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**Rural Dispute Resolution in Bangladesh:  
Popular Perceptions about Village Courts**

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*The rural poor and other marginalized people in Bangladesh are caught in a quandary. Neither the formal judicial system nor informal dispute resolution through local tribunals, called Shalish, is able to meet their needs. The formal system is hardly accessible and affordable to them and suffers from millions of pending cases. Informal dispute resolution through Shalish is notorious for unfair decisions based on local power structures and backward norms, as well as draconian enforcement practices. To remedy this situation, a 2006 law has reformed and redesigned Shalish under the guise of village courts. These village courts were introduced as an accessible, fair and affordable alternative to both the formal judicial system and traditional Shalish, but experience since 2006 has shown that they have their own flaws and require further reform. Drawing on popular perceptions in two Bangladeshi villages, this study finds that more attention should be paid to access for poor and otherwise vulnerable people, procedural fairness shielding litigants from local power structures, and matters of effectiveness. Only then can village courts truly fulfil their promise of providing redress for those most in need of social justice and human security.*

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## Introduction

Nosiran<sup>2</sup> is the wife of a poor day labourer on the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh. To buttress her meagre salary as a maid in the home of a wealthy man, she grows rice and other crops on a tiny plot of land. One day, another villager allows his cow to overrun her land. When she protests, the owner of the cow threatens her with a stick. What is Nosiran going to do?

In past centuries, she might have turned to informal dispute resolution by village elders, called *Shalish*. After independence, *Shalish* was considered backward and replaced by the formal judicial system; but people like Nosiran could hardly afford the hefty fees and courts had other priorities. Today, Nosiran can turn to a new incarnation of *Shalish*, called village courts.<sup>3</sup>

Those of us who live in highly individualized urban societies tend to think of dispute resolution in terms of the formal judicial system. However, for most of human history, dispute resolution has been much less formal and broadly community-based (Galtung 2010). Even today, many people lack access to the formal judicial system. For them, dispute resolution remains based on informal mechanisms that may or may not be integrated with the formal judicial system.

Either system has its advantages and its disadvantages. Informal dispute resolution tends to be more accessible and effective, but it often operates in summary or even arbitrary ways. The formal judicial system places more emphasis on procedural justice, but its accessibility and effectiveness are often in doubt. Only a few people in developing countries can afford to take legal action. In addition to that, the formal judicial system has other problems. It suffers from ever growing caseloads, leading to a situation where individual cases can drag on for years if not decades. Unsurprisingly, therefore, practices of informal dispute settlement continue.

Bangladesh is a case in point. On the one hand, *Shalish* is an ancestral informal dispute resolution mechanism where rural people have easy access to justice regardless of wealth, gender, caste, and religion (The Asia Foundation 2007). Unfortunately, *Shalish* is also known for unfair decisions based on local power structures and backward norms, as well as draconian enforcement (Local Government Division 2012). On the other hand, Bangladesh has inherited from colonialism an adversarial judicial system which is highly formalized and places great emphasis on due process (Haq 1998). Unfortunately, the system is incapable of meeting the needs of society, especially in the countryside: fees are unaffordable, delays enormous, procedures impenetrable, corruption rampant, and judges biased against poor and other marginalized people.

To bridge the gap between informal and formal dispute resolution, Bangladesh has redesigned *Shalish* through the 2006 Village Courts Act. The 2006 act provides for the establishment of a village court in every Union Parishad (UP). In this way, Bangladesh offers an interesting case where informal dispute resolution has been institutionalized as an alternative route to justice. Ideally, village courts combine the best of *Shalish* on the one hand (accessibility and effectiveness), and of the formal judicial system on the other (procedural justice).

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, I have used pseudonyms for Nosiran and any other rural poor.

<sup>3</sup> For further details about Nosiran's case, including the outcome, turn to the second case study below.

Despite the reform, it remains debatable to what extent village courts actually work for those who need them most. The rural poor are socially excluded and suffer from discrimination, deterring them from accessing even informal village courts. Even when they have the courage to do so, they may not get a fair hearing as procedural justice is undermined by local power imbalances and widespread practices of nepotism and corruption. What is more, the effectiveness of the system is jeopardized by lack of capacity and enforcement problems.

