

APPENDIX 2: THE IMPACT OF LEGAL EMPOWERMENT ON SELECTED ASPECTS OF KNOWLEDGE, POVERTY, AND GOVERNANCE IN BANGLADESH: A STUDY OF THREE NGOS

I. Introduction

1. This paper presents the results of survey research conducted in Bangladesh during the period November 2000 through January 2001, as a supplement to the seven-country Legal Empowerment Study undertaken under Asian Development Bank Regional Technical Assistance 5856. The research examined the impact of *legal empowerment*, which is the use of law to increase disadvantaged populations' control over their lives, on selected aspects of sample groups' legal knowledge, economic well being, gender equity, and participation in local governance.

2. Legal empowerment differs from the more general notion of empowerment in that it involves the explicit or implicit use of the law (for example, through training, counseling, or litigation) or relates to public decision-making processes that have a specific legal dimension (for example, equipping citizens or communities with the skills and confidence to appear before an administrative tribunal or to inform local policy development). It frequently combines such activities with initiatives that are not inherently law-oriented, such as community organizing or livelihood development. While they typically include education, most advanced legal empowerment initiatives aim to do more than simply teach people about law. They provide the disadvantaged with opportunities to apply their knowledge through actions that are intended to advance their legal rights, improve their quality of life, or increase their participation in public decision making.

3. The survey involved a controlled comparison of three different approaches to legal empowerment to determine differences in impact on beneficiary populations, as well as demographically similar control samples. The three nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) selected for the survey were: (i) the Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA), which specializes in educating citizens about the law and providing a variety of legal services, notably mediation; (ii) Samata, which concentrates on mobilizing communities to apply the law through mass-based advocacy initiatives; and (iii) Banchte Shekha, which provides mediation and other legal services as part of an integrated development strategy for women.

II. Methodology

4. The study was designed as a controlled comparison among four groups: three intervention (NGO beneficiary) populations that have been exposed to the legal empowerment strategies of the subject NGOs, together with a control population comprising persons who reside in or near the areas in which the three NGOs operate, but who themselves are not beneficiaries of the NGOs' services. In addition, some comparisons were drawn between intervention and control populations associated with a specific NGO.

5. The "intervention" sample was made up of equal numbers of male and female respondents from the operating area of the three NGOs surveyed: Banchte Shekha, Madaripur Legal Aid Association, and Samata. From a list of direct legal empowerment program beneficiaries provided by each NGO, 150 individuals were randomly selected for a total intervention population of 450.

6. The control population is made up of 150 individuals (50 per intervention area) selected randomly from villages in two unions in the thana neighboring each of the NGO intervention areas. Equal numbers of men and women were selected from each village using the *kish* method. This well-established sampling methodology utilizes a preset criteria for systematically selecting interview/research subjects in a research site, so as to ensure that the full diversity of the population is represented in the sample. The control population was selected in such a way as to be representative of the total populations of the three geographical areas where the subject legal empowerment activities are conducted, but with no direct exposure to such programs. The three intervention samples, by virtue of constituting beneficiaries of and/or targeted participants in NGO services, represent the lower economic strata of the communities.

7. Any differences between the intervention samples will suggest differential impact of the various legal empowerment program strategies followed by the three NGOs. Differences between any of the intervention samples compared to the control population will in turn reveal the effect that legal empowerment activities are having on the poor, in comparison to characteristics found among the general populations of the three regions.

8. The control population necessarily has a slight socioeconomic advantage compared to the intervention populations, given the inclusion of all strata of the population, including the poor. For example, the control population has slightly higher levels of education (six percent have achieved higher secondary education or a higher degree, compared to only 2.5 percent among the intervention population; only 55.3 percent of the control group are illiterate, compared to 60.2 percent in the intervention population). Furthermore, the control sample has more landed individuals (73.3 percent) compared to only 43.8 percent in the intervention population, while their land holdings are two to three times larger and more productive. In addition, median monthly individual income levels of the control group are up to two times greater than those of the intervention sample.

III. Profiles of the Three NGOs

a. Banchte Shekha:

9. Banchte Shekha is a women's development organization based in Jessore district. Established in 1982, it pursues an integrated development approach in which legal education, counseling, and dispute resolution services constitute an integral part of a broader community development strategy that includes health education, non-formal education, income generation, voter education, and credit. Banchte Shekha works in 10 predominantly rural areas of Jessore and Khulna districts. In 1999, it served a direct beneficiary population of 25,000 women, while another 200,000 women indirectly benefited from voter education and other activities. Banchte Shekha has achieved a favorable reputation in the Bangladesh development community for mobilizing women, strengthening their status within the family and community, and raising their confidence and capacity. As part of its operating strategy, it collaborates with other NGOs and with local government officials, the police, and other public authorities; however, much of its work deals with communities independently of state agencies.

