Ensuring Voice and Equity: An Analysis of Inclusive Governance in Local Government in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Citizen participation is frequently regarded as a cornerstone of accountable and inclusive local governance. However, legal participatory procedures in many developing countries, including Bangladesh, do not necessarily translate into considerable citizen influence over decision-making. The justification for the present study is that, despite the increasing institutionalisation of participatory procedures at the local level, there is still little empirical data on their real efficacy. This study examines the effectiveness of citizen participation regarding institutional arrangements on inclusive governance in municipalities of Bangladesh. A mixed-methods approach was used to conduct the study in Trishal Municipality, Mymensingh District. A total of 384 respondents were sampled using stratified random sampling techniques, and 10 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with the Municipality officials and community stakeholders. Thus, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis were conducted. The results show moderate effectiveness scores across all participation mechanisms (2.54-3.19), with the lowest score for citizen influence (2.58) and the highest for transparency (3.19), indicating the presence of "participatory formalism" in municipal governance. The Multiple regression results indicate that the factors of inclusion ($\beta = .634$, $p < .001$), transparency ($\beta = .400$, $p < .001$), awareness ($\beta = .141$, $p < .001$), and gender ($\beta = -.436$, $p < .001$) are significant predictors of participation, while education and income are not. These findings suggest that institutional inclusiveness and governance quality play a more important role in shaping participation than socioeconomic factors. The study shows that while the quality of citizen engagement in municipal governance is moderate, it is strongly influenced not by individuals' socioeconomic factors but by institutional inclusiveness, transparency, and trust, among other factors. Therefore, the study calls for strengthening deliberative and inclusive governance spaces, improving transparency and accountability systems, and advancing gender-transformative participation to improve substantive democratic governance in Bangladesh.

JEL Classifications: O19, F15, B28

Keywords: Local Governance, Citizen Participation, Inclusive Governance, Formal mechanisms, Municipal Governance.

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Corresponding Author's Email: abir7du@yahoo.com
Article History: Received 31 May 2026; **Accepted** 28 September 2026; **Published online** 10 October 2026; **Published in print**
DOI: https://doi.org/10.67120/jkkniujss.v6.i1.a72

INTRODUCTION

Local government institutions are closest to citizens and important for democratic participation and accountability. These are spaces where people can interact directly, make choices, participate in the provision of public services, and contribute to community development (Coelho, 2016; Uddin, 2019). The idea of democracy is said to work best in a context of decentralised power and when citizens have the opportunity to participate in the decisions made that impact their everyday lives (Mulanda, Frinaldi and Magriasti, 2024; Amin, 2025). Therefore, decentralisation fosters accountability, inclusion, and a fair distribution of power across levels (Faguet, Fox and Pöschl, 2015; Radhakrishnan, 2024). In the developing world, decentralised governance has been shown to positively impact responsiveness and public service delivery (Ibrahim, 2024; Larsala and Chaka, 2025).

Bangladesh has pursued this promise of decentralisation through a series of institutional and legal reforms designed to enhance the scope for direct public engagement in local decision-making and bring the government closer to the citizens (Uddin, 2019). Municipal administrations, in particular, have been given a growing number of participatory instruments, from direct elections and ward meetings to citizens' committees and participatory budget consultations (Ahsan, Walters and Khan, 2021). It is important to look into this because there is no clear evidence of how much these constitutionally mandated techniques translate into genuine and equitable citizen influence over municipal decisions, or whether they remain purely procedural.

Exclusion persists because women are not given the authority to make decisions, are not provided with resources, or have unequal power, according to patriarchal norms (Struckmann *et al.*, 2025). While women have reserved seats, their voice in decision-making is low (Naheed *et al.*, 2021). Poor citizens are also less likely to participate due to a lack of social capital, time, and information, as they tend to be in urban poverty (Walters, 2018; Kaiser, Sakil and Akter, 2024). The described inequalities are interconnected, highlighting the importance of engaging in an intersectional approach to governance (Pinem, 2023; Favetti, Vermiglio and Naciti, 2025).

Despite extensive research on governance and decentralisation in Bangladesh, gaps remain to be addressed (Hossain and Habib, 2021; Panday, 2025). Research on governance is mostly on rural governance, particularly on the Union Parishads, and there is limited research on urban municipal governance (Chowdhury and Aktaruzzaman, 2017; Amin, 2023). Research has primarily focused on formal participation mechanisms rather than on the possibility that citizens can actually shape decisions (Choi and Song, 2020; Oliveira and Ckagnazaroff, 2022; S. Quick and M. Bryson, 2022). As a result, participatory processes are largely symbolic and not empowering (Kamruzzaman, 2020; Newig *et al.*, 2023).