In this paper, I draw on fieldwork in two Bangladeshi villages to examine popular perceptions of village courts. In the first section, I provide an overview of what we know about village courts in rural Bangladesh: their history and the way they operate. In the second section, I present my fieldwork on popular perceptions of village courts. In the third section, I draw on my fieldwork to suggest reforms to make village courts work for the rural poor in Bangladesh. I find that more attention should be paid to access for poor and otherwise vulnerable people, procedural fairness shielding litigants from local power structures, and matters of effectiveness. Only then can village courts truly fulfil their promise of providing redress for those most in need of social justice and human security.

## Background

Bangladesh's current system of local government has come into existence through a gradual process of evolution. Initially, the British Empire was forced to rely on traditional institutions for specific purposes such as tax collection. Before long, various acts were introduced to establish a system of local government that would ensure tax collection and political control. Instead of integrating the traditional system of administration and dispute resolution in Bengali villages into colonial administration, the British tried to impose a top-down system controlled by bureaucrats. The system showed little concern for the needs of marginal people and mostly served the administrative interests of the Empire (Tinker 1954).

Under British rule, the Union Board was the smallest unit of rural administration and local government. Its remit included sanitation, public works, and village schools. The Union Board's president also had the power to adjudicate petty civil and criminal cases. Such formal local dispute settlement worked in parallel to, and competed with, traditional *Shalish* (Hyam 2007). In 1947, Pakistan separated from India and East Bengal became part of Pakistan. During the early years of Pakistani administration, the local government system remained the same as it had been under British rule. As previously, the Union Board was responsible for a variety of functions, including the adjudication of petty local disputes. Under Pakistani rule, the system of local government remained largely colonial in nature and spirit (Abedin 1974).

In 1971, East Bengal gained independence from Pakistan and became Bangladesh. Five years later, the 1976 Village Court Ordinance brought considerable change in local government. The Ordinance renamed Union Boards as Union Parishads (UPs). Since then, the nodal department in charge of UPs has been the Local Government Division (LGD) at the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government (Faizullah 1987). Under the 1976 Ordinance, a village court was to be established in every UP, consisting of the UP Chairman, two further members from the UP, and two additional members chosen by the Chairman to represent the disputing parties. Although the court could not pass any sentence of imprisonment, it had the power to impose fines. In 1982, after the military coup led by Ershad, the system of local

government was again reorganized but the provisions on village courts remained unaltered (Riaz 1994).

The system of formal village courts located at the Union Parishad was never truly implemented. In exceptional cases, the system empowered UP Chairmen who were often henchmen of the authoritarian government of the day. A determined Chairman had the option of taking unilateral decisions and imposing them on the parties (Stapleton and Jahan 2013: 63). In most other cases, local authorities were more interested in the effective solution of local disputes and preservation of social harmony than in the letter of the law. Even in those rare cases when dispute resolution happened under the auspices of village courts, proceedings de facto resembled traditional *Shalish* in terms of communal participation, procedural flexibility, and consensual decision making. More often than not, villagers ignored formal institutions and depended on informal *Shalish* for the settlement of petty disputes (Siddiqi 2003).

Over time, this led to a legitimacy crisis. On the one hand, *Shalish* had been outlawed as backward. On the other hand, village courts were not operating as intended. Overtly returning to *Shalish* would have been an admission of failure, but incorporating local dispute resolution into the formal judicial system was hardly an option. For a long time, the judicial system has been under enormous pressure, with unmanageable workloads and an inadequate number of officials and staff to deal with a backlog that amounted to millions of cases (Islam 2015: 7). What is more, the rural poor and other vulnerable people were unable to afford the cost of litigation and did not have a sufficient understanding of how to gain access to justice in formal courts on issues that, in any case, were better resolved at the local level (World Bank 2008).

