Final Report on

Baseline, Rapid Security Assessment, and Stakeholder Mapping in 11 Unions of Brahmanbaria Sadar

Project: "Her Vote, Her Voice" From Brahmanbaria to Nation: Promoting Safe and Informed Voting for Rural Women through Legal Literacy and Online Outreach

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Acknowledgment

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Project: *"Her Vote, Her Voice: From Brahmanbaria to Nation – Promoting Safe and Informed Voting for Rural Women through Legal Literacy and Online Outreach"*

Lead Researcher:

Nadia Nahrin Rahman

Assistant Professor

Department of Mass Communication and Journalism

Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)

Assistance by:

Abu Sufian

Program Officer (Community Mobilization and Advocacy)

South Asia Center for Media in Development (SACMID)

Shadman Al Arbi

Program Officer (Digital Communications)

South Asia Center for Media in Development (SACMID)

Co-ordination:

Syed Kamrul Hasan

Deputy Director

South Asia Center for Media in Development (SACMID)

Acknowledgment and Research Note

This report presents the findings of the *Baseline, Rapid Security Assessment, and Stakeholder Mapping in 11 Unions of Brahmanbaria Sadar* under the project **"Her Vote, Her Voice: From Brahmanbaria to Nation – Promoting Safe and Informed Voting for Rural Women through Legal Literacy and Online Outreach."** It reflects a collaborative effort grounded in academic rigor, field-based inquiry, and community engagement.

This study represents one of the first systematic efforts in the district to document the lived experiences of rural women voters. It identifies persistent barriers such as patriarchal influence, misinformation, infrastructural limitations, and restricted mobility, while also highlighting opportunities—particularly the increasing use of smartphones and digital platforms for information access.

The research was led by **Lead Researcher: Nadia Nahrin Rahman**, Assistant Professor in the Mass Communication and Journalism Department at **Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)**. Under her academic leadership, the study adopted a mixed-method approach combining quantitative surveys, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and participatory community dialogues to explore the multidimensional barriers affecting women's independent voting rights in Brahmanbaria Sadar.

The research and field implementation were **assisted by Abu Sufian**, Program Officer (Community Mobilization and Advocacy), South Asia Center for Media in Development (SACMID), and **Shadman Al Arbi**, Program Officer (Digital Communications), South Asia Center for Media in Development (SACMID). Their contributions included community mobilization, stakeholder engagement, data coordination, digital outreach strategy, and support in organizing validation trainings and dialogues across the eleven unions.

Overall coordination of the project was carried out by **Syed Kamrul Hasan**, Deputy Director, South Asia Center for Media in Development (SACMID). Through his strategic leadership and continuous oversight, he ensured that the research design, field implementation, and analytical processes remained methodologically sound, ethically grounded, and operationally coherent. His guidance strengthened institutional coordination, safeguarded compliance with ethical standards, and maintained alignment with donor commitments and project objectives, thereby upholding the overall quality, credibility, and accountability of the initiative.

PREFACE

The right to vote is one of the most fundamental expressions of democratic citizenship. In Bangladesh, this right is guaranteed by the Constitution and reinforced by international human rights frameworks, including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 21)* (Morsink, 2022) and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)*. Since the country's independence, elections have remained a central mechanism through which citizens shape political representation and governance. Women, as voters and political actors, have been an integral part of this democratic journey, contributing to voter turnout, civic engagement, and over time increased representation in public life. Because women's meaningful participation in elections and political leadership serves as a key measure of the strength and quality of a democratic system (Ara & Northcote, 2020). However, despite these constitutional guarantees and historical contributions, women's ability to exercise their voting rights freely and independently has not always been assured. Particularly, in rural areas, electoral participation continues to be influenced by patriarchy, social barriers, and gendered control over decision-making (Azam et al., 2025). While women may physically attend polling centers, their choices are often shaped by family members, community leaders rather than personal political judgment. Concerns related to safety, intimidation, lack of legal awareness, and limited access to credible information further weaken the promise of democratic participation.

Therefore, this project *"Her Vote, Her Choice: From Brahmanbaria to Nation"* is rooted in the belief that strengthening democracy requires addressing these everyday barriers faced by women voters. Implemented in eleven unions (*N = 11*) of Brahmanbaria Upazila, the project emphasizes legal literacy, digital inclusion, and media awareness as essential tools for empowering women to engage confidently in electoral processes. This project represents one of the first steps in understanding the current realities of women's voting experiences, including issues of safety, patriarchal control, access to information, and exposure to rumors and misinformation.

Another important factor is, over recent years, the growing role of digital media and technology have added new dimensions to these challenges. Alongside increased access to information, rural women are increasingly exposed to misinformation, rumors, and politically motivated narratives that can distort electoral understanding and decision-making. Without adequate legal knowledge and media literacy, these factors can undermine women's confidence and autonomy as voters, particularly during local and national elections. Arguably, knowledge gaps can generate disbeliefs among these rural population who have been living for decades with their own traditional beliefs, some common and shared cultural values with stereotypes.

Grounded in this belief, SACMID, a non-profit national media development organization, focusing on democracy and information integrity, developed a comprehensive proposal and

conducted this project to contribute to addressing these concerns in Brahmanbaria. Democracy, that is strengthened when only women are able to exercise their constitutional rights with credible information, safety, and independence. Thus, implemented across eleven unions of Brahmanbaria, the project places emphasis on legal literacy, digital inclusion, and critical awareness of misinformation as key enablers of informed voting. The Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Dhaka, Bangladesh granted SACMID's proposal and cooperated with the responsibilities of implementing and conducting this project.

This study serves as one of the foundational steps to assess the current realities during elections, including women's understanding of electoral rights, exposure to rumors, insecurity and the broader social obstacles that shape the country's democracy.

The key purpose of the project is to understand the experiences, challenges, and perceptions around voting faced by rural women in the current realities. To fulfill the objectives, this project activities included a comprehensive situation analysis (knowledge, perception and practice) in the eleven different unions, reviewing the literature materials, arranging community dialogue with different political party leaders and stakeholders, trainings on fact-checking with young trainers, developing social media awareness materials, and finally conducting evaluation of the responses among the respondents, at practice level, after the trainings and discussions.

PROJECT TARGET PEOPLE

The project mainly targets rural women voters, aged 18–65+, residing in eleven unions of Brahmanbaria district. Women represent nearly half of the population of Bangladesh. However, rural women in particular often face barriers to practicing their voting rights, largely due to patriarchal norms, family influence, and social pressure. Thus, women, Gender Diverse People (GDP) become the common victims of irresponsible digital and social media misinformation, rumors. Also, this project targets particular stakeholder and local leaders including school and college teachers, imams/religious preachers, government officials, local elected representatives, development (NGO) workers, health practitioners and care providers, journalists whose support can enhance this project's activities and basic objectives.

IMPLICATION OF THE PROJECT

This project marks the first study in Brahmanbaria district to assess the challenges faced by rural female voters during elections. It identifies key barriers such as patriarchal control, limited legal awareness, restricted access to credible information, and exposure to misinformation and rumors. By focusing on eleven unions of Brahmanbaria district, the project provides comprehensive and localized findings on women's voting behaviors, safety concerns, and importantly decision-making autonomy. Moreover, the findings suggest practical guidance for creating awareness during election among women, local leaders, and civil society actors to

promote interventions that promote safe, informed, and independent participation of rural women in national elections.

STUDY METHODS AND MATERIALS

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches have been followed in the methodology. The quantitative data is based on the survey results, and the qualitative section analyzed the conducted Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII). Also, it included reviewing of relevant literature on the issue of women's autonomous voting decisions.

SOURCES OF PRIMARY DATA

The sources of primary data included quantitative survey questionnaire, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and community dialogue to receive the responses of the stakeholders aiming at solutions. The data and information emerged from all these approaches facilitated by the data collectors and the research team of SACMID to do an effective triangulation of analysis.