10. Banchte Shekha's principal mode of engaging direct beneficiaries is through the formation of community-level women's groups. The groups, which average approximately 25 to 30 members, provide an opportunity for women to leave the traditional confines of the household and meet and interact in a secure environment. Group members elect a leader and a treasurer, the latter managing the modest savings that the women deposit to a joint account. Members can take loans from the group savings for emergency, personal, or business reasons.

The group serves as the forum for most of Banchte Shekha's education programs, including informal legal education.

11. The legal program includes a combination of education, counselling, alternative dispute resolution (ADR, which it provides through a modified version of the traditional *shalish* dispute resolution forum), and—where there is no other recourse but to go to court—formal litigation. Unlike conventional *shalish* as practiced in most Bangladeshi communities, in which men dominate the committee of local elders who preside over the dispute, women play a central role in Banchte Shekha *shalish* committees. At least seven members of each 11-person village mediation committee are women. In addition, women constitute the majority of beneficiaries of the mediation program. In the typical scenario, a woman whom Banchte Shekha first assists in settling a legal problem concerning domestic violence, maintenance, or violation of inheritance rights subsequently joins the organization as a beneficiary of other support services that help her to establish an independent existence. The legal services program is facilitated by volunteer women paralegals (many of whom are former beneficiaries of Banchte Shekha legal services), who advise women beneficiaries and convene the *shalish*.

b. Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA)

12. MLAA is an NGO that specializes in community legal service delivery. It is well known throughout Bangladesh as a pioneer and innovator in mediation, legal aid, and paralegal development. MLAA is particularly well known for the development of a model ADR program that is designed to make *shalish* procedures more transparent and the decisions reached by *shalish* committees fairer. Target beneficiary groups include both affluent and disadvantaged men and women.

13. Since its establishment in 1978, MLAA has helped citizens of Madaripur district and neighboring Shariatpur and Gopalganj districts to settle disputes in an equitable manner through a modified *shalish* system. Its activities include: organizing local mediation committees consisting of the Chairman and members of the Union Parishad (UP, the lowest local government unit), teachers of regular and *madrassa* (religious) schools, and local elites; conducting training programs and workshops that aim to influence the knowledge and attitudes of influential community members who voluntarily serve on the committees; and organizing mediation sessions in which committee members actively participate in resolving local disputes. These interventions have so far ensured that vulnerable individuals in rural areas have an increased chance of receiving a fair hearing. Most of the cases handled by MLAA are settled in a efficient and cost effective manner. In order to replicate facilitated mediation services throughout the country, MLAA also provides other NGOs and CSO with training and advice in its proven methodology, known as the MLAA model. In its technical resource capacity, MLAA interacts with approximately 200 implementing NGOs.

c. Samata

14. Established in Pabna District in 1976, Samata is a community development organization whose integrated development work with the rural poor includes, *inter alia*, non-formal primary education and human development training, employment creation, disaster preparedness, and legal services. Samata enhances the capacity of community leaders through leadership training and civic and human rights education. It also provides modest legal aid and mediation services in some working areas, and helps members to acquire government agricultural extension services and subsidized fertilizer and insecticides. Samata's programs have a strong gender focus, with female-headed households receiving special preference in land distribution

programs and joint ownership of land by both husbands and wives. Most of Samata's beneficiary groups were formed by women. Members receive literacy training, legal rights education, and training in homestead gardening, nursery, fisheries and livestock raising, as well as collateral-free loans. Samata's beneficiary population includes male and female wage earners, the unemployed, day laborers, marginal farmers, and fishermen. It presently works in 63 Unions in Pabna, Sirajgonj, and Rajbari districts.

15. Land rights advocacy is a primary focus of Samata's legal assistance program. It has achieved great success in this field. Its law program includes assistance in the recovery and sustainable management of *khas* land, which is legally managed by local government authorities and available to citizens for productive or community use. Such land is frequently subject to aggressive seizure by local elites and land grabbers. Samata has created strong pressure for the proper implementation of land laws through the formation of 2,613 organized groups. To date, it has recovered and distributed almost 3,400 acres of land. More than 8,300 landless people have benefited from the land distribution program. In addition, Samata has leased 80 acres of khas water bodies among five organized fishing groups. It has formed a network of 51 local NGOs (the Land Network for Development or LAND) and trained smaller NGOs in different parts of the country. LAND has identified 93,640 acres of khas land and 20,682 acres of khas water bodies in its work area. Samata works with a number of public agencies, including the Ministry of Land, land registration and record offices, thana Khas Land Distribution Committees, the district commissioner, police, judges, and lawyers.