In this situation, the Government of Bangladesh decided to reform village courts in such a way that they would combine features of traditional *Salish* with a more formal judicial approach. In 2006, a new Village Courts Act replaced and updated the Village Courts Ordinance. Like its 1976 predecessor, the 2006 Act provided for the establishment of a court in every Union Parishad. To enable access for the most vulnerable groups, fees and other associated costs for submitting a case are very low (ca. 240 Taka, or £2). By empowering rural citizens to resolve their disputes at the local level in affordable, transparent and effective ways, village courts have been designed to provide access to justice for disadvantaged and marginalized people while at the same time reducing the enormous case backlog in the formal judicial system (Panday 2013).

According to the 2006 Act, village courts are comprised of a panel of five: the Union Parishad's Chairman; two other Union Parishad members, one of whom is chosen by each party in the dispute; and two additional citizens, who are also chosen by the parties respectively (Government of Bangladesh 2006). In principle, village courts have considerable powers. They can impose penalties and indemnities of up to 25,000 Taka (ca. £223).<sup>4</sup> In 2013, the Village Courts Act was amended to increase the maximum amount of compensation to 75,000 Taka (ca. £670). For most villagers, this is a significant sum.<sup>5</sup>

Village courts follow a less formalized procedure than courts in the formal judicial system. The procedure starts with a victim filing a petition, or with a formal court referring a case to

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<sup>4</sup> Here and elsewhere, values in Taka are recalculated into GB£ according to exchange rates of July 2018.

<sup>5</sup> According to Trading Economics (2018), in 2017 the average monthly income in Bangladesh was 13,258 Taka (ca. £118). Minimum wages stood at 5300 Taka (ca. £47). Minimum wages refer to the monthly minimum pay for workers in the garment industry.

the UP Chairman. The UP Chairman then has three options: rejecting the case, proposing a compromise through mediation, or convening a village court. The procedure is summarized in Figure 1.