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

The survey questionnaire was totally quantitative in nature. The sample size for this survey includes a diverse representation of the urban, semi-urban, and rural-based population in eleven unions in terms of age, gender, education level, occupation groups. This survey is based on a basic reference of the statistical standard.

For analysis, responses are categorized, and frequency counts are calculated for the overall category. The total number of respondents ($N = 100$) is used to determine the percentage of women, allowing a clear representation of patterns. This approach provides a simple yet effective way to summarize the data and identify key areas where interventions are needed to promote independent voting.

Survey parameters:

While selecting the respondents in each union, the following aspects are taken into consideration:

- A balance gender ratio (though mostly women) of the respondents
- Age of the participants, i.e. from 18 years old female to above 60, basically who have the experience at least once of casting the vote
- Diversity of occupation among the women as well as the local leaders
- Diversity in income levels
- Educational qualification of these participants.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS GENDER OF THE RESPONDENTS

1.1 The survey has covered 57% female and 43% male respondents.

Gender	Percent
Female	57%
Male	43%
Total Respondents	100.0%

*Since the survey total is 100 respondents, the percentage values are equal to the frequencies

1.2 **Religion of the respondents:** Of the survey total respondents covered 86% were from the Muslim community where about 14% were from the Hindu community.

Religion	Percent
Muslim	86%
Hindu	14%
Others	0%
Total	100.0%

* Given a total sample size of 100, percentages and frequencies are numerically the same

1.3 Age of the respondents: The majority of the respondents have been covered from 18-27 years of age group with 34% coverage since this group of respondents is one of the major percentage target groups of the study. Since the voting age starts from 18 years therefore, this has been one of the primary target groups in the 11 unions of Brahmanbaria. Second, the next most percentage target groups of this study are 28-37 years with the coverage of 25%. Then, 22% is covered from the 38-47 years' age group, 12% from 48-57 years. And the least two percentages were covered from 58-67 years and 68-77 years' age group with only 4% and 3%.

Age Range	Percentage
18-27	34%
28-37	25%
38-47	22%
48-57	12%
58-67	4%
68-77	3%
Total	100.0%

1.4 **Educational qualification:** The survey covered 17% have primary education while 21% respondents have secondary level education. 19% participants have completed their higher-secondary education while 12% have completed graduation studies and 18% are post-graduates. And only 1% have more post-graduation study level, while the other 12% have shared about having no formal education.

Educational Qualification	Percent

Primary Education	17%
Secondary Education	21%
Higher-secondary	19%
Graduate	12%
Post-graduate	18%
Higher than post-graduation	1%
No academic Education	12%
Total	100.0%

Since the survey total is 100 respondents, the percentage values are equal to the frequencies

1.4 **Respondents' occupation:** Of the survey respondents covered 15% students, 13% labors, 11% homemakers, businessmen, and school, madrasah teachers, while 9% health and 6% NGO workers.

Occupation	Percentage
Students	15%
Labors	13%
Homemakers	11%
Businessmen	11%
School and Madrasah teachers	11%
Health workers (Doctors, Nurse, etc.)	9%
NGO workers	6%
Imam/ Religious Preachers	6%
Service holders (Bank, Govt. employee, Union members, etc.)	6%
Farmers	4%
Migrant workers	2%
Others (Tailor, English instructor, etc.)	6%
Total	100.0%

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PURPOSE-BASED METHOD ALIGNMENT

Purpose	Questionnaire	Method	Respondents/ Stakeholder	Tools of Data Collection
To Identify gaps and to guide the women about media literacy and make them concern about democratic voting right.	Have you ever felt confused or misled by election-related news or social media messages?	Survey, FGD & KII	Local leaders	Survey questionnaire, FGD & KII

	Where do you usually get information about candidates, elections, or voting procedures? How often do you encounter information about elections that you suspect may be misleading?			
Design fact-checking processes to make these women more media literate and informed.	How do people understand the misinformation and rumors affecting them? How to debunk this fake information?	KII & Trainings	Local leaders and trainees	Survey questionnaire, KII
To make them understand about the familial patriarchal pressure, and restrictions.	Do your family members influence or pressure your choice of candidate? What are the most important factors that influence your decision on whom to vote for?	Survey, FGD & KII	Respondents	Survey questionnaire, FGD & KII
Local leaders, stakeholders, and fact-checkers to be involved in creating a safer-	How can stakeholders ensure information reaches women who have limited	FGD, KII, Community dialogue	Local leaders and trainees	KII, Training, Community dialogue

| informed voting environment. | awareness of media literacy?

How can fact-checkers collaborate with community leaders or NGOs to promote informed voting among the women? | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|

2. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGD)

To gather in-depth qualitative data on this issue, a total 11 FGDs were conducted with total 99 respondents (n = 99) having mixed group audiences focusing on the females, youth, local leaders in 7 unions including Sadekpur, Machhihata, Basudeb, Budhol, Suhilpur, Ramrail, and Majlishpur Union.

Table: FGD Location and Distribution

Location/Union	Category/Type	No. of FGD and Participants
Sadekpur	Mixed (diverse groups of respondents including Homemaker, schoolteacher, both male and female students, religious preacher/ imam, businessmen, immigrant, lawyer, member of UP, government employee, police, doctor, health worker, NGO workers, etc.)	1*10 =10
Machhihata		1*08 = 8
Basudeb		1*10= 10
Budhol		1*10= 10
Suhilpur		1*10= 10
Ramrail		1*11= 11
Majlishpur		1*10= 10
Talshohor		1*10= 10
Natai, North		1*10= 10
Natai, South		1*10= 10
Sultanpur		1*10= 10
All Locations		**Total: 99**

The field level supervisors and the data collectors communicated with the particular stakeholders including the social media users, imam, religious preachers, the local government representatives, NGO workers, local opinion leaders, students, schoolteachers, and especially the women from these rural areas for organizing and conducting FGDs in these respective areas.

THE KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KII)

The Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) are an important qualitative data collection method used to gather in-depth information from individuals who have insights about the community with specific issues. These informants may include community leaders, teachers, religious leaders, health workers, NGO worker, or different stakeholders who are directly involved with or closely observe the subject under study. KII are useful when we need to ask open-ended questions and understand issues in detail from selected people. This approach enables the collection of detailed insights from various stakeholders. For this study, total 22 KIIs ($n = 22$), two in each union, have been conducted to ask in-depth questions from the targeted respondents. The male and female respondent ratio was maintained to ensure gender balance. The category of KIIs is described below:

Table: KII Distribution

Category	Number of Respondents	Gender	Location
Profession related to family planning, Union Ansar	2	Female, male	Talshohor Purba Union
Imam, Service-holder	2	Male, female	Sadekpur Union
Schoolteacher	2	Male, female	Machhihata Union
Headmaster, NGO worker	2	Male, female	Basudeb Union
Schoolteacher, farmer	2	Female, Male	Budhol Union
Housemaker, govt. employee	2	Female, male	Suhilpur
Teachers	2	Male, female	Ramrail Union
Teacher	2	Male, female	Majlishpur
Retired army officer, Teacher	2	Male, female	Sultanpur Union
Service-holder, student	2	Male, female	Natai Union (South)
UP member, Senior teacher	2	Male, female	Natai Union (East)
Total: 22 KII Respondents			

Community Dialogue: As part of the project validation process, a community dialogue session was organized to address that the FGD, KII, and findings from these interviews reflected current challenges. To get better solutions, participants from a wide range of stakeholder groups have been invited to this participatory dialogue, including Election Commission personnel, government officials, police personnel, Ansar women members, businesswomen, political leaders from BNP, NCP, GOP, and other political parties, students, journalists, and religious leaders.This multi-stakeholder engagement was particularly important in capturing the social, political, and cultural dimensions that influence women's electoral participation in rural and semi-urban settings.