The present study aims to critically evaluate the efficiency of institutionalised citizen participation in the process of inclusive, equitable, and meaningful governance in municipalities in Bangladesh. The study particularly aims to assess the level and nature of citizens' participation in activities of formal governance structures, including Direct Election, Citizens Committee, Budget Consultation, Ward Committee, and Standing Committees. It also highlights the socio-economic and institutional factors that impact inclusive participation, such as gender, education, income, civic awareness, and institutional trust. Moreover, the study examines the gap between formal provisions and the influence of participatory processes and citizens in municipal decision-making. It highlights the problems and constraints of participatory local governance in Bangladesh.

Against this background, the study aims to address the following research questions: (i) To what extent may Bangladeshi individuals meaningfully participate in and influence formal municipal government mechanisms? (ii) Which institutional and socio-economic factors influence the participation and inclusion of residents in local decision-making? and (iii) How big is the gap between the real influence of residents on municipal choices and formal participatory provisions? The study aims to: (a) measure the level and effectiveness of citizen participation in five formal governance mechanisms (Direct Election, Citizens' Committees, Budget Consultation, Ward Committees, and Standing Committees); (b) explore the socio-economic and institutional factors (gender, education, income, civic awareness, and institutional trust) that determine inclusive participation; and (c) evaluate the gap between formal participatory provisions and citizens' substantial influence in municipal decision-making, and thus identify the constraints to participatory local governance in Bangladesh.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Deliberative democratic theory underpins the concept of citizen involvement in governance, whereby valid political choices are made through open, informed civic dialogues, rather than through preference aggregation (Abdullah and Abdul Rahman, 2015; Dacombe and Wojciechowska, 2024). These differences have been translated into the models of "thin" and "thick" participation (Mellon *et al.*, 2017; Ali, Waris and Azad, 2021), which respectively refer to formal and substantive involvement in governance. Based on the institutionalist approach, in Bangladesh's local governance, institutional frameworks are systematically distorted and eliminated by informal power, political clientelism, and bureaucratic inertia, thereby perpetuating elite power even in nominally participatory arenas (Sarker and Nawaz, 2019; Ehsan, 2020).

The current government of Bangladesh has witnessed several legislative changes, such as the "Local Government Municipalities (Pourashava) Act 2009", which aimed to institutionalise participatory mechanisms such as Ward Committees, Standing Committees, Citizens' Committees, and participatory budgeting processes. But empirical studies clearly report differences between the law and governance practice (Uddin, 2019; Jahan and Faisal, 2025). In formal participatory elections and community forums, active civic participation in Union Parishads remains largely symbolic, as citizens' influence is limited (Ara *et al.*, 2024; Md Moshiur and Antor, 2025).

Women's involvement in civic decision-making is also limited in South Asian settings due to patriarchy, limited mobility, time constraints from domestic responsibilities, and institutional design that favours elite men's voices (Nazneen, Hossain and Chopra, 2019; Ullah and Izhar Ahmad Bacha, 2025). The third reserved seat for women in each municipality has been questioned for its descriptive nature, with reserved-seat councillors often having to work under the thumb of male ward commissioners (Akhter and Mahmud, 2021). But recent research questions economic determinism: the quality of institutions or the perception of inclusion is stronger than the socioeconomic endowment of individuals as participatory drivers in developing-country settings (Aracil, Gómez-Bengoechea and Moreno-de-Tejada, 2022).

Participatory governance has been the subject of extensive literature in Bangladesh, but a significant gap remains in understanding the nature and effectiveness of citizen participation in municipal governance. Previously published research has primarily focused on rural Union Parishads and formal mechanisms for citizen participation in decision-making, but not on citizens' actual power to make decisions. In addition, the impact of institutional trust, transparency, inclusion, and gender on meaningful civic participation remains underexplored. The legal provisions on participatory rights have also been largely overlooked in past studies, as have been the issues of substantive democratic empowerment. Hence, this study aims to fill these gaps by critically analysing the effectiveness and democratic nature of institutionalised participatory institutions in Bangladeshi municipalities and exploring the socio-economic and institutional factors that affect inclusive citizen participation.