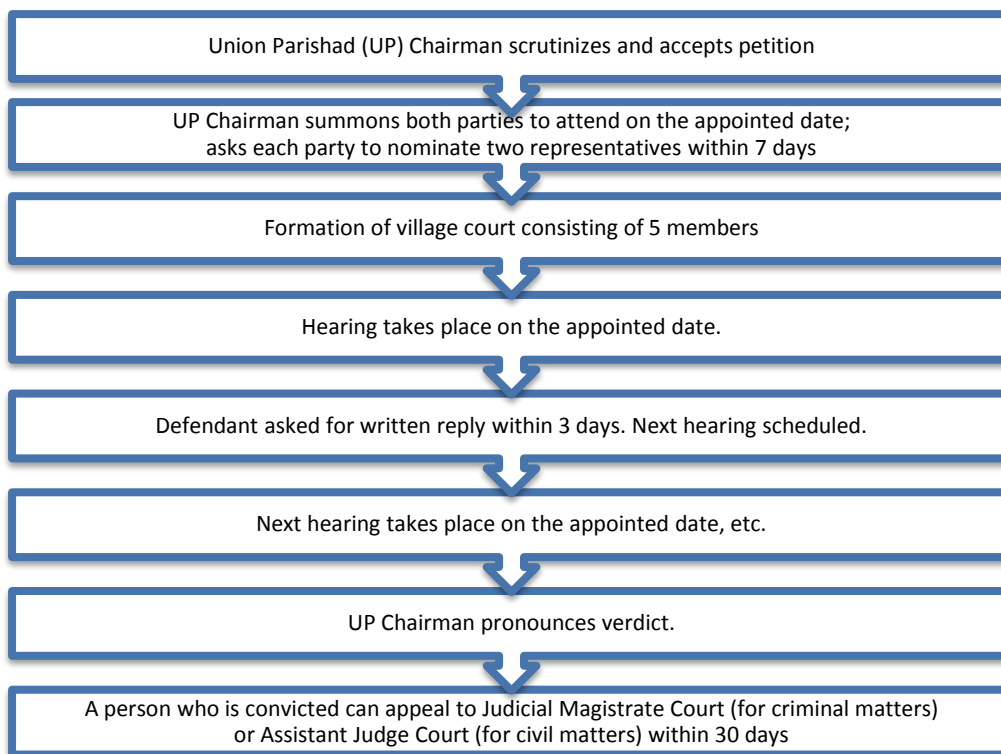


Figure 1: Procedure of village courts

Similar to formal courts, village courts have the power to summon witnesses. They can also impose fines for contempt of court. Unlike informal mediation, they have the authority to issue binding decisions. While the powers of village courts are significant, their capacities are limited in practice. In theory, every six months the UP Chairman has to submit a report to the sub-district (*upazila*), but this does not happen in most cases. Besides, Union Parishads are overburdened with other activities and do not have the manpower to keep a tally of judicial decisions and write a formal report about the activities of their village courts every six months.

### Popular perceptions

To understand popular perceptions of village courts, I conducted fieldwork in two villages: Kaichan, in the remote Mymensingh District, and Kushuria, in the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital city.<sup>6</sup> In each village, I conducted a focus group (FG) with 12 participants. Participants represent different groups in terms of religion (Muslim or Hindu), caste, gender, and profession. To convey a better sense of how village courts work in practice, I investigated one specific court case in each village. To provide further background information, I also conducted expert interviews with UP chairmen, government officials, academics, and a foreign donor representative based in Bangladesh. These experts shared their understanding of the Village Court Act, their knowledge of the challenges and opportunities of the local justice system, and their thoughts on how local justice might be improved (see Table 1).

<sup>6</sup> Kaichan belongs to the Birunia Union Parishad. Kushuria belongs to the Kushuria Union Parishad.

Kaichan FG	2 farmers 1 businessman 1 landless person 2 teachers 1 student 1 community leader 2 housewives 1 local NGO staff 1 religious leader	8 male 4 female	Kaichan, 2 February 2018
Kushuria FG	2 farmers 1 businessman 2 landless people 1 teacher 2 community leaders 1 doctor 1 housewife 1 local NGO staff 1 religious leader	9 male 4 female	Kushuria, 10 February 2018
Interviews	2 UP Chairmen 2 officials of the Ministry of Local Government 2 academics 1 donor representative	5 male 2 female	Dhaka and Kaichan, 4-8 March 2018

Table 1: Overview of fieldwork

My focus groups suggest that UP chairmen and other members of the local community have at best rudimentary knowledge of village courts and their procedures. When I first asked participants about village courts, only 10 out of 24 had even heard of them. It seems that there were two distinct reasons for this. Clearly, public awareness of village courts is low.

In Kaichan, which is one of the remotest villages in the peripheral Birunia Parishad, few participants were aware of their existence. Here, people were still operating under the assumption that disputes are settled by traditional *Shalish*, and only those who had been in actual contact with village courts had heard this term. Once terminology was clarified, however, people were able to engage in a frank exchange of views about village courts, aka *Shalish*.

In Kushuria, which is located in the semi-urban periphery of Dhaka, the capital city, both traditional *Shalish* and village court had lost much of their erstwhile relevance. People are more exposed to urban lifestyles here, and they are financially more solvent. Therefore, they are not used to approaching the Union Parishad for dispute resolution and instead prefer to approach the police and formal courts. Here, only very marginalized people rely on village courts.

Overall, a majority of about two thirds of participants expressed optimism or constructive criticism. It seems that such optimistic or reform-minded participants are generally pleased with the flexibility of village courts. They believe that village courts offer a flexible process

of arbitration leading to effective solutions that enable reconciliation and the rebuilding of social relationships between victim and offender. “If the husband physically tortures her, she goes to the village court. The Chairman of the Union Parishad warns the husband in the presence of the other villagers and has him swear not to beat her anymore. This is how village courts act to maintain peace and harmony in society” (Kaichan FG, female participant).