The discussions primarily focused on identifying key barriers to women's voting participation, including safety concerns, patriarchal influence, misinformation, misuse of religious narratives, and infrastructural challenges at polling centers. Participants primarily emphasized on community-driven solutions, prioritizing the need for legal awareness, digital and media literacy, safer polling environments, and the involvement of male family members in awareness initiatives.

Key suggestions raised by participants

- Ensuring safer and women-friendly polling centers
- Addressing misinformation and rumor-spreading: Participants highlighted the urgent need to counter election-related misinformation, particularly on social media, through fact-checking initiatives and verified information campaigns.
- Strategic use of digital platforms
- Responsible engagement of religious leaders
- Engaging male family members
- Improving infrastructure and transportation

Validation Trainings: This phase included a four-day training program emphasizing on voting education and legal rights. Diverse stakeholders including veteran journalists, political leaders, doctors, content creators, cultural activists along with students, in total more than 220 participated these trainings. The sessions focused on strengthening participants' understanding of citizen journalism in the election context, with emphasis on ethical reporting, fact-checking, identifying misinformation and disinformation. Importantly, the respondents were motivated to strengthen women's voices to support an informed and inclusive participation in community-level electoral processes. The suggestions from the validation trainings have also been pit in the study findings.

SURVEY ADMINISTERING
- Drafting and pilot survey testing

After a thorough review of relevant literature and the collection of background information from 11 unions in Brahmanbaria district, a preliminary questionnaire was developed. To test the survey questionnaire, a pilot survey was conducted with 10 respondents from one union. Based on the challenges and difficulties faced by the field team during the pilot survey, necessary adjustments were made later. Then, the survey questionnaire was reviewed and finalized according to their feedback, while considering respondents' appropriate ratio of age, sex, occupation, and educational background.

- **Selection of Data Collectors and Supervisors**

  Once the questionnaire is revised and finalized, the data collectors were selected by the SACMID team. Basically, employees working at SACMID played the role as data collectors and supervisors in the field as necessary.

- **Data Collection Method**

  A random purposive snowball sampling was followed in this study. This approach was adopted to identify relevant respondents with appropriate knowledge and experience related to the study objectives. Initial participants for survey and FGDs were selected purposively. Then the KII respondents were selected through referrals from earlier participants. This method was particularly useful for reaching diverse participants at the community level.

- **Supervision During Data Collection Process**

  A team leader directly supervised the data collection process during survey, FGD, and KII. Necessary members of the SACMID team visited the survey areas to ensure the quality of work. After collecting data from each union, the team discussed their field notes and data collection updates to ensure the quality of data.

- **Data Management and Security**

  The survey questionnaire was carried out by Google form. Survey data from each union were organized using specific code numbers. Also, the survey locations were clearly mentioned so that data could be easily recognized and compared across the eleven unions. Hand-written notes and transcriptions from FGDs and KIIs were stored by the responsible SACMID team members, prioritizing the standard ethics of qualitative research.

- **Data Cleaning**

  First the research team in the field and then the authors checked and verified the stored data for any error (i.e. occurred due to human errors). These errors were primarily detected manually and corrected to ensure accuracy.

- **Finally, Data Analysis**

  Authors of the research team analyzed the data and prepare the primary report. Percentage, frequency was figured out in this study report. Tables and charts are produced from these numerical data and findings to use in this report.

ANALYSIS OF QUALITTAIVE DATA

Qualitative data collected through FGDs and KIIs were analyzed thematically using narrative analysis. A codebook was maintained throughout the whole process. First, open coding was conducted, followed by axial coding, completing two rounds of coding in total. The author, herself developed the codebook following the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Through this process, key themes and patterns were identified by analyzing in-depth data from the FGDs and KIIs. Also, themes were aligned and compared with the study indicators and project objectives.

Salient concepts were identified and coded while their occurrences were manually labeled. To analyze the FGD and KII data, a color-sorting approach was maintained manually. This helped to categorize responses as 'most frequent', 'frequent', and 'occasional' on women's voting-related issues. Finally, direct quotations from the respondents were included in the report as exemplars to support and validate the findings.

Both the FGD and KII data analysis were followed some particular steps that are basically followed in qualitative research. The steps started initially with sampling the respondents, moderating the FGD and KII, taking consent from the participants to maintain ethical considerations highly, taking attendance, running hand notes, and audio recording. Every recording was then transcribed into English utilizing the Google NotebookLM and NVivo software. Some draft versions were also printed.

During the transcription process, the recordings reflected fragmented speech, repeated phrases, overlapping ideas, and varied emotional expressions. The translated transcripts, both FGDs and KIIs, comprising a total of 110 single-spaced pages, were analyzed using a thematic analysis framework as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

- **PREPARING REPORT**

  In discussion with the data collectors and supervisors, primarily a draft report (summarizing mostly the findings) was prepared. Finally, with the feedback from the SACMID team and the project donor, the final report was prepared.

- **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

  Ethical considerations were strictly maintained during the FGDs, KIIs, and survey data collection processes. According to the *The Belmont Report* (1979) and *The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)* (2021) developed a set of basic ethical standards to protect participants from harm and enhance the credibility of the research findings. The following key ethical considerations were maintained during the survey, FGDs, and KIIs:

- Prior to participation, all respondents were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, and their *voluntary consent* was obtained. Participants were assured that their participation was optional and that they could withdraw at any stage.

- Confidentiality and anonymity were highly ensured by not recording any personal identifiers in the data. Field notes, survey forms, and interview transcripts were also stored securely.

- Special care was taken during FGDs and KIIs to respect participants' opinions, privacy, and cultural sensitivities. The collected data were used solely for research purposes and shared with the authors, donor's representatives and SACMID team only.

- All participants were treated equally regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, occupation, or social status ensuring that minority participants were treated with fairness.

- Recognizing the rights of participants and data owners, all information was handled and stored in accordance with relevant standards.
- Also, the study acknowledged potential imbalances between researchers and participants, particularly in community settings. Efforts were made to conduct interactions respectfully and to avoid any form of influence, or expectation of benefit arising from participation.

* *The Belmont Report (1979).* Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.
* *American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). (2015).* Code of Professional Ethics and Practices. *[Revised in 2021]*

COMPARATIVE REPORT AMONG THE ELEVEN UNIONS OF BRAHMNABARIA SADAR

Brahmanbaria Sadar Upazila is one of the key administrative areas of Brahmanbaria district in Bangladesh, characterized by a mix of rural and urban populations. The upazila consists of one municipality and eleven union parishads (where the survey, FGDs, and KII were conducted), with a diverse population. The area has a relatively balanced gender distribution with a predominantly young population. Most residents are Muslim, alongside Hindu and other minority communities. Literacy levels are comparatively high, and livelihoods are mainly based on agriculture, small businesses, service-related jobs, and migrant work. The combination of rural settlements and urban centers shapes access to education, services, and information across the unions, making Brahmanbaria an important arena for comparative social research.

Project Implementation Unions

The survey, FGD, and KII were conducted in the following unions:

	Unions/Areas	Area Type	Available Transportation
01	Natai Union (North)	**Half rural–half urban** **91%**	Rickshaw, CNG, auto, bus, boat, train, etc.
02	Natai Union (South)		
03	Budhal Union		
04	Suhilpur Union		
05	Majlishpur Union		
06	Talshahar (East)		
07	Ramrail Union		
08	Machihata Union		
09	Sultanpur Union		
10	Basudeb Union		

11	Sadekpur Union	Rural Based Area (9%)

Among eleven unions (*n= 11*), 10 show a balanced urban–rural character, benefiting from proximity to the town while still maintaining local community life.