IV. Findings

a. General

16. Regardless of the particular legal empowerment strategy employed by the three NGOs surveyed, all are helping to improve the quality of life of the poor. To varying degrees, each organization is off-setting gender inequities by equipping women with critical knowledge, access to services, and avenues to advance their interests and to obtain justice when their legal rights are violated. In addition, the NGOs are helping: (i) to improve community recognition of the role and status of women and the importance of citizen-government engagement; (ii) to increase the confidence of the poor generally, and women in particular, regarding their capacity to effect change; and (iii) to mobilize local communities to articulate their interests and to successfully apply the law and advocacy techniques, to lessen the exploitation and marginalization of the poor.

17. The survey results demonstrate that, compared to the control population, all intervention populations have benefited from knowledge and application of the law, and that their socioeconomic vulnerability has been reduced. All of the intervention samples scored higher in four critical areas: general knowledge of law; engagement and confidence in citizen advocacy; positive perceptions of gender equity and the role of women in governance; and confidence in the value of law and good governance. The most sizable gains in these areas were achieved where legal empowerment activities were conducted as part of an integrated development approach that combines legal and socioeconomic development activities; where high levels of women's leadership were sustained through the program period; and where women's direct participation was facilitated by and through community advocacy efforts. Furthermore, of all the highest-ranking populations (that is, those in which the NGOs showed high results compared to the controls), women experienced the greatest benefits of such an approach across the board.

18. Where the strategy focused on mobilizing community advocacy initiatives and engaged public officials, those surveyed expressed greater confidence in governance and public services. They also are more likely to view advocacy for land rights as a positive action. The survey results further suggest that success in securing legally-mandated control of common lands by, or for the benefit of, the poor is facilitated by regular citizen-government engagement.

19. Where focused legal education and training is supplemented by mediation and other specialized legal services, confidence in knowledge of the law and the perceived benefits that flow from that knowledge is highest. Identification of NGOs as a source of help in securing access to justice is also highest amongst participants of programs that follow this very focused approach.

20. While concern for law and order is among the top concerns for survey respondents (employment and secure livelihood ranks highest), many of the formal legal institutions are inaccessible to the poor or fail to protect the interests of the disadvantaged. For the poor, and for women in particular, knowledge of rights, informal legal services, and community advocacy play a key role in helping to advance their interests. This helps to ensure access to justice despite the current inadequacies of formal dispute resolution and administrative decision-making mechanisms, as well as helping to enhance the quality of local governance.

b. Specific Findings

21. Beyond the general findings noted above, the research results indicate that the legal empowerment efforts of the three NGOs surveyed have an impact on knowledge, poverty and the empowerment of the poor, and on the quality of governance. These specific findings are discussed in the following sections.

c. Impact on Knowledge

22. A key finding of the survey research is that NGO-assisted populations tend to understand the law better than their control counterparts. The NGO populations as a whole demonstrated a better grasp than the control groups in each of a series of ten questions (some described below) that tested knowledge of family, inheritance, and land law.

23. This pattern assumes greater significance when disaggregated by NGO. For the two organizations that place particular emphasis on educating their members/beneficiaries and that follow a more integrated approach to legal empowerment—Samata and Banchte Shekha—there are more instances of noteworthy differences between their members/beneficiary populations and control groups than for MLAA. For example, only two percent of the Banchte Shekha population mistakenly believe that it is legal for a traditional religious body to find a woman guilty of adultery and to order her stoned and beaten in public (*fatwah*), as opposed to 18 percent of the control group. Similarly, more than 83 percent of the Samata population knows that a widow is entitled to inherit part of her husband's land, versus 58 percent for the control.

24. Banchte Shekha's member/beneficiaries registered at least 10 percent more correct answers than the control population for five of the knowledge-oriented questions. The gap was as high as 44 percent (68 percent versus 24 percent) where the respondents indicated that they know the correct judicial venue (family court) to which a woman should go if pressured,

threatened, or physically abused by her husband and his family in demanding increased *dowry*.¹ Samata's sample population reflects significant differences, ranging from 13.3 percent to 41.3 percent in four questions. MLAA beneficiaries reveal greater legal knowledge than the control population in two instances, by margins of 15.3 percent and 10 percent. As might be expected, female Banchte Shekha members exhibit far better knowledge than the female samples associated with the other NGO or control groups regarding three questions pertaining to women's legal status.

25. The survey responses accordingly suggest that Banchte Shekha and Samata member/beneficiary populations tend to learn more about the law, relative to their control groups, than those of MLAA. Banchte Shekha is especially successful in educating women about their rights. This may reflect a number of factors, including the integrated approach through which legal education and support services form part of a broader development strategy, and the emphasis placed on gender and women's empowerment. MLAA, in contrast, focuses more on providing mediation and litigation services. A second explanation may be that the MLAA population is significantly less educated than its control group, with a gap larger than Samata's and reversed in the case of Banchte Shekha (whose members demonstrate greater levels of literacy than its control population). For example, 67 percent of MLAA's beneficiaries are illiterate or can only sign their names, compared with 46 percent for the corresponding control respondents.