In both villages, participants emphasized the importance of “fairness.” If a victim is to have confidence in obtaining justice, they argued, a fair trial is paramount. Reform-minded participants also emphasized the importance of easy access to village courts, as well as regular supervision by the local administration. Only then, they claimed, are village court decisions likely to be enforced. Some reform-minded people were optimistic that, if it were possible to eliminate corruption, the problems of village courts would disappear. Altogether, 21 of 24 participants placed emphasis on the “proper investigation” of cases. 19 participants felt that village courts should always include female members of the community.

About one third of focus group participants were more negative about village courts. Especially in Kushuria, some continue to refer to village courts as *Shalish*, emphasizing a loss of authority and credibility. “People used to accept *Shalish* long ago. But they do not give importance to it now. Only petty cases are settled through *Shalish*. *Shalish* is done on verbal complaint” (Kushuria FG).

According to six participants, the enforcement of decisions is sluggish. Five blame “unfair judgment” and three “ineffective administration” as the key problem. Participants also find that village leaders and other local elites always prefer to maintain the prestige of the village by resolving disputes within the community.

Participants also mentioned that kinship solidarity leads to biased verdicts in favour of relatives. People felt that the UP Chairman would always rule in favour of a relative, regardless of guilt or innocence. Similarly, participants suggested that political affiliation plays a major role. Apparently, in Kaichan village a ruling UP member, party leader and close relative of a landowner disagreed with a ruling that the landowner should sacrifice his land. Because he was a relative of such a powerful man, the landowner did not sacrifice his land. The claimant gave up trying to get justice.

### Case Study A: Party politics versus fair play?

This is the story of Kariman from the Kachina village in the Birunia Union Parishad in Mymensingh District. She complained that her husband Hannan was regularly assaulting her at home. She alleged that one day she had discovered that he had an affair with an unmarried girl who worked in a garment factory. One evening she took him to task, mentioning the future of their two children. She complained that her husband became angry and assaulted her badly, threatening her to do more harm and to divorce her. Kariman felt she had no other choice than to approach the village court. After seven hearings, the court unanimously passed an order in favor of her husband. The court determined that Hannan was a good person with an impeccable reputation whereas his wife was acting on a base motivation, namely to destroy his political career. The court issued a warning that she should stop subverting him. Kariman alleges that her husband belongs to the ruling political party in the village. She believes that the UP Chairman had to back her husband because the local leader of that party stood by him.

Similar concerns were expressed by others. “Those who can give a lot of money to the Chairman are blessed by him. The verdict comes out in their favour. When complainants are weak and submissive, nobody will speak up for them. On the other hand, nobody comes to participate if there is any complaint against an influential person. If the victim is an opponent of the UP Chairman or other UP members, he or she will not get justice” (Kushuria FG, female participant).

At least half of the participants expressed limited trust in village courts: “People don’t go to

### Case Study B: Vindicated by the village court

This is the story of Nosiran in the Kushuria village in the Kushuria UP in Dhaka District. Her husband Akkas Ali is a day labourer. The little plot of land they hold is insufficient for their livelihood. Nosiran grows crops on 3.00 decimal land [121 square meters] near her house. She also works at the home of an affluent person in the same village. Her distant relative Kaddus Mia frequently let his cow overrun her land, damaging the paddy seeds and other crops. When Nosiran reproaches him for his cattle encroaching, Kaddus Mia became angry and started shouting. He threatened and, at one point, assaulted her with a bamboo stick. After that, Nosiran went to the Union Parishad. According to the proceedings of the village court, she filed a case against Kaddus Mia. The full panel of the village courts scrutinized the evidence and found Nosiran’s complaint against Kaddus Mia justified. In the verdict, the court fined Kaddus Mia Tk. 3,000 [£27] as compensation for damaged crops and cautioned him not to do such wrongs again. Kaddus Mia paid the fine and apologized to Nosiran in public.

*Shalish* spontaneously. They are afraid of it. They never get any justice from *Shalish*. Educated and rich people do not need a court, or they can form their own court. The verdict always comes out in favour of influential people” (Kaichan FG).