The above-mentioned literature review reveals that research on local governance in Bangladesh has been predominantly focused on rural local government in general and Union Parishads in particular. However, the formal existence of participatory mechanisms has been highlighted, while relatively little attention has been paid to their functioning and to citizens' perceptions in urban governments, such as municipalities. To date, very few research articles have investigated the combined effects of institutional trust, transparency, inclusion, and awareness, as well as socioeconomic characteristics such as gender, income, and education, on the effectiveness of citizen participation within a single integrated analytical framework. Moreover, the gap between nominal participatory provision and citizens' substantive influence over municipal choices has seldom been evaluated rigorously and quantitatively. This study addresses these gaps through a mixed-methods evaluation of participatory efficacy at the municipal level in Bangladesh.

Theoretical framework

This study employs Deliberative Democratic Theory and New Institutional Theory to account for inclusive public participation in municipal governance. According to Deliberative Democratic Theory, inclusive discussion, openness, and meaningful public participation in decision-making produce democratic legitimacy that increases accountability, responsiveness, and democratic outcomes (Fishkin,

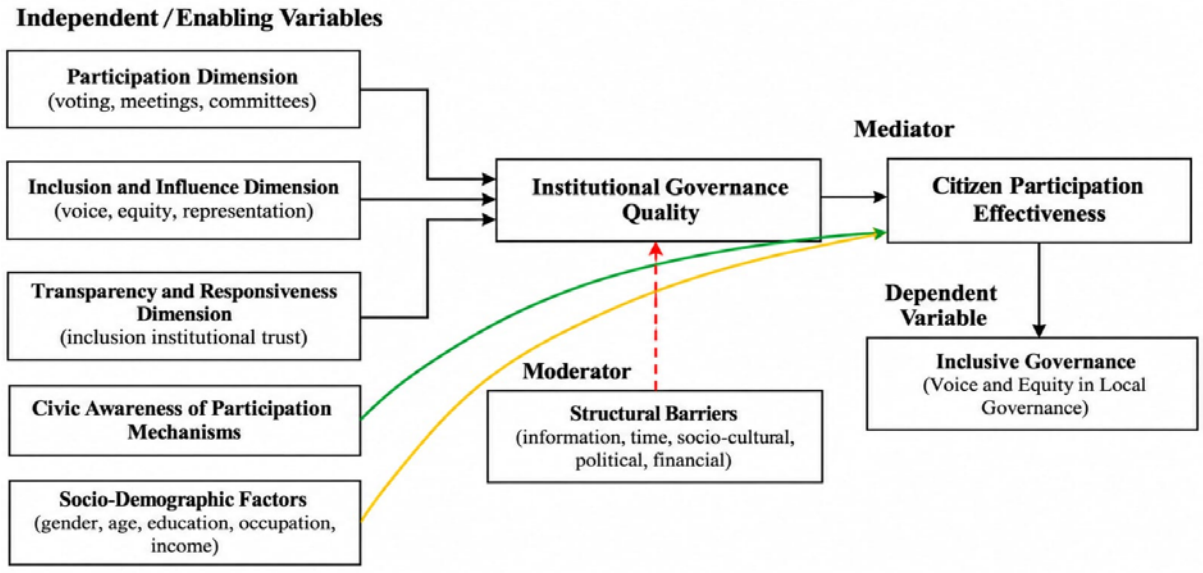
2009, 2011; Smith, 2010; Habermas, 2020). This perspective is buttressed by the New Institutional Theory, which emphasises how formal mechanisms such as elections, ward committees, budget consultations and standing and citizens' committees are contingent on their institutional capacity, responsiveness and transparency (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; North, 1990).

This study converges these perspectives to conceptualise participation effectiveness as a function of three interrelated dimensions: participation (direct civic engagement), inclusion and influence (fair voice & representation for women and marginalised groups), and transparency and responsiveness (institutional transparency & trust). Sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, education, employment, and income), structural impediments, and civic consciousness influence the public perception of inclusive and equitable local governance (Arnstein, 1969; Putnam, 2000; Fung, 2006).