Educational Institutions

	Union Name	Educational Institutions
01	Basudeb	Primary School- 20 High School- 4 College – 1
02	Natai Union (North)	Primary School – 13 High School- 1 College – 0
03	Natai Union (South)	Primary – 20 High School – 4 College – 1
04	Budhal Union	Primary – 10 High School – 4 College – 2
05	Suhilpur Union	Primary – 9 High School – 6 College – 0
06	Majlishpur Union	Primary – 13 High School – 2 College – 0
07	Talshahar (East)	Primary – 14 High School – 3 College – 1
08	Ramrail Union	Primary – 14 High School – 3 College – 1
09	Sadekpur Union	Primary – 12 High School – 5 College – 2
10	Machihata Union	Primary – 11 High School – 6 College – 0
11	Sultanpur Union	Primary – 15 High School -2 Collage – 0

A significant number of girls are enrolled in primary and secondary schools while a good number continue their studies at higher-secondary levels. However, educational attainment for women

varies across these eleven different unions. Particularly, rural areas where access to educational and transportation resources are comparatively limited.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN VOTING

Based on opinions shared during the FGDs and KIIs across the unions, the data were analyzed accordingly.

Type of Challenge	Frequency (No. of Unions)	Percentage
Family Barriers	11	100%
Rumors and misinformation	10	90.9%
Infrastructural challenges	9	81.8%
Negative political influence	9	81.8%
Transportation challenges	8	72.7%
Religious barriers	1	9.1%

*Each percentage reflects the proportion of unions reporting a specific challenge, not a mutually exclusive distribution

Respondents from several unions, including Budhol, Machhihata, and Sadekpur, have reported strong patriarchal restrictions that limit women's ability to cast their votes independently. Regarding negative political influence, a KII respondent from Budhol union have noted that many women are not fully aware that voting is their democratic right and often follow decisions suggested by political actors or family members. About 85% respondents have shared that family members impose voting decisions on women in the households. About religious barriers, FGD and KII respondents from Suhilpur union shared that misinterpretations of religion often restrict women's freedom to participate in casting their votes.

- **Data based on survey respondents:**

  This quantitative data was collected through the survey. Descriptive statistical techniques, such as frequency and percentage distributions, were used to summarize the data.

	Factors that make voting difficult for women	Percentage
01	Fear of attack and assault	**67%**
02	Absence of authentic information	**46%**
03	No company / fear to go alone	**41%**
04	Lack of legal action	**31%**

05	Pressure from male family members	**23%**
06	Restriction on free movement	**15%**
07	Societal stigma	**5%**

Factors that make voting difficult for women

- Fear of attack and assault
- Absence of authentic information
- No company / fear to go alone: 41%
- Lack of legal action: 31%
- Pressure from male family members: 23%
- Restriction on free movement: 15%
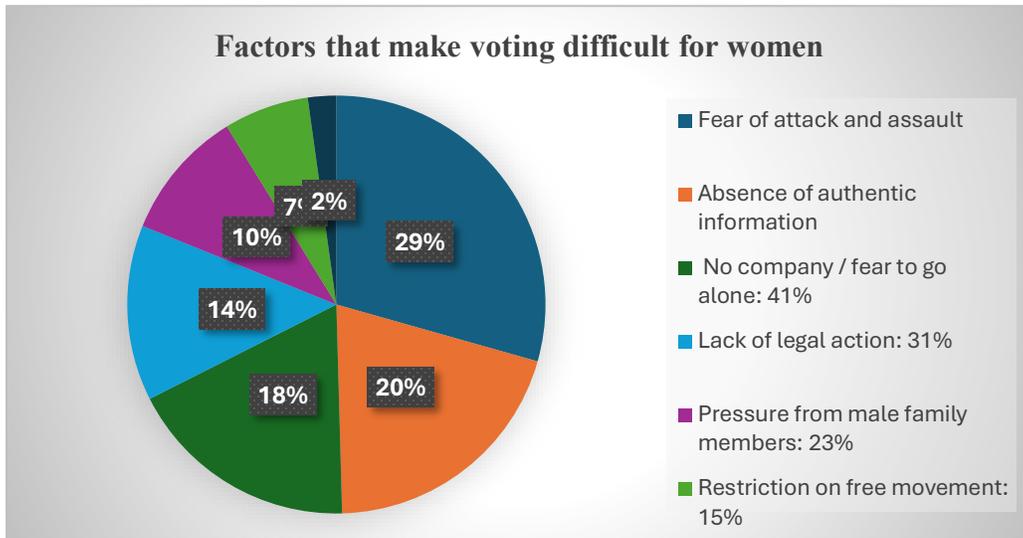
Respondents also shared their concern that female voters face more threats than male voters.

Female voters face more threats than male voters

Yes: 43%   Sometimes: 30%   No: 27%
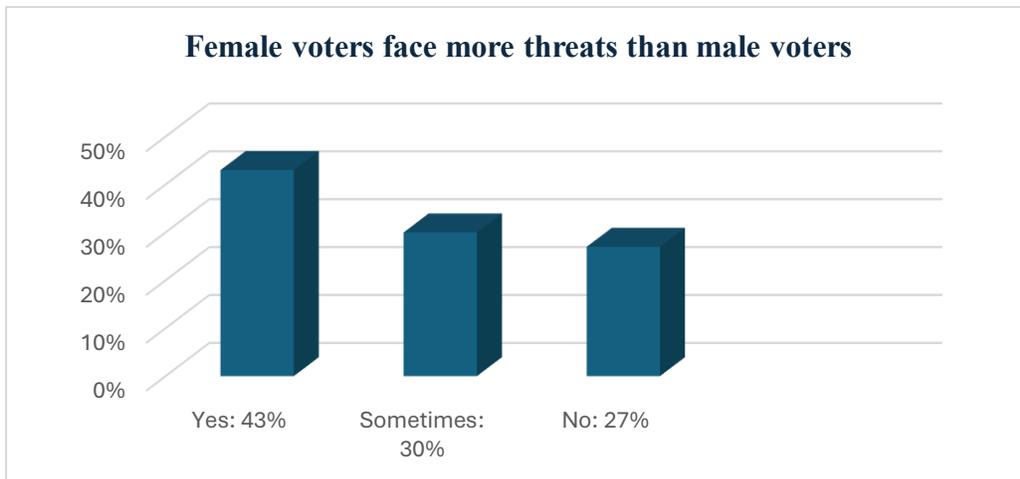
STUDY FINDINGS

The study findings were analyzed based on the basic aims and objectives of the study. Accordingly, the findings have been presented under concise headings aligned with the stated objectives and goals.

1. **Multidimensional Challenges Faced by Women in Exercising Their Voting Rights**

This project analyses the major obstacles encountered by women exercising their voting rights across 11 unions in the Brahmanbaria district of Bangladesh. The study identifies a pervasive *patriarchal structure* where *familial* and *religious expectations* often force women to defer to male guardians when making political choices. Beyond domestic pressures, voters face *external influence* from political leaders and significant *logistical barriers*, such as long distances to polling stations and inadequate *sanitation facilities*. Furthermore, *conservative interpretations* of religious norms frequently discourage female independence and mobility in the public sphere. Ultimately, these findings show, how a combination of *familial, societal pressure* and *less organized infrastructure* undermines the democratic participation of women in the region of Brahmanbaria Sadar Upazila.