26. MLAA is conversely distinguished by providing a widely utilized service to which villagers can turn for legal assistance. Sixty-seven percent of MLAA respondents identified an NGO worker as the source to which a young woman can go for "good legal advice or assistance" if she is "not sure about her legal rights regarding marriage, *dowry*, abuse, divorce, inheritance" or other legal issues. This is by far the highest rate for any of the several choices of assistance from which respondents were invited to choose. This contrasts with the 22.7 percent for Banchte Shekha (which is still significant) and 1.3 percent for Samata. In addition, the MLAA control group is the only one that identified an NGO as a source of legal assistance, with a 14 percent response. This may indicate that even persons otherwise unattached to MLAA are aware of its services. To the crucial extent that legal knowledge is not just a function of knowing the law, but of knowing where to go to seek redress, such awareness is noteworthy.

27. It should not automatically be assumed that all MLAA respondents, whether beneficiaries or control group members, necessarily had this particular NGO in mind as their source of "good legal advice or assistance." But MLAA clearly is the leading provider of such services in its district. Furthermore, certain development-oriented NGOs in the area have learned about the law through MLAA training, which in turn makes MLAA at least indirectly responsible for community members being able to seek help from those other NGOs.

28. The survey research further suggests that, absent other factors or circumstances, knowledge does not necessarily translate into action. Five of the six NGO and control groups indicated a good grasp of the fact that *dowry* is illegal (over 90 percent, with the significant exception of 76 percent for the Samata control population). Yet roughly half of both the total NGO intervention and control populations indicated that *dowry* is nevertheless paid in connection with the marriage of female members of the target communities.

¹ Dowry is the payment of money, livestock, or material goods such as motorcycles by the bride's family to the family of the groom, in order to secure a marriage. Dowry demands frequently continue following marriage, and may also be accompanied by threats of or actual violence against the wife.

d. Impact on Poverty and Empowerment

29. Though most development institutions have come to regard poverty in terms broader than material circumstances alone, such circumstances still merit consideration in reviewing the impact of legal empowerment work. A comprehensive review of the effect of such work on income would require a “before-and-after” longitudinal study and/or a more extensive survey methodology involving proxy indicators of economic status. While both these approaches were beyond the modest budget of this survey research, significant differences in material circumstances can still be discerned.

30. One such difference concerns access to *khas* lands. The NGO populations as a whole (by a margin of 17.8 versus 6 percent for the control groups), and Samata in particular (28 percent versus 10 percent), report that the poor have use of these lands as specified by law. The comparison must be drawn carefully, however, since the NGO sample also reports greater use by elite populations than the controls do. Statistically, this can be explained by the fact that much higher percentages of the control populations do not report any *khas* lands at all in their communities, so their percentages of both poor and wealthy use of such lands are much lower. The results also demonstrate the value of effective advocacy.

31. Similarly, there is tentative evidence of NGO engagement meeting with some success in making such lands available to the poor. While a rather low 19.3 percent of the NGO-assisted populations consider pro-poor mobilization for *khas* lands successful, this substantially exceeds the mere 5.3 percent of the control population who characterized such efforts as successful. The more dramatic difference is specific to Samata, for which this issue is a primary focus of activity. Thirty-six percent of Samata respondents perceive success, in contrast with 0 percent for its control. These advocacy efforts may translate into substantial benefits for the poor, while at the same time underlining the challenge of the struggle for land tenure.

32. The impact of legal empowerment on the status and material circumstances of women is demonstrated by its effectiveness in restraining the widespread, illegal practice of *dowry*. As might be assumed, this is most evident for Banchte Shekha. More than twice as great a percentage of its members (84.7 percent) as its control group (40 percent) state that the families of young women of their villages are not obliged to provide *dowry* when a daughter marries. Furthermore, only 9.4 percent of its members report that the family would have to pay 10,000 taka (approximately \$200) or more, as opposed to 48 percent for the control group.

33. Though not nearly as dramatic, the Samata responses also suggest impact on the *dowry* problem. Thirty percent of its members report that no *dowry* would be necessary, in contrast with 20 percent of the control. Of perhaps greater statistical significance, 53.3 percent of Samata members report paying 10,000 taka, versus 74 percent in the control group. The control groups for Banchte Shekha and Samata, however, include wealthier households that would be expected to make higher *dowry* payments.

34. The figures for Banchte Shekha and Samata starkly differ from those for MLAA, where 36.7 percent of the beneficiaries and 86 percent of the control report no *dowry* payment. The differences among the three may in part reflect the fact that Banchte Shekha explicitly and exclusively focuses on empowering women and Samata partly does so, whereas MLAA does so only implicitly through its dispute resolution and litigation services.