Conceptual Framework

Based on the foregoing dispute, an analytical/conceptual framework for this study has been developed as follows:

FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



METHODOLOGY

Research design

A mixed-method approach has been applied that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to gain insights into citizens' involvement in local governance in Bangladesh. The study area is Trishal, an Upazila of Mymensingh District of Bangladesh. A cross-sectional survey was carried out to quantify citizens' participation, awareness, inclusion, transparency, and perceived influence. Furthermore, qualitative data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with the municipal-level officials and community stakeholders to gain more depth into the governance experiences and institutional barriers. A mixed-method design has been adopted in the study purposefully because the quantitative survey component allows us to measure participation, inclusion, transparency, and awareness across the population sampled in a statistically generalisable way, and the qualitative Key Informant Interviews add contextual depth and help explain the mechanisms underlying the quantitative patterns. This complementarity fits well with a study designed to illustrate both the extent and the nature of participatory mechanisms.

Sample and data collection

The stratified random sampling method was used to obtain representative samples (384) in terms of gender, age, education, occupation, and income from the areas of Trishal municipality in Bangladesh. Ten Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were also held with local government officials, elected leaders, and the community to gather qualitative information around citizens' participation and local governance. The 10 Key Informant Interviews were purposefully selected to include a diversity of institutional and community perspectives rather than to be statistically representative. Stratified random sampling was selected instead of simple random sampling to ensure adequate representation of important socio-demographic sub-groups, especially women and lower-income residents whose participation experiences are essential to the study's aims.

Measurement instruments

Items were drawn from validated five-point Likert scales in the governance and civic participation literature, with all constructs measured in the same way (1 = strongly disagree/never to 5 = strongly agree/always). Frequency items and engagement items were used to measure citizen participation across the five mechanisms. To assess institutional trust, 5 items were adapted from the OECD trust survey framework (OECD, 2024). The inclusion index consisted of four questions relating to perceived openness and fairness to participation. The transparency index covered six dimensions of perceived informativeness of local government processes. Instead of developing new measures, the study adopted reliable Likert-type measures from well-known governance and civic-participation scales, such as the OECD trust survey framework, to improve content validity and cross-study comparability.

Analytical techniques

SPSS version 26.0 was used to analyse the data. All of the variables used were demographic and constructed variables, and descriptive statistics were calculated for all of them. Pearson correlation analysis was carried out to look for bivariate associations between seven important governance variables. A multiple ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model was estimated to find the structural predictors of citizen participation, where the male dummy was coded 0, and the female dummy was coded 1. Descriptive statistics were used to profile respondents and participation mechanisms; Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine bivariate associations among governance variables before multivariate modelling; and multiple OLS regression was used to identify relative structural predictors of participation while controlling for socioeconomic characteristics. This sequential analytic approach is useful in distinguishing between simple connections and independent prediction effects.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all respondents and KII participants before data collection. Participants were informed of the aim of the investigation, that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The dataset and interview notes were de-identified to remove personal information and to preserve participants' identities and confidentiality throughout the research process. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical norms approved for social science research.

FINDINGS

Demographic profile of respondents

A total of 384 persons participated in this study, reflecting the general socio-economic situation of the local communities in Bangladesh. This is also skewed towards males (74.5%, n = 286) compared with females (25.5%, n = 98).

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Variable	Category	Count	Percentage %
Gender	Male	286	74.5%
	Female	98	25.5%
Age	18–25	28	7.3%
	26–35	79	20.6%
	36–45	116	30.2%
	46–60	126	32.8%
	60 and above	35	9.1%
Education Level	No formal education	61	15.9%
	Primary	118	30.7%
	Secondary	99	25.8%
	Higher secondary	86	22.4%
	Bachelor's or above	20	5.2%
Occupation	Service	56	14.6%
	Business	54	14.1%
	labour	181	47.1%
	Homemaker	65	16.9%
	Student	25	6.5%
	Other	3	0.8%
Monthly Household Income	Low (<15,000 BDT)	188	49.0%
	Middle (15,000–40,000 BDT)	173	45.1%
	High (>40,000 BDT)	23	6.0%

Source: Field survey, 2026

The first two age groups (economically active: 36-45 years, n = 116; 46-60 years, n = 126) accounted for almost a third of the respondents (30.2% and 32.8%, respectively). In contrast, youth participation was comparatively low, with 7.3% of youth (28) aged 18 to 25 years represented in formal governance processes. Low literacy rates were reflected in the educational profile: 30.7% (n = 118) of respondents had only primary education, 15.9% (n = 61) had no formal education, and 5.2% (n = 20) held a Bachelor's degree or higher. The majority were involved in manual activities (47.1%, n = 181) and were associated with the informal economy, with highly labour-intensive jobs. Economic vulnerability was also reflected in the income distribution – almost half of the respondents earned less than BDT 15,000 per month.

