbitration ‘salish’ in the communities, supporting survivors to gain medical, protective and/or legal aid services. Aparajitas have successfully mediated over 260 decisions.

- Stakeholders, including local authorities
- confirm that where Aparajitas are active, violence, and conflict have decreased in their communities.
- Aparajitas also successfully campaigned for girls’ rights to an education, and reducing their drop out rates.



Rahima Begum, learned how to face tough challenges and now is ready to stand up and ask for more services and better policies for women. She has become a role model for young Aparajitas in Rajshai district.



Many Aparajitas themselves are survivors of child/early or forced marriage, and/or violence, or were deprived of proper education. They are now committed and well placed advocates against such harmful practices.

MORE INFORMATION

Main Websites

- **APARAJITA WEBSITE:** <https://aparajita-bd.net/>
- **DEMOCRACY WATCH:** <https://www.dwatch-bd.org/sdc/aparajita.html>
- **KHAN FOUNDATION:** http://www.khan-foundation.org/institute_of_democracy.php
- **PRIP TRUST** <http://priptrust.org/>
- **RUPANTAR** <https://rupantar.org/democracy-political-empowerment/>
- **HELVETAS BANGLADESH** <https://www.helvetas.org/en/bangladesh/what-we-do/how-we-work/our-projects/Asia/Bangladesh/bangladesh-women-empowerment>
- **SDC BANGLADESH** <https://www.eda.admin.ch/countries/bangladesh/en/home/international-cooperation/strategy.html>

Audio & Visual

- **Aparajita Radio Program Nari Kotha:** <https://www.facebook.com/nari.kotha.radio.program/videos/>
- **Helvetas YouTube channel:** <https://www.youtube.com/@HelvetasBangladesh>
- **Videos on Aparajita:**
 - **The Journey of the Aparajitas:** <https://youtu.be/5uTHXpT5H4k?si=D46c2ra-FAyhvZlr>
 - **Nasima Kabir who won a general seat in the local government:** https://youtu.be/inn4qapzWC4?si=8_5w5fiG-4lv4o_V
 - **Khyanto Rani, a woman leader elected at different levels of local government:** <https://youtu.be/5NCetKI-Kho?si=UfCrrrUN4TRYDDT2>
 - **Rahima Begum who is a role model for other women:** <https://youtu.be/PaCCgMCRbS8?si=ndHDEs3moxTGVIOL>



Aparajitas in Rangpur district looking at the future with confidence.

Helvetas/Zayed Siddiki