35. Empowerment, like poverty, is not simply a function of material circumstances; it also depends on participation by the poor in decisions that shape their lives. There is evidence that

the integrated legal/developmental strategies of Banchte Shekha and Samata have a positive impact. For example, they seem to have a favorable impact on community attitudes regarding a woman's right to seek legal redress. Compared with the control groups, significantly higher percentages of members of both organizations report that a young woman is "taking action to solve a legal problem" when she seeks advice or assistance in applying the law (87.3 percent for Banchte Shekha, as opposed to 68 percent for its control; 77.3 percent for Samata as opposed to 64 percent for its control). Similarly, only 4.7 percent and 10.7 percent of the Banchte Shekha and Samata populations, respectively, consider that such action is likely to create more problems, as opposed to 16 percent and 32 percent for their respective control groups. Beyond the positive attitudes concerning women's participation and equity that they suggest, these results may also suggest a confidence in the ability of the law to resolve legal problems among those served by the NGOs. This contrasts with the apparent sense among members of the control population that legal action is likely to create more problems.

36. Citizen involvement in joint actions (such as group saving, community development, establishing schools) is another manifestation of an important type of participation—particularly for poor or otherwise disadvantaged persons who typically are powerless when acting alone. Nearly twice as high a percentage of Banchte Shekha respondents (31.3 percent versus 16 percent for its control group) and more than three times as high a rate of Samata respondents (35.3 rate versus 10 percent) reported group actions. The fact that both Banchte Shekha and Samata members have a greater history of mobilizing large numbers of individuals to advocate for social and governance reforms may be viewed as evidence of their participation in decisions affecting their lives.

37. Moreover, nearly all of the Banchte Shekha and Samata populations who engage in participatory actions also report complete or partial success. Substantial portions of their respective memberships are not only participating in efforts to advance their interests, but are meeting with success in ways that improve their material circumstances and/or control over their lives. Whether such enhanced participation and empowerment involve legal empowerment is unclear. At the very least, it can be said that the impact flows in part from an integrated development strategy that includes important rights-oriented elements.

38. Similarly, the survey strongly suggests a decreasing reliance on traditional elites and patrons, which may also be regarded as poverty-alleviating and/or empowering. Just 31 percent of the NGO population suggested that a young woman should turn to elites or patrons for help, in contrast with 65.3 percent for the combined control groups. Similarly, only 25.1 percent of the NGO population would turn to elites in the first instance if personally facing "legal or social injustice," in contrast with 57.3 percent of the control population. The gap is even greater for NGO and control women (21.3 percent versus 60 percent) and for women associated with MLAA (only 10.7 percent, in contrast with 36 percent of MLAA-affiliated men). Consistently, the NGO populations express far less confidence in local leaders than do the control groups, with only 19.1 percent of the former considering the village chief "a good and fair person," versus 43.3 percent for the latter.

39. This is not to say that such dependence on elites is necessarily counterproductive or poverty-perpetuating. Yet the more participatory and equitable interaction that beneficiaries enjoy through their engagement with NGOs may play a role in helping to reduce poverty. At a minimum, turning to NGOs is more likely to advance the specific interests of the poor. In contrast, relying on a patron for legal advice or assistance can exacerbate dependence or reinforce the *status quo*.

40. In providing alternative outlets for dispute resolution and redress, MLAA and Banchte Shekha seem to be contributing to this decreasing reliance on elites among their member/beneficiary populations. As already noted, their beneficiaries/members consider NGOs to be important sources of legal advice and assistance for young women in need of help (62.7 percent for MLAA, as opposed to 14 percent for its control group; 22.7 percent for Banchte Shekha, as opposed to 0 percent for its control). By a 32 percent to 13.3 percent margin, women affiliated with Banchte Shekha express a far stronger preference for NGO assistance for females than men do.

41. Similarly, if personally facing “legal or social injustice,” 24.4 percent of the NGO population as a whole would first seek NGO assistance, versus 0.7 percent of the control population. As expected, given its particular focus on dispute, MLAA stands out in this regard. Fifty-one percent of its beneficiary population selected NGO assistance as a first choice, versus only two percent for its control group. Though not as great, the difference for Banchte Shekha is also significant: 16 percent versus 0 percent.

42. It is important to note that MLAA is not an absolute alternative to local elites, in the sense that to some extent it involves them in its operations as mediators. While some disputes are handled by MLAA’s staff or lawyers without resort to mediation, in the many instances where mediation is necessary MLAA engages those who might generally be regarded as the less conservative members of local elites. Thus, MLAA respondents who select NGO workers as the persons whom they would approach in the first instance may well end up before panels composed of the wealthier and better educated members of the community. At the same time, MLAA seems to be gradually modifying the nature of these panels, both by introducing women (who rarely participate in traditional village mediation) and by pressing for greater reliance on law, rather than traditional biases, in resolving disputes.