Effectiveness of participation mechanisms

Table 2 provides comparative impact/effectiveness data on five dimensions: awareness, intensity of participation, inclusiveness and influence, transparency and responsiveness, for five citizen participation mechanisms in local governance in Bangladesh. The results showed that the overall effectiveness of these mechanisms remains moderate, with effectiveness scores ranging from 2.54 to 3.19 on a five-point Likert scale.

TABLE 2: PRESENT STATUS AND EFFECTIVENESS OF FIVE PARTICIPATION MECHANISMS

Mechanism	Awareness %	Participation Mean	Inclusion and Influence Mean	Transparency and Responsiveness Mean	Effectiveness Score	Rank
Direct Election	54.9	3.18	2.91	3.48	3.19	1
Standing Committees	48.4	2.77	2.58	3.35	2.90	2

Ward Committee	60.2	2.53	2.67	3.38	2.86	3
Budget Consultation	53.6	2.62	3.29	2.41	2.77	4
Citizens Committee	60.9	2.22	2.58	2.82	2.54	5

Source: Field survey, 2026

Note: *Mean scores are based on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Very Low/Never to 5 = Very High/Always).*

In terms of effectiveness, Direct Election scored the highest at 3.19 and had relatively high participation intensity and transparency levels, meaning that electoral participation is the most institutionalised form of citizen participation in local governance. Standing Committees had moderate levels of transparency and citizen engagement (2.90), while Ward Committees (2.86) also scored moderately. Standing Committees (2.90) and Ward Committees (2.86) also scored moderately, with some institutional and procedural constraints observed. Budget Consultation was moderately effective (2.77), had average levels of citizen inclusion and influence, and relatively low responsiveness, indicating low levels of incorporation of citizen priorities into local development planning. Citizens' Committees showed the highest awareness rating (60.9%) but the lowest effectiveness rating (2.54), reflecting ongoing structural barriers to substantive citizens' participation such as elite dominance and unequal power relations.

The municipal official explained

"Participation is also more visible in practice than it is in influence. Participation mechanisms like ward committees and public meetings are regularly maintained in municipalities, but many citizens do not feel their views are listened to or taken seriously by municipalities, and, compared to the past, fewer citizens are voicing opinions and fewer citizens are complaining, yet final decisions are still largely made by political interests and influential actors rather than citizens." KII-01, KII-02, and KII-04.

Relational patterns across participation mechanisms

Table 3 shows the relationality of citizen awareness, participation, and perceived inclusion and influence with five institutional mechanisms of participation in the local government system of Bangladesh.

TABLE 3: RELATIONAL PATTERN ACROSS PARTICIPATION MECHANISMS

Mechanism	Awareness %	Participation Mean	Inclusion and Influence Mean	Participation vs Inclusion Gap	Relational Pattern
Direct Election	54.9	3.18	2.91	-0.27	Higher participation than perceived inclusion and influence
Budget Consultation	53.6	2.62	3.29	+0.67	Lower participation but stronger perception of inclusion and influence
Standing Committees	48.4	2.77	2.58	-0.19	Participation slightly exceeds inclusion and influence.
Ward Committee	60.2	2.53	2.67	+0.14	Relatively balanced, with slightly higher inclusion and influence

Citizens Committee	60.9	2.22	2.58	+0.36	Low participation despite moderate inclusion and influence perception

Source: Field survey, 2026

Note: *Negative values indicate higher participation than influence; positive values indicate stronger influence than participation.*

The results show a large gap between participation and influence, indicating that higher participation does not translate into stronger influence in local governance processes. There is, however, uneven public awareness about the participatory institutions, with Standing Committees having the lowest percentage (48.4%) and Citizens' Committees the highest (60.9%). Direct Election had the highest mean for participation (3.18) but the lowest for influence (2.91), resulting in a negative gap between participation and influence (-0.27). The trend is procedural, in which participation in elections does not generate a sense of influence over governance. Moderate participation and high perceptions of inclusion and influence were found to be related to Budget Consultation (3.29) compared with the other groups, indicating a relatively high level of institutional responsiveness.