According to female participants, mediation in village courts “is conducted by males only. It happens openly, in the presence of many people” (Kaichan FG). This suggests that village courts reinforce prevailing power imbalances and inequalities, rather than providing a safe haven for women. According to some, innocent and weak people do not get justice. In the presence of powerful influential people, they do not dare to speak the truth: “village courts cannot achieve anything because they are biased due to administrative connections, undue influence of ruling political parties,

muscle power, and corruption” (Kaichan FG).

Despite negative views, participants were unanimous in preferring village courts over formal courts as it takes too much time to get a final ruling from the latter. They find that, even when a formal court has pronounced its ruling, it is still difficult to get it implemented. For example, the police might demand a bribe from the plaintiff before arresting the accused.

Several interviewees suggest that village courts are run without any budget, which according to their view is a major constraint on the proper functioning of village courts. UP chairmen and members of both Union Parishads noted that they do not receive any compensation for working in village courts, and suggested that an honorarium would work as an incentive.

Respondents put forward several other suggestions. For example, they suggest that village courts should welcome the participation of educated people; that they should be free from political interference; that there should be awareness raising and capacity building initiatives; and, importantly, that village courts should be able to impose heavier fines.



Between the two villages under study, there is no significant variation regarding the kinds of offences mentioned by participants. Seven participants identified land as a source of dispute. Theft, child marriage and dowry were mentioned by three participants each. Five mentioned other family issues such as domestic abuse, inheritance, divorce, and extramarital relations. There were isolated cases of drugs, eve-teasing, and cattle encroaching on crops. As the table below suggests, violence against women<sup>7</sup> looms large in village courts (Table 2).

Source of dispute in rural Bangladesh	Number of respondents
Land dispute	7
Theft	3
Child marriage	3
Dowry	3
Other family issues	5
Drugs	1
Eve-teasing	1
Cattle encroaching on crops	1

Table 2: Sources of rural disputes mentioned in focus groups

### Policy recommendations

The expansion of rural justice in Bangladesh can improve the lives of millions of people in need, and transform social norms that disempower the poor (Lewis and Hossain 2005). However, while village courts have moved justice closer to the socially excluded and marginalized, lack of access remains a serious problem. The rural poor in Bangladesh face serious socio-economic and cultural discrimination, and they have very limited opportunity to voice their issues and seek redress. Within the overarching context of poverty and social exclusion, vulnerable groups are subject to further barriers in claiming their rights and remedying their grievances. They lack knowledge and information regarding available services, while the authorities often lack a clear understanding of their duties and responsibilities. All of this severely limits the scope for the powerless to obtain justice, not only in the formal but also in the informal system.

One way to improve the chances for litigants to gain justice from village courts would be to help litigants find affordable and easily approachable solicitors with a good understanding of rural affairs. Another is to make access easier, for example by helping illiterate people to file their case. A third is to provide training to the UP Chair and other people involved with village courts, sensitizing them to the needs and aspirations of poor and marginal people. In any case, it is necessary to make sure that nobody can use power to determine or influence a verdict.

Women face particular difficulties in getting their voices heard, not least in a village court setting. A women-friendly environment in the court premises is therefore very important. UP representatives and panel members need adequate sensitization with gender-friendly

<sup>7</sup> According to the 2006 Village Courts Act, violence against women does not fall under the jurisdiction of village courts; yet my findings from the focus groups indicate that, in both villages, courts are dealing quite regularly with violence against women and “dowry-related subjugation.”

behaviour. Whenever a woman's interest is at stake, at least one woman should be on the panel.

Indeed, according to the 2010 Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, at least one woman should be incorporated in a village court whenever the interest of women or children is at stake in a case. The 2010 Act describes domestic violence as any physical or mental torture, sexual atrocity or financial damage to a woman or child caused by a person related to the family. Under this Act, a court can enforce heavy fines upon the accused for causing domestic violence. The Act leaves unspecified what "a court" means. According to the experts interviewed, the spirit of the law suggests that it must mean a village court, the purpose of which is to defend social peace and stability. To clarify this point, both the 2006 Village Courts Act and the 2010 Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act should be amended.<sup>8</sup>

There has been technical help under the "activating village courts" project implemented by the Ministry of Local Government in partnership with UNDP and the EU Commission (Local Government Division 2010). The aim of the project is to improve access to justice by establishing village courts all across rural Bangladesh. The project has been a success and village courts are now widely present in rural areas, but unfortunately there has not been any provision for the training of court officials (UP Chairmen and other UP members serving on panels).