1.1 Family Level Challenges

Most of the participants reported in the KII and FGDs that decisions related to voting are *mostly controlled and decided* by male family members. The KII respondents (92%) shared that their decisions related to voting are largely controlled by male "guardians" within the household. Notably, this control often comes not from women's own paternal family members, such as fathers or brothers, but primarily from their in-laws. Husbands, fathers-in-law, and brothers-in-law were frequently identified as the key decision-makers who determine whom women should vote for, or whether they should vote at all. The survey shows that only 58% of women are able to participate in family discussions, while the remaining 42% are not even aware that voting is a democratic right.
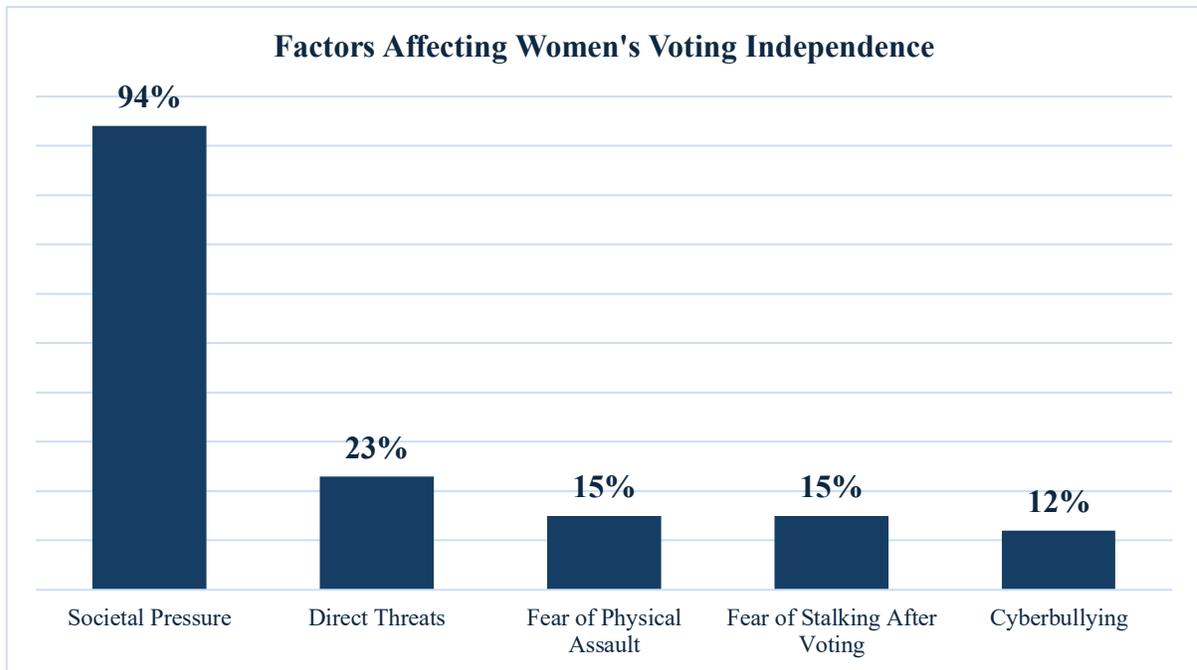

Key Statictics on Women's Voting Decision

92% — Voting decisions controlled by male guardians
58% — Women participate in family discussions
42% — Women unaware voting is a democratic right
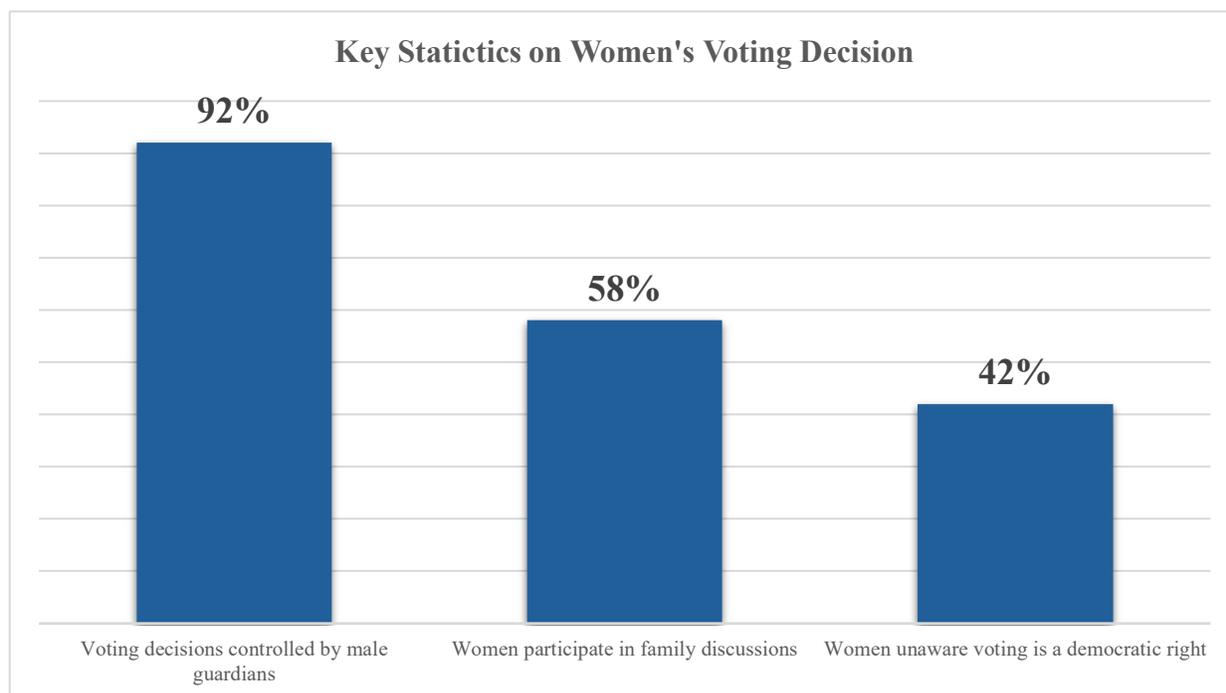
One of the Key Informant Interviewees (KII), from Budhol union shares the reasons behind this challenge, "Because of a lack of awareness and access to authentic information, many women are unable to fully understand their voting rights. We are even often *excluded from family discussions about elections*, and most women *do not realize that voting is a democratic right"*. The challenges that are triggering this patriarchy, "Due to economic dependency and limited education, women become dependent and have to follow the opinions of their male family members. This influence is not always *direct pressure, but rather a subtle form of control that shapes our decisions*".

Most of the FGD respondents report that expressing independent political opinions could lead to family conflict or disapproval. As a result, women's personal political preferences are suppressed, and voting becomes a collective family decision rather than an individual democratic choice. Like, another KII respondent, a female health worker in Majlishpur union, shares, "This situation is common, *even in families where women are employed and contribute economically to the household.* Patriarchal patterns in decision-making have been practiced for decades, making male dominance in electoral decisions a normalized phenomenon".

An important observation is that the role of male guardians in voting decisions is normalized and rarely questioned within families. Many women did not describe this control as unfair but rather as a *"natural"* family practice. This pattern shows the deeply embedded *patriarchal structure* within households of these 11 unions in Brahmanbaria, particularly within marital families, where power and authority are concentrated among male members.

1.2 Societal Pressure and Political Influence on Women Voters

The survey and FGD show that most of the respondents (94%) are concerned about societal pressure significantly that affects women's ability to make independent voting decisions. The primary concern is influence from the female and male political workers approaching directly women voters. Both male and female political leaders were reported to actively visit communities during election periods and in most cases, women reported feeling obligated to cast their votes for the suggested candidates. Quantitative survey data reveals that 23% of respondents reported facing direct threats, while 15% expressed fear of physical assault during the electoral process. Additionally, 12% reported concerns related to cyberbullying, and 15% feared being stalked even after casting their vote.

Factors Affecting Women's Voting Independence

Factor	Percentage
Societal Pressure	94%
Direct Threats	23%
Fear of Physical Assault	15%
Fear of Stalking After Voting	15%
Cyberbullying	12%

KII respondents from Majlishpur, Sultanpur, Sadekpur unions similarly share that this pressure is not always overt, rather, sometimes the influence or pressure involves the provision of small material benefits, such as soap, household items, or other daily-use goods. Although these items may appear insignificant, they create a sense of obligation and negative pressure on women, especially those from economically and educationally vulnerable households. Accepting such items often places women in a moral dilemma, where they feel compelled to vote in favor of the provider, thereby compromising their free choice.