The municipal official explained

"Citizen involvement in elections and public discussion is still present, but it is not sufficient to persuade the municipal authorities to take decisions that are effective for the citizens. In the same way, citizens' participation in municipal authorities' decisions remains, but is not sufficient to influence them effectively. These findings point to the fact that citizen participation in local governance is visible, but not yet strong enough to influence the decisions of the municipal authorities effectively." KII-05 and KII-06.

Correlation matrix of key governance variables

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation analysis between socio-demographic variables (gender, education, and monthly household income) and indicators of governance: participation, inclusion, transparency, and awareness. Data from 384 respondents were analysed to determine the direction and intensity of the relationships among the variables.

TABLE 4: CORRELATION MATRIX OF KEY GOVERNANCE VARIABLES

Variables	Gender	Education Level	Monthly Household Income	Participation	Inclusion	Transparency	Awareness
Gender	1	.000	.189**	-.360**	.095	.010	.164**
Sig. (2-tailed)	—	.992	<.001	<.001	.063	.849	.001
Education Level	.000	1	.319**	.138**	.259**	-.023	.085
Sig. (2-tailed)	.992	—	<.001	.007	<.001	.648	.095
Monthly Household Income	.189**	.319**	1	.071	.454**	-.156**	-.082
Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	—	.162	<.001	.002	.110
Participation	-.360**	.138**	.071	1	.540**	.438**	.260**
Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.007	.162	—	<.001	<.001	<.001

Inclusion	.095	.259**	.454**	.540**	1	-.056	-.014
Sig. (2-tailed)	.063	<.001	<.001	<.001	—	.270	.791
Transparency	.010	-.023	-.156**	.438**	-.056	1	.488**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.849	.648	.002	<.001	.270	—	<.001
Awareness	.164**	.085	-.082	.260**	-.014	.488**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.095	.110	<.001	.791	<.001	—

Source: Field survey, 2026.

Note: *N = 384.* ******** *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

The results indicate a significant positive relationship between gender and monthly household income ($r = .189$, $p < .001$) and awareness ($r = .164$, $p = .001$). In contrast, the relationship between gender and participation is significant and negative ($r = -.360$, $p < .001$). This suggests a disparity in participation and gender awareness in local governance activities. The education level is statistically significantly positively associated with monthly household income ($r = .319$, $p < .001$), participation ($r = .138$, $p = .007$), and inclusion ($r = .259$, $p < .001$). The results indicate a positive relationship between education and participation and inclusion in governance processes.

However, no significant relationship is found between education level and transparency and awareness. Household income is also positively associated with inclusion ($r = .454$, $p < .001$), suggesting that people with higher incomes are more likely to feel included in governance. In contrast, income is negatively correlated with transparency ($r = -.156$, $p = .002$), suggesting that income groups may differ in their perceptions of transparency. Significant positive correlations between participation and the governance indicators of inclusion ($r = .540$, $p < .001$), transparency ($r = .438$, $p < .001$), and awareness ($r = .260$, $p < .001$) exist. This suggests that greater citizen involvement is associated with high levels of inclusiveness, transparency, and public awareness in municipal governance. Transparency is also positively and significantly correlated with awareness ($r = .488$, $p < .001$), indicating that transparency in local governance effectively increases citizens' awareness of governance practices and services.

NGO representatives and municipal officials explained

“An NGO representative added that the citizens' interest is enhanced when the city's planning and budgeting processes are open to public involvement, with information shared openly on budgets, development projects, and public services, as this makes citizens feel included in governance processes. Similarly, a municipal official noted that the increased interest of citizens was experienced when they could observe the follow-up actions of the municipality to their complaints and recommendations, as this boosted their feeling of being held accountable.” KII-07, KII-01, and KII-06.

Regression analysis predicting citizen participation

In Table 5, the regression coefficients indicate that several predictors are significant in influencing participation. Of all variables, inclusion was most strongly associated with participation ($\beta = .634$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of inclusion have a significant positive effect on participation.