43. Banchte Shekha also makes use of local elites in its mediations. But the dynamic is different from that of MLAA, in that it more explicitly presses for an equal role for women. Of even greater importance, it grounds its mediations on a developmental base of income generation, education, consciousness-raising, and overall empowerment, which in turn substantially affect the underlying dynamic of the mediations that it organizes.

44. Although Banchte Shekha and MLAA replace elites in certain respects and rely on them in others, their respective approaches to dispute resolution differ. MLAA’s mediation work reaches a far broader population than Banchte Shekha’s, while the latter more fully transforms the dynamic of dispute resolution in fundamental ways. As a result, the women served by Banchte Shekha enter the mediation on more equal footing with men, and with considerably less subservience to participating elites. Of additional importance, most of the respondents who have participated in mediation (whether NGO or control populations) report complete or partial success.

45. Evidence of at least a sense of empowerment can be inferred from respondents’ self-assessments regarding knowledge of the law. Thirty-eight percent of the NGO populations consider their knowledge good or excellent, as opposed to 20 percent of the control groups, with the NGO-affiliated women registering significantly higher percentages than the men (47.1 percent versus 29.3 percent). This also can be seen as evidence of superior knowledge achieved through the focused and sustained attention devoted to women’s legal awareness. Women’s higher self-assessment is also an indication of growing levels of empowerment and confidence relative to men. Given women’s generally subordinate role in society, this is a very

important trend. Similarly, a much higher percentage of the NGO populations (21.3 percent) attribute their knowledge to NGOs, versus 2.7 percent for the control groups.

46. Further evidence flows from the significantly higher rates of Banchte Shekha and Samata populations who report that they have benefited from knowledge of the law. Fifty-one percent of the Banchte Shekha respondents indicate that they have benefited, as opposed to 14 percent for the control population. The rates for Samata are 33.3 percent and 16 percent, respectively.

47. While women's higher self-assessment ratings regarding knowledge of the law may reflect greater self-confidence and a sense of empowerment, a higher percentage of NGO-affiliated men report benefiting from such knowledge (58.2 percent, as opposed to 32.4 percent). Nonetheless, NGO-affiliated women do benefit at a higher reported rate than control group women, by 32.4 percent to 20 percent.

48. It is highly plausible that economic empowerment helps pave the way for legal empowerment. For example, an impoverished woman may be financially unable to challenge an abusive husband or an exploitative landlord, even if she understands her legal rights and has access to supportive legal services. Accordingly, it is noteworthy that a significantly higher percentage of the NGO populations report having "cash savings for emergencies for the future" (40.7 percent for the three groups combined, compared with 24 percent for the control populations). The gap is even more significant for women associated with the NGOs: 48.9 percent, versus 25.3 percent for the control group females. In response to a related question, more than double the percentage of NGO-affiliated women versus women members of the control group (44.4 percent to 21.3 percent) viewed savings as a key strategy for improving their personal well-being and that of their household. In contrast, the difference for men (25.8 percent versus 28 percent) is negligible.

49. The greatest NGO-specific difference regarding emergency savings occurs in the case of Samata, where 52 percent have such savings, as opposed to 22 percent for the control population. Thus, the organization that has the strongest activist orientation demonstrates the greatest gap between beneficiary and control savings prevalence.

50. The significance of savings is further illuminated by respondents' identification of the main obstacles to improving their lives and fulfilling their hopes. Both the NGO and control groups report "inadequate funds" as by far the largest problem (74 percent and 79.3 percent respectively). "Insufficient land" and "insufficient employment opportunities" also figured prominently in responses.

51. The preceding responses do not necessarily convey all of greatest obstacles facing the sample populations. For example, people may be too embarrassed to report "family conflict" to an interviewer. "Inadequate funds" may result from injustices that respondents do not categorize as such. Furthermore, while a problem such as violence against women is an assault on women's rights, dignity, and physical security, it also should be seen as an action that undercuts their economic independence and prospects in a variety of ways.

52. A broader conclusion to be drawn from the identification of obstacles is that many types of legal empowerment work need to address economic empowerment if they are to respond to the priorities of the disadvantaged. As important as it is to simply educate people about their rights, it is even more important to respect their identification of their greatest needs, and to structure rights-oriented work so that it responds to their need for financial resources,

employment, and land. Thus, while it is appropriate to emphasize a rights-oriented approach to development, it may be even more useful to pursue a development-oriented strategy for strengthening rights. This can translate into legal empowerment strategies that prioritize social and economic rights without abandoning civil and political rights.

e. Impact on Governance

53. The survey indicates that NGO populations seem to be consistently more satisfied with public services and the performance of public officials than the control groups. There is a clear pattern of positive responses across the three NGOs and through the diversity of questions posed. A higher percentage of the NGO populations than the control groups rated public services and officials as “excellent” or “good.” This includes primary education (70.6 percent for the NGO groups versus 46.7 percent for the controls), health clinic/hospital (38.5 percent versus 12.7 percent), and law and order (43.3 percent versus 24 percent). Even where the differences are less significant (as with the Thana Development Committee, which is convened by the District Commission to better coordinate government and NGO activities at the thana level, and with Members of Parliament), the NGO populations still express greater satisfaction than the controls regarding almost all of the fifteen categories surveyed. In response to a similar additional question, 23.4 percent of the NGO populations rated the performance of the Union Parishad in the last year as “excellent” or “good,” in contrast with 12 percent of the control groups.