One of the major dilemmas is, this practice limits women's access to neutral and unbiased political information. Often, women are exposed primarily to targeted messaging designed to secure votes. As a result, the independent flow of political information is disrupted that reduces women's ability to make autonomous voting decisions. When information flows are controlled, creates an uneven political environment overall in the country.

An important aspect indicates that women are rarely approached as independent voters. Instead, political actors often assume that women can be influenced more easily through emotional appeals, social pressure, or material benefits. This perception reinforces gender stereotypes and undermines women's political credibility and agency.

1.3 Infrastructural Challenges

Survey shows that 76% of respondents do not feel secure going to polling centers alone and therefore rely on male family members to accompany them. This dependence often results in

male influence over voting decisions, limiting women's ability to exercise independent choice. A further 14% of respondents reported experiencing insecurity and fear of potential harassment or trouble during the voting process, while the remaining 10% expressed a neutral position regarding their sense of safety.
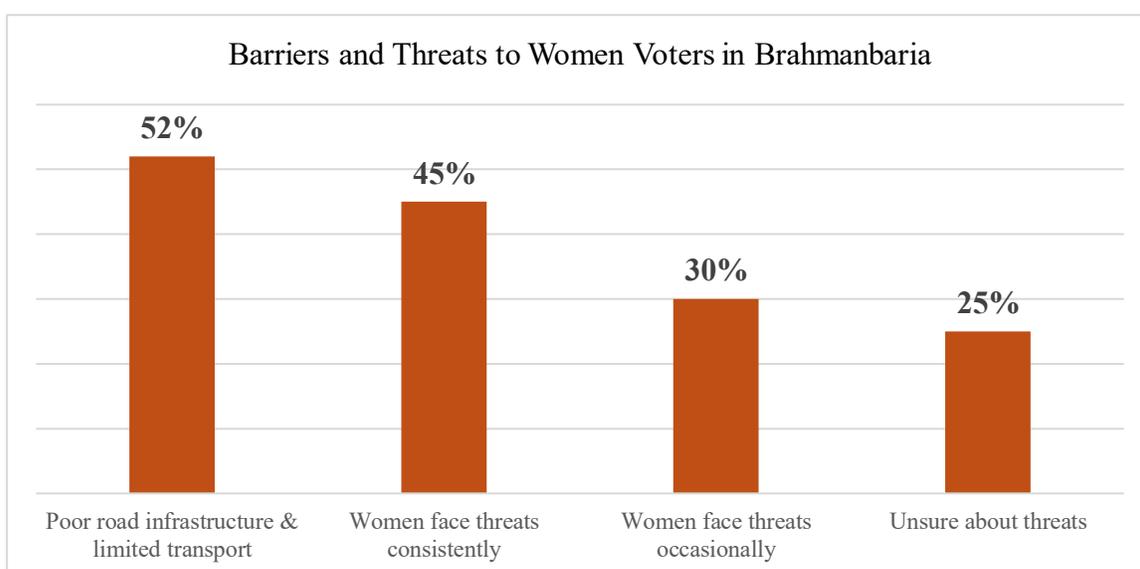
Perception of Safety at Polling Centers
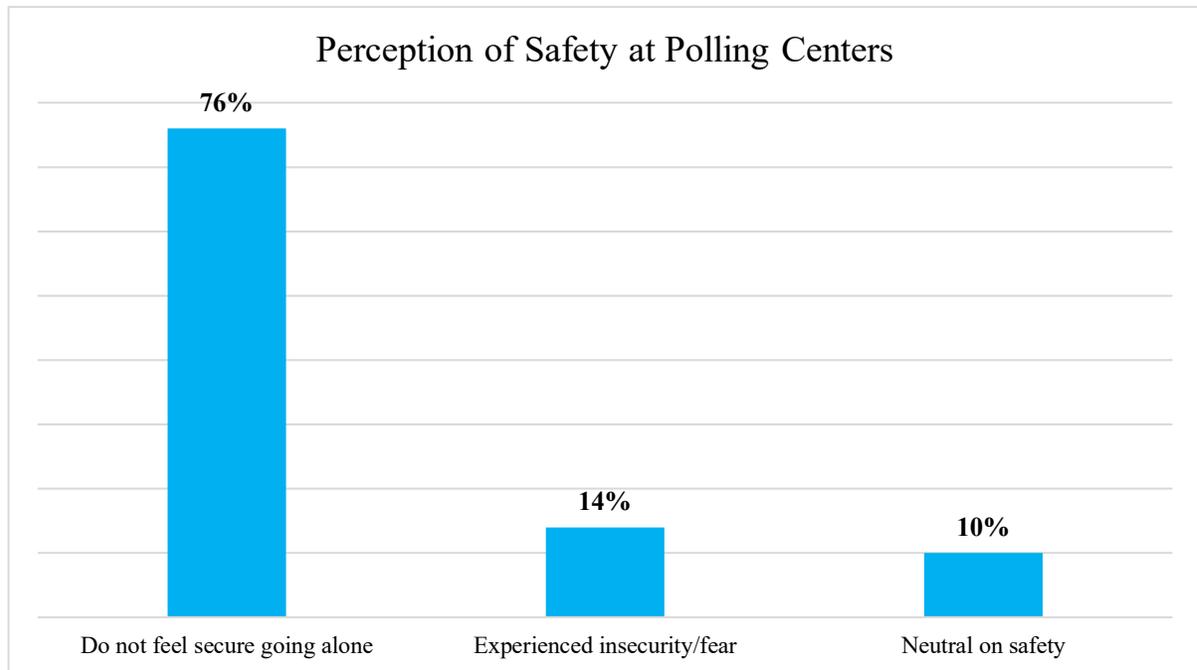
The fear of harassment, verbal abuse, or physical discomfort is the biggest concern among the women from attending polling stations independently. Every FGD and KII respondents shared this concern. They are concerned about the distance to polling centers as another key barrier. Particularly in the eleven unions, where villages are geographically dispersed and transportation facilities are limited. Women from remote areas of Brahmanbaria reported having to walk long distances to reach polling stations, often on poor road infrastructure. This challenge disproportionately affected elderly women, and women with health conditions. Many of whom found it unsafe to travel such distances. In these cases, women have to depend on their male family members, which further reduced their ability to decide freely *when and how to vote*. The absence of female-friendly facilities created discomfort and, in some cases, forced women to leave polling centers without casting their vote.

FGD respondents in Basudeb union highlights that, *poor road conditions*, *limited transportation options*, *overcrowded polling stations*, and *the absence of women-friendly facilities* directly affects women's ability to participate independently in elections.

Also, the lack of basic facilities at polling centers also emerged as a significant issue. Many women across the unions highlighted the absence of adequate sanitation facilities, clean

toilets, safe drinking water, and designated resting spaces. These are the basic necessities for the women who have kids.

Logistics and supports systems like, long waiting times, lack of seating arrangements, and insufficient crowd management were reported in several unions, discouraging women from full participation. The survey questionnaire reveals that 52% of participants reported poor road infrastructure and limited transportation facilities as major barriers**.** These infrastructural gaps indicate that polling environments in Brahmanbaria are not adequately designed to address women's specific needs. Another key quantitative finding indicates that 45% of participants believe that women voters *consistently* face threats, while 30% reported that such threats occur *occasionally*. The remaining 25% expressed *uncertainty*, indicating that they were not sure whether women voters face threats.

Barriers and Threats to Women Voters in Brahmanbaria

Poor road infrastructure & limited transport	52%
Women face threats consistently	45%
Women face threats occasionally	30%
Unsure about threats	25%

1.4 **Religious Norms and Interpretations**
A female schoolteacher as a KII respondent from Suhilpur Union particularly indicated about religious norms as one of the challenging factors that affecting women's ability to freely cast their votes. Also, the FGD respondents including government employee, female development workers, students and homemakers in this same union indicated that these similar experiences reflect *how religion is used in everyday life to limit women's decision-making*. FGD respondents reported that they are expected to follow the instructions of their *male "guardians*," such as husbands, fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, father, or other senior male family members in these matters considered as political. The idea that women should not act without male guidance or support was commonly linked to religious reasoning, even when such interpretations were culturally influenced. This indicates that the challenge lies not in formal religious teachings, but in how religion is understood and enforced within rural socio-cultural structures.