TABLE 5: MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS PREDICTING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value	Decision
Gender	-.626	.042	-.436	-14.985	< .001	Significant
Education Level	-.006	.017	-.010	-.343	.732	Not Significant

Monthly Household Income	-.059	.034	-.057	-1.717	.087	Not Significant
Inclusion	.651	.032	.634	20.041	< .001	Significant
Transparency	.397	.032	.400	12.347	< .001	Significant
Awareness	.350	.081	.141	4.292	< .001	Significant

Source: Field survey, 2026

Note: *$R = .840$, $R^2 = .706$, Adjusted $R^2 = .701$, $F (6, 377) = 150.664$, $p < .001$. Dependent variable: Participation. $p < .05$. The regression constant (intercept) was also included in the model estimation.*

The second finding was that transparency had a strong positive effect ($\beta = .400$, $p < .001$), indicating increased citizen participation. The same applied to awareness, which had a statistically significant positive effect ($\beta = .141$, $p < .001$) on participation, suggesting that greater awareness positively affects participation. Gender, with a β of -.436 ($p < .001$), was statistically significant, indicating a difference in participation by gender. This negative beta coefficient indicates that women respondents were less likely to engage in local governance processes than men respondents, with female respondents coded 1 and male respondents coded 0. This finding reflects the persistence of gender-based institutional and social barriers in participatory governance. Education level ($p = .732$) and monthly household income ($p = .087$), on the other hand, were not statistically significant, as their p-values were above the conventional .05 level of significance.

A female municipal official and participant explained

“A female councillor explained that some of the results obtained show that women's participation in local governance is still constrained by institutional and social factors, such as a woman participant stating that “family responsibilities, social pressure, and the lack of supportive environment restrict women to participate actively in local governance processes”, and another woman participant stating that “women are formally included in the municipal meetings and committees, but their views are not always taken seriously during important policy discussions”. — KII-08 and KII-09.

Substantive participation quality across mechanisms

Table 6 shows that the quality of substantive participation is mostly moderate (2.54 to 3.19) in the five local governance mechanisms in Bangladesh. The results show that participatory formalism is still a reality: Participatory formalism refers to formal institutional structures that allow citizens to participate in the decision-making process without influencing the outcome and without the opportunity to be empowered.

TABLE 6: SUBSTANTIVE PARTICIPATION QUALITY ACROSS MECHANISMS

Mechanism	Participation Mean	Inclusion and Influence Mean	Transparency and Responsiveness Mean	Quality Score	Quality Status
Direct Election	3.18	2.91	3.48	3.19	Moderate
Budget Consultation	2.62	3.29	2.41	2.77	Moderate
Standing Committees	2.77	2.58	3.35	2.90	Moderate
Ward Committee	2.53	2.67	3.38	2.86	Moderate
Citizens Committee	2.22	2.58	2.82	2.54	Poor

Source: Field survey, 2026

Note: *Quality Score represents the average of Participation, Inclusion, Influence, Transparency, and Responsiveness scores based on a five-point Likert scale.*

Direct Election scored the best quality (3.19) with relatively high participation and transparency, and high responsiveness. The lower inclusion score, however, and the influence score indicate that engagement in the electoral process does not equate to substantive citizen influence in local decision-making procedures. The participatory quality of the Standing Committees (2.90) and Ward Committees (2.86) was moderate. While these mechanisms showed some greater level of transparency and responsiveness, low citizen participation and influence indicate the persistence of structural barriers, procedural complexity, and poor facilitation of inclusive engagement. The score for Budget Consultation was moderate (2.77), which is alarming because it is one of the most significant activities in deciding priorities for local development and allocating resources. Low participation and low transparency suggest that budgeting practices are still relatively technocratic and not so inclusive for marginalised groups. Citizens' Committees had the lowest rating (2.54) due to low participation, elite domination, and low opportunities for meaningful citizens' participation and democratic accountability.

Perceptions of municipal officials and citizen representatives on participation limitations