54. This greater level of satisfaction should not be taken as absolute approval of government services. With respect to several categories, the single greatest response for both the NGO and control groups is “not at all good” or “don’t know.” In other instances, the combination of “moderately good” and “not at all good”—or even just “not at all good”—surpasses “good” and “excellent” combined. Still, the consistent pattern of greater satisfaction among NGO beneficiaries is clear.

55. The reason for this pattern is far less clear. It would be tempting to associate the higher ratings with the facilitation of public service delivery by NGOs. This could include educating partner populations about available services, or helping them to obtain access to those services. Yet the pattern includes MLAA, which appears to be much less actively involved in such activities (with the exception of what some respondents consider “law and order”) than are the other two NGOs. In addition, the higher ratings extend to public services such as electricity and road maintenance, in which none of the three NGOs are involved.

56. Contrary to some popular assumptions, these survey results do seem to suggest that activist NGOs do not necessarily fuel dissatisfaction with government. In fact, for certain categories the members of Samata—arguably the most activist of the three organizations surveyed—are linked to the greatest degree of relative satisfaction compared to the control group.

57. The survey probed attitudes toward women’s participation in governance through two questions: one requesting respondents to rate the performance of recently elected members of the Union Parishad; the other more generally asking whether “women’s involvement as elected officials makes government/public services better or worse.”² The integrated development

² In the last local government election, women were, for the first time, directly elected to three reserved seats, totaling nearly 13,000 newly-elected women officials. These reserved seats represent three times the constituencies of the general seats, which few women currently fill.

approach of Banchte Shekha and Samata appear to bring benefits in both regards, particularly the latter. By respective margins of 83.3 percent to 60 percent, and 56.7 percent to 24 percent, the respective memberships are more favorably inclined to such participation than are their control groups. In contrast, the beneficiary population of MLAA, which focuses less directly and intensively on attitudinal change, lags behind its control population by 53.3 percent to 72 percent.

58. Another pair of questions explores participation in governance, with moderate but noteworthy differentials between the NGO and control populations. Forty-two percent of Banchte Shekha respondents report that government officials “always” or “sometimes” discuss respondents’ concerns with them, versus 30 percent for the control. Similarly, 44.7 percent of those respondents report being able to individually influence Union Parishad members’ decisions, as opposed to 34 percent in the control. The gap is smaller for Samata, while for MLAA it is reversed.

59. These results correlate with the degree to which respondents believe their UP members indulge in corruption. Only 18.7 percent of the Banchte Shekha respondents hold this view, versus 32 percent for the control. Once again, the gap is smaller for Samata, and reversed for MLAA. A possible conclusion to draw from this correlation is that the role played by NGOs in facilitating community engagement with public officials contributes to improvements in their actual or perceived accountability.

60. Considered in isolation, these results do not make a definite case for NGO-attributable impact on governance, as the differentials are not large enough. Taken together with other responses considered here, however, they form a positive pattern of impact involving organizations that pursue an integrated development strategy that includes legal empowerment activities to promote participation, responsiveness, and perhaps even accountability in government.

61. This conclusion assumes particular significance in light of the respondents’ replies to a question asking, “What are the top three sources you can rely on to best represent your interests and make your life better?” Consistently across the three NGOs, and by a margin of 34.9 percent versus 4.7 percent for the combined control groups, NGO respondents selected NGO workers or activities, including mediation). The largest NGO-specific margin attached to MLAA (45.3 percent versus 6 percent). This suggests that MLAA’s mediation and related legal services are highly appreciated by beneficiaries.

62. Reliance on NGOs inversely relates to decreasing dependence on local elected officials, such as UP members. Consistently across the three NGOs, and by a margin of 25.3 percent versus 43.3 percent for the control groups, NGO respondents selected those local officials.

63. An interesting facet of these results is that, with the exception of greater male reliance on NGOs in the case of Samata, the NGO respondents indicate that women are more inclined than men to seek NGO assistance. That is, while the men associated with the other two NGOs still prefer NGOs to local officials, the emphasis placed on NGO support services is much greater for women. This pattern may reflect the fact that most public officials are men, and that they may have substantial gender biases, in which case women may be less likely to regard them as sources of assistance where other options exist. The Samata exception may be attributable to the fact that Banchte Shekha specifically serves women and MLAA legal services place particular emphasis on women’s legal rights issues, whereas Samata values gender equity but does not make it the main thrust of its operations.