As the respondents in the survey, FGD, and KII were mostly from Muslim (86%) and Hindu (14%) community, they shared their experiences including going to polling centers was sometimes seen as inappropriate for women, as it involves leaving the home and participating in public spaces.

2. Rumor and Misinformation: A Barrier to Women's Electoral Agency

The survey reveals that 46% of the respondents have felt there is a huge lack of proper information during the election. The FGD and KII discussions have revealed that women are capable of understanding political issues and choosing candidates based on their own priorities when they have *access to accurate, timely, and trustworthy information*. But this potential is significantly undermined by the widespread circulation of rumors and false information during election periods. Participants shared that rumors related to candidates, voting procedures, and perceived social consequences of voting are deliberately spread within communities. Such misinformation creates fear, confusion, and uncertainty among women voters.

One of the KII, a male farmer in Budhol Union says, "False information, such as claims that a particular candidate is dishonest or assertions that another political leader from a specific party is certain to win, is widely circulated during elections. Messages suggesting that voting for alternative candidates is meaningless further contribute to confusion and weaken individuals' motivation to vote according to their own choice. Such misinformation creates uncertainty and reduces independent decision-making among women, and in some cases, among men as well".
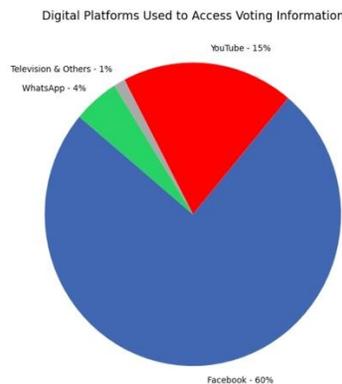
Another KII male respondent, in Talshohor Purba Union shares, "In some cases, rumours are deliberately spread to intimidate women voters. Sometimes, false claims that violence will occur at specific polling centers or women will face harassment are used to instill fear. Such misinformation is sufficient to discourage women from attending polling centers and exercising their voting rights".

On the other hand, when women receive clear, factual, and neutral election-related information, they express confidence in forming their own choices. Addressing rumor and misinformation through inclusive discussions, community awareness, and reliable information channels is highly essential to strengthening women's voting rights and ensuring their independent participation in the electoral process.

3. Strengthening Women's Electoral Agency through Digital Tools

According to the survey findings, approximately 88% of women across the eleven unions of Brahmanbaria district use smartphones in their daily lives. Among these respondents, 81% have access to the internet on their mobile phones. The majority of these women (60%) have reported about their own Facebook accounts, while others use YouTube platform as a source

of information (15%). Also, a smaller proportion of survey respondents, 4% follow information on WhatsApp and only 1% rely on television for accessing information.


Digital Platforms Used to Access Voting Information

YouTube - 15%

Television & Others - 1%

WhatsApp - 4%

Facebook - 60%

KII and FGD respondents have shared that this user percentage presents an important opportunity to support women's informed and independent participation in the electoral process. Because, when used effectively, digital tools can help counter misinformation and strengthen scopes for women to access reliable information. 10 FGD respondents from Majlishpur Union shared an important insight, *although many parents lack awareness, their children, who are engaged with digital media, can play a role in informing their parents.*

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook pages and groups, were identified as widely used and accessible channels for women. A female Key Informant Interviewee (KII) in Majlishpur union recommends, "Female-focused online groups can serve as inclusive spaces where women can participate in discussions, share experiences, ask questions, and exchange views related to elections and candidates". Because, these platforms allow women to receive information directly, rather than relying solely on male family members, community intermediaries, thereby strengthening their space in making independent voting decisions. Similarly, another female KII respondent from Sadekpur shares, "Apps that provide real-time updates on polling procedures, voter rights, and security information can help reduce fear and uncertainty among women voters". In these cases, digital safety tools can also offer reassurance for women who may feel vulnerable when attending polling centers.

YouTube was identified as another important platform for sharing video content related to political leaders, candidates, and election processes. Short, clear visual content is particularly effective for reaching women with unbiased information.

Overall, the survey results indicate that 85% of respondents want voting-related information to be made available on social media, with 66% expressing a preference for receiving such

information through these platforms. At the same time, 36% of respondents still prefer hard-copy materials as a source of voting-related information.

Source of Voting-Related Information
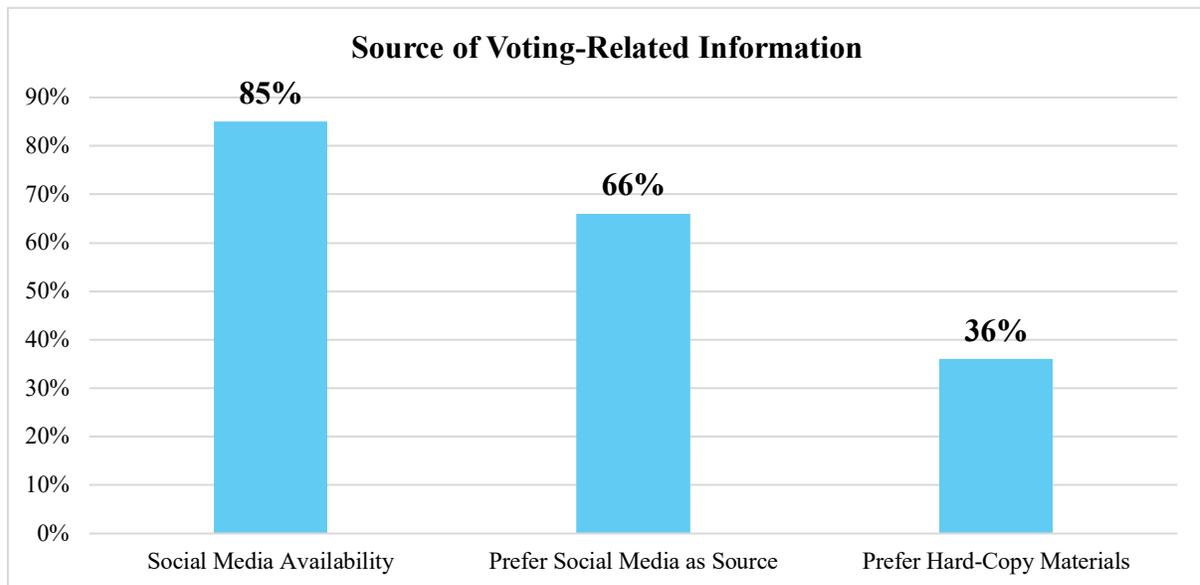
A few more observations and opinions of the FGDs and KII, both the male and female respondents based in these eleven unions, have been shared as mentioned below:

- While more than 85% women have access to smartphones and social media, access alone does not guarantee exposure to accurate or unbiased information. Without adequate digital literacy and fact-checking skills, social media platforms may also amplify rumors and misinformation.

- Although digital platforms offer spaces for women's participation, online discussions may still be influenced or dominated by male voices, political actors. In some cases, women's online political engagement may be monitored or controlled by their family members. Therefore, awareness-raising initiatives should also target family members.

- Increased reliance on digital tools also raises concerns about online harassment, misinformation, and importantly data privacy. Fear of online abuse or sometimes political backlash can discourage women from participating in digital discussions too.

- The effectiveness of digital platforms in strengthening women's informed voting depends on the availability of credible, neutral, and verified information. Without active engagement from election authorities, civil society organizations, and trusted local leaders, these digital spaces will remain vulnerable to manipulation.