"A municipal official stated that, although participation mechanisms are officially maintained and documented within the municipality, citizens' actual influence over planning and implementation processes remains limited in practice. Similarly, a citizen committee member noted that people often provide opinions and complaints but rarely receive feedback regarding subsequent actions taken by the municipality. This lack of communication weakens public trust and reduces confidence in participatory governance processes." — KII-01 and KII-02.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal the presence of "participatory formalism" in municipal governance in Bangladesh, where formal participatory institutions have been set up, but in practice, have not ensured that citizens have meaningful influence on the governance process. The effectiveness scores for the five mechanisms of participation were moderate, between 2.54 and 3.19, indicating that there was not much substantive empowerment in local governance. This indicates that engagement is still largely formal and not really transformative. It is also shown in the study that this participation–influence gap is present in all the formal participation mechanisms, whether it is Direct Election, Budget Consultation, Standing Committees, Ward Committees, or Citizens' Committees. Awareness and participation were found to differ between the different mechanisms, but citizens were always found to have limited influence on municipal decisions. This suggests that the issue is not just a problem with any particular mechanism, but is a sign of more overall structural shortcomings in municipal governance. The results indicate that meaningful participation is strengthened by the ability to access information, open, and inclusive governance. Correlation analysis also found strong positive associations between involvement and inclusion ($r = .540$, $p < .01$), and participation and transparency ($r = .438$, $p < .01$). Public awareness levels of participatory institutions ranged from 48.4% to 60.9%, which is a moderate level. This implies that institutional quality, inclusion, transparency, and awareness are more important to participation than socioeconomic status. Overall, the research indicates that inclusive governance in Bangladesh is more dependent on institutional responsiveness and democratic inclusiveness than on citizens' educational and economic status. Therefore, the results highlight the importance of developing participatory spaces that are more inclusive, more transparent, and more accountable, and of making official participation more effective and democratic. In summary, the findings indicate that the efficacy of citizen participation in Trishal Municipality is moderate across all five formal processes (scores ranging from 2.54 to 3.19), with poor performance by Citizens' Committees and good performance by Direct Elections. This constant gap between participation and influence across mechanisms confirmed the participatory formalism. Gender ($\beta = -.436$), with lower engagement among women than males, was a significant negative predictor of participation. Institutional inclusion ($\beta = .634$), transparency ($\beta = .400$) and awareness ($\beta = .141$) were significant positive predictors. Household income and education were

not significant factors. In sum, the study's findings reveal that institutional qualities, rather than the socioeconomic level of the people, are the primary determinants of meaningful engagement in municipal governance in Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study shows that the persistence of participatory formalism in municipal governance in Bangladesh is driven by five institutional mechanisms: Direct Election, Citizens' Committees, Budget Consultation, Ward Committees, and Standing Committees. The findings further reveal that institutional factors are stronger determinants of participation than socioeconomic characteristics. These results recommend that institutional inclusiveness, transparency, and democratic responsiveness are more important for strengthening citizen participation than individual socioeconomic capacity. The study proposes that the following challenges need to be overcome: establishing inclusive deliberative spaces for marginalised groups; restoring trust in institutions through transparency and accountability; and redesigning budget consultation processes, going beyond reserved seats, to ensure they are participatory. The future study should focus on the role of social capital, institutional development over time, and digital governance instruments in increasing substantive democracy in Bangladesh, and on their effectiveness in municipal governance capacities.

CONTRIBUTION TO ACADEMIA AND POLICY

This study contributes to the existing body of material by extending the scope of the literature on citizen involvement from the mainly rural and Union Parishad context to the relatively uncharted area of urban municipal governance. Moreover, by distinguishing formal involvement from the substantive effect of citizens, it experimentally lends quantitative support to the notion of participatory formalism in the South Asian context. Findings have practice and policy implications. To this end, national and local officials should improve the transparency and inclusiveness of existing participatory mechanisms, including Citizens' Committees and Budget Consultation processes. They should consider establishing systematic feedback systems so that people can see how their views influence decisions. In an effort to secure women's greater influence in municipal decision-making, women must develop gender-transformative activities beyond reserved seats.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

It is important to point out that this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional technique captures citizen engagement only at a single point in time; therefore, the causes of the variables under study cannot be determined. Second, the findings may only be generalisable to other municipalities in Bangladesh. The study was limited to one municipality (Trishal). Third, self-reported Likert-scale evaluations may be affected by social desirability and recollection bias. Future studies on the temporal and contextual dynamics of participatory efficacy could benefit from longitudinal or comparative techniques, including several cities. It is also crucial to understand the significance of digital governance technologies and social capital in increasing substantive engagement. Institutional and societal variables should also explain gender differences in civic involvement.

Acknowledgement

The author is deeply grateful to the municipal, administrative, and community leaders who participated and cooperated in this study. We would also like to thank the staff members and the recognised supervisor for their cooperation and assistance during the research process.

Funding

The study was conducted with financial support from the Research and Extension Centre of Jatiya Kabi Kazi Narul Islam University, Trishal, Mymensingh, Bangladesh.

Ethical Declaration

Each respondent provided informed consent before data collection. The study respected respondents' privacy and identity and adhered to current ethical principles in social science research.

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