64. One facet of governance concerns which formal mechanisms a citizen turns to in seeking redress. MLAA stands out in this regard, with a far lower percentage of its beneficiaries (3.3 percent) reporting a preference for court litigation, in contrast with its control population (16 percent) and members of the other two NGOs (both 23.3 percent).

V. Conclusions

65. The Bangladesh survey indicates greater knowledge of the law on the part of the intervention populations, which can potentially contribute to greater public participation and other empowerment goals. It similarly suggests positive impact on aspects of gender equity, poverty, and governance. These include reductions in the prevalence of *dowry*, receptivity to women in public office, improvements in the material circumstances of member/beneficiaries, and greater responsiveness on the part of local public officials.

66. Though the nature and impact of the three NGOs' legal empowerment work vary among them and from issue to issue, it seems clear that they have an impact on some of the problems affecting their respective communities. This in turn suggests that donors, governments, and other concerned institutions should explore legal empowerment as a tool for advancing justice and socioeconomic development.

TABLE I: KNOWLEDGE OF LAW

TOPIC	RANK*			
	1	2	3	4
Girls Age at Marriage	Banchte Shekha	Control	Samata	MLAA
Boys Age at Marriage	Banchte Shekha	Samata	Control	MLAA
Dowry	Banchte Shekha	MLAA	Samata	Control
Dower	Samata	Banchte Shekha	Control	MLAA
Consent of Girl Required	Banchte Shekha	MLAA	Samata	MLAA
Court Action for Dowry Related Violence	Banchte Shekha	MLAA	Control	Samata
Talak (Verbal Divorce)	Banchte Shekha	MLAA	Samata/ Control	
Inheritance Rights of Women	Banchte Shekha	MLAA/ Samata		Control

SUM OF RANKS: Banchte
Shekha = 9
Samata = 21
MLAA = 22
Control = 26

TABLE II: PERCEPTIONS

TOPIC	RANK*			
	1	2	3	4
Women Who Use the Law are Problem Makers	Banchte Shekha	MLAA	Samata	Control
Female Participation Improves the Quality of Governance	Banchte Shekha	Samata	MLAA	Control
Male and Female's Have Equal Say	Samata	Banchte Shekha	Control	MLAA
Acceptable to Beat Wife?	Banchte Shekha	MLAA/Control		Samata
Aware That Fatwah (Religious Edicts) Are Illegal	Banchte Shekha	MLAA	Samata	Control
Knowledge of Land Rights Advocacy Organizations	Samata	MLAA	Banchte Shekha	Control
Land rights Advocacy Legal	Samata	Banchte Shekha/MLAA		Control

SUM OF RANKS:

Banchte
Shekha = 11
Samata = 15
MLAA = 17
Control = 25

TABLE III: EMPOWERMENT AND USE OF LAW THROUGH ADVOCACY

TOPIC	RANK*			
	1	2	3	4
Participation in Community Development.	Banchte Shekha	Samata	MLAA	Control
Involvement in Collective Action	Samata	Banchte Shekha	Control	MLAA
Benefit from Knowledge of Law	MLAA	Banchte Shekha	Samata	Control
Benefit from Community Development.	Samata	MLAA	Control	Banchte Shekha
Perception of Corruption in Union Parishad	Samata	Control	MLAA	Banchte Shekha
Success in Land Rights Actions	Samata	MLAA	Banchte Shekha	Control

SUM OF RANKS:

Samata = 5
Banchte
Shekha = 8
MLAA = 9
Control = 15

TABLE IV: POVERTY REDUCTION

TOPIC	RANK			
	1	2	3	4
Vulnerability	Samata	Banchte Shekha	MLAA	Control
Life improvements Over 5 Years	Banchte Shekha	Control	Samata	MLAA
Emergency Cash	Banchte Shekha	Samata	Control	MLAA

SUM OF RANKS:
 Banchte
 Shekha = 4
 Samata = 6
 Control = 9
 MLAA = 11

*Note: Rank 1 – highest scores; Rank 2 - second highest scores; Rank 3 - third highest scores; Rank 4 - lowest scores. This refers to ranked knowledge, perceptions, empowerment and use of law through advocacy, and poverty reduction. Sum of ranks refers to the total score accumulated from the respective rankings for each variable. Low sum of ranks refers to greater knowledge of law; more positive perceptions regarding gender equity, violence against women, and advocacy initiatives; greater empowerment through participation in community development and governance and effective use of the law through advocacy; and improvements in quality of life including reductions in vulnerability and poverty.