4. Voices of Trust: Community Leadership as a Catalyst

Respondents from the KII and FGDs have shared that in the rural unions of Brahmanbaria, where patriarchal norms, social restrictions, and religious interpretations often influence women's mobility and decision-making, local leaders can play a credible role in shaping women's awareness by providing authentic information. Local leaders can be anyone who must first be trustworthy, accessible to women, and informed to effectively support women's independent voting. The FGD respondents shared, they trust in health practitioners, particularly community health workers or and village doctors, schoolteachers, religious preachers, NGO workers are identified as influential voices. 22 KII respondents from 11 unions, have shared the similar opinions regarding the supportive role of local leaders. One of the female KII respondents from Macchihata union, a schoolteacher shares, "*Local leaders can play an active role in preventing the spread of misinformation and rumors. Through platforms such as mosques, local shops, and various community meetings, they can help raise awareness among women and provide accurate information*".

One of the sensitive aspects is the use of careful words and phrases, particularly in the rural areas, ensuring that messages are communicated in a culturally appropriate manner. Thus, through the FGD in Sadekpur union, it is highly emphasized that by using culturally appropriate language, local leaders' involvement helps normalize discussions on women's voting rights, reduce fear and stigma.

Several other steps were strongly emphasized during the FGD and KII discussions.
- FGD participants have prioritized the importance of organizing small, women-only courtyard meetings where women can ask questions freely without fear of judgment. Participants also emphasize that meetings facilitated by trusted female leaders or NGO workers are more effective, as women feel more comfortable sharing their concerns in these settings. Like, FGD respondents from Macchihata union have shared about conducting sessions with the NGO workers. The schoolteachers also share videos with their school communities.

- KII respondents have shared the need for *repeated messaging* through *continuous training sessions* rather than one-time awareness sessions. Because continuous engagement helps counter misinformation and builds awareness over time.

- Across 11 FGDs, 97 participants discuss openly about the need to include male family members in awareness discussions. They have expressed concerns that if household 'decision-makers' are absent from these sessions, awareness efforts are likely to be ineffective. Involving male family members can support at home and allowing women to exercise their voting rights freely.

- KII participants also mentioned the effectiveness of using real-life examples and local success stories to make the message more credible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

	Findings	Analysis	Recommendations
01	76% of women do not feel safe going to polling centers alone and rely on male family members.	Safety concerns and patriarchal norms limit women's independent voting, reinforcing male influence in electoral decisions.	Improve polling center safety, provide women-friendly facilities, and conduct awareness sessions for both women and male family members on women's autonomous voting rights.
	Poor infrastructure and transportation at polling centers (bad roads, overcrowded facilities).	Physical barriers increase reliance on male accompaniment and reduce accessibility, especially for rural women.	
02	Patriarchal and cultural norms limit women's participation, even among economically active women.	Long-standing social norms perpetuate male dominance in decision-making and subtle control over women's votes.	Include *male family members in training and awareness programs,* alongside women-focused initiatives, to gradually shift attitudes and promote supportive behaviors.
	Limited participation in family discussions about voting.	Women are excluded from electoral decision-making, reinforcing dependency on others for their choices.	Promote *community dialogue sessions* that encourage women's participation in family and community discussions related to elections
03	Lack of awareness of legal voting rights and democratic principles among many women.	Limited knowledge prevents informed decision-making and makes women vulnerable to mis/disinformation and rumors.	Organize *legal literacy campaigns* and participatory workshops to educate women on their constitutional voting rights and democratic participation.
04	Subtle political pressure from male and female political actors.	Women often face indirect influence that affects their electoral choices, which	Train women to recognize and resist undue influence, while also *engaging local*

		perpetuates patriarchal and political control.	*leaders and also male family members* in awareness programs to promote equitable participation.
05	Exposure to misinformation via social media and rumors about candidates/elections.	Misleading information reduces women's confidence and can manipulate their choices.	Establish women-only digital literacy groups**,** fact-checking initiatives, and social media campaigns to provide credible election-related information.
06	Social media used to spread rumors and disinformation targeting women voters.	Digital platforms amplify misinformation, reducing women's confidence and independent decision-making.	Utilize *social media strategically* to share accurate information, create *women-only online discussion groups***,** and promote digital literacy among rural women.
07	Misuse of religion to influence women's voting choices.	Religious narratives are sometimes manipulated by political actors, creating fear or confusion among women.	Conduct awareness campaigns that clarify constitutional voting rights and engage *community and religious leaders* to prevent misuse of religion in political contexts.
0**8**	Limited engagement of local leaders in supporting women voters.	Women lack community advocacy and encouragement to vote independently.	Train and sensitize local government representatives, union leaders, and community influencers to actively support women's participation.
09	Importantly, inadequate awareness of grievance mechanisms or reporting of election malpractice.	Women remain vulnerable to coercion, intimidation, or fraud without recourse.	Conduct training on complaint procedures, hotline access, and awareness of the Election Commission's support systems**.**
10	Finaly, lack of long-term monitoring and follow-up.	Without continuous engagement, improvements in awareness, confidence, and autonomy may not be sustained.	Establish *periodic monitoring, refresher trainings, and post-election feedback sessions* to track progress and challenges.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the short period of data collection limited the ability to reach a more diverse population and gather more in-depth insights. Second, the survey and focus group discussions relied on self-reported responses, which may be influenced by cultural sensitivities and patriarchal norms. It may have led some respondents to underreport personal experiences of intimidation, influence, or challenges in exercising their voting rights. Also, with the limited time for this study, it was difficult to change the long-standing traditions and mindsets of rural and semi-urban communities in Brahmanbaria. Real progress and changes require *continuous training*, *awareness programs*, and *follow-up* to see how things improve over time. Because continuous monitoring is essential to evaluate these efforts to improve women's confidence, knowledge, and their ability to participate independently in elections over time. Importantly it will also foster supportive attitudes among male family members.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this project reveal that the voting experiences of women in Brahmanbaria district are shaped by deeply embedded social, political, and infrastructural conditions that continue to influence democratic participation in Bangladesh. Although the Constitution ensures the right to vote and legal equality for all, women's independent exercise of this right remains uneven, particularly in rural areas. In Brahmanbaria, women's participation in elections is often mediated by concerns related to safety, mobility, misinformation, and patriarchal authority within households and communities. The evidence from this study indicates that many women in Brahmanbaria attend polling centers under male supervision or guidance, which frequently influences their voting choices. This reflects a *broader national pattern* where patriarchal norms, continue to shape women's political agency, particularly in more rural settings. Even women who contribute economically to their households report experiencing subtle forms of control in electoral decision-making, demonstrating that economic participation alone does not dismantle entrenched gender hierarchies.

This study, through its analysis and its attempt, highlights some specific issues prevailing among the population in these eleven unions of Brahmanbaria. The situation underscores a critical national concern, when women, who constitute nearly half of Bangladesh's population, are unable to freely, safely, and knowledgeably exercise their voting rights, democratic representation remains incomplete. Women's voting rights are not merely procedural aspects of elections but fundamental democratic rights essential to accountable governance and inclusive development. Strengthening women's electoral autonomy is therefore vital to deepening democracy in Bangladesh.

The study also addresses the subtle political pressures that women face from both male and female political actors during elections. In some cases, religion is misinterpreted, and political rivals exploit disinformation to influence voting, sometimes even inciting violence. However, the local population, importantly the women who are the focus of this study, often remain unaware of these agendas and are inadvertently victimized by them. One of the most critical strategies to address these challenges is the *strategic use of social media platforms* to counter rumors and disinformation and to create groups only for women that raise awareness about informed voting.

The study also addresses that patriarchal influence requires the inclusion of male family members in awareness and training sessions. This approach ensures that women's autonomy is

respected while fostering community-wide understanding of democratic rights and equitable participation.

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