The provision of training is absolutely crucial. Well-functioning village courts require engagement not only of UP representatives but also of officials higher up: sub-district officers, judicial officers in district courts, police officers etc. The training institutions of these sections of professionals should integrate village courts into their curriculum. Initiatives should also be taken to incorporate village courts in the training curriculum of the National Institute of Local Government (NILG), Judicial Administration Training Institute (JATI), Bangladesh Civil Services Administration Academy (BCSAA), Police Academy etc. This should entail substantive legal training regarding a core set of fundamental rights which village courts would be required to respect.

To ensure fairness, policy makers should limit the authority of the UP Chairperson; set clear rules for who should chair village courts when the UP Chairman is seen as partial; and make it a requirement that all sessions must be publicly announced. Other desiderata include a streamlining of the process for enforcing decisions, a system for proactive judicial supervision of the courts to comply with fundamental rights, and with village court procedure.

While administrative assistance is essential for the smooth running of village courts, Union Parishads are heavily overburdened. At present, the only functionary available is the UP Secretary. The Secretary not only assists the UP Chairman and his 12-member council but also attends to all types of other functions. Given the increasing workload resulting from the decentralization process, the UP Secretary has insufficient capacity to serve village courts. Therefore, the relevant laws should be amended to create a post of Assistant UP Secretary. The Assistant Secretary would provide valuable assistance to the UP Secretary. He or she would also be the first port of call for all matters relating to village courts. The job description should include, but not be limited to, the management of cases: assist complainants who need

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<sup>8</sup> In Indian panchayats, domestic violence has been integral to the dispute resolution process for a long time. Divorce-related dispute resolution also plays a role in Nepal, Ghana, and Uganda (Anderson 2003).

help filing their cases, issue summons to the parties on behalf of the UP Chairman, call on witnesses, register decisions, issue enforcement orders, keep a record of cases, collect court fees etc.

Development partners should intensify their technical support to the Local Government Division in trying to develop and consolidate village courts. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are an important case in point. Over the decades, NGO interventions in rural Bangladesh have contributed significantly to creating a bridge between justice seekers and justice providers. Partnership between NGOs and local government bodies, especially Union Parishads, has helped reduce mounting pressure on the country's legal justice system. NGOs should further increase their efforts to provide legal aid for destitute litigants. NGOs can also call out corruption, abuse of authority, lack of accountability, or failure of service delivery by Union Parishads.

As my fieldwork suggests, the level of community awareness of legal rights and how they might be enforced is extremely limited, especially in remote areas. In a society largely governed by traditional beliefs and practices, raising people's awareness of their rights is perhaps the most effective means to combat undesirable practices embedded in a system riven by corruption.

Another obvious reason for corruption is that people sitting on courts do not receive any salary. Even a token salary for the officials serving on village courts might reduce corruption.

## **Conclusion**

Informal dispute resolution through village courts has great potential, but marginal and poor sections of rural society in Bangladesh continue to suffer from lack of access to informal justice. Women in particular are struggling to get their voices heard. Access to informal dispute resolution remains one of the core needs of the poor, who cannot afford to gain access to the formal courts. My fieldwork suggests that decisions taken by village courts are often discriminatory as perpetrators, who are typically men, are given a safe pass. Justice will never reach the local level unless the rule of law and decentralization of the state truly become a reality.

Unlocking the potential of village courts will take considerable political will. Members of parliament and local assemblies must get involved. Other relevant stakeholders are the media, academics, and NGOs. The United Nations and other donor agencies should appreciate the importance of village courts in protecting the human security of rural communities. If properly implemented, village courts can play a crucial role in resolving local disputes amicably and thus promoting social safeguards to prevent local conflicts from spiralling out of control.

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