



Aparajita: Political Empowerment of Women



Six-Monthly Report 2022
(Operational report for the period from January – June 2022)
29 September 2022.

(EXCERPTS for PNGOs)



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PART ONE

1 Summary (Snapshot)

Implementing organization	Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation		
Project name	Aparajita: Political Empowerment of Women, Phase III	Type of report	Operational
		Reporting period	1 January 2022 – 30 June 2022
Phase duration	15 October 2018 – 14 January 2023	Recipient	SDC
Main results achieved and implementation performance of the project/program			
The present reporting period was meant to be the first half of the final year of implementation of Aparajita III as per the existing agreement between Helvetas and SDC. However, the Annual Plan of Operation (APO) for 2022 was finalized by the end of January in terms of what would be realistic and feasible, instead of aiming to use up all the available by the end of the current contract period. In addition, activities were designed by taking into consideration there being new UP representatives, including new EWRs, because of UP elections that started during the second half of 2021, and continued through the reporting period. In addition, the APO 2022 also had to be adjusted to a brief resurgence of Covid cases starting from late January, leading to suspension, or downscaling, of many activities for over a month. However, the momentum of field operations could be regained starting in March, and during the reporting period, it was possible for project teams to achieve most planned outputs, particularly under Outcomes 1 and 2. Under Outcome 1, a total of around 8700 Aparajitas (including 621 newly elected EWRs who had not been members of the Union Aparajita networks prior to participating and winning in UP elections) have been given different types of capacity building support through various activities, including orientation on Aparajita project/Women's Political Empowerment involving 309 new EWRs, training on gender and UP governance involving 1462 EWRs, and other types of training/regular meetings involving all the Aparajitas. Under outcome 2, a total of 12452 members of 260 local communities across all clusters were sensitized on gender and women's political participation through activities targeting family and community members; similarly, a total of 624 youths were sensitized on similar topics through school-based events conducted in 74 schools in four clusters. Similarly, over 5000 men representing elected UP representatives in 540 unions were sensitized on gender and women's political empowerment, and several hundred local political leaders were made more aware of the demands of Aparajitas through interactive meetings organized in 58 Upazilas involving a total of 2151 participants. Under outcome 3, there has been progress in terms of further analysis and framing of policy reviews and strategy development based on studies on selected topics carried out in 2021, and the updating of the Aparajita website. As for other activities, a few that were scheduled during the reporting period had to be shifted to the second half of the year.			
Main steering implications for next period of implementation			
During the reporting period, starting in April 2022, possible options for an extension of the project began to be explored by all concerned. Subsequently, after several rounds of discussion and exchanges involving representatives of SDC, Helvetas Bangladesh and the four implementation partner NGOs, it was determined that there was sufficient justification for the project to be extended up to 30 June 2024, with the national elections scheduled around December 2023 providing opportunities as well as challenges for the project to upscale its advocacy on women's political empowerment. Finalizing the details of the proposed extension would be a major steering task during the next period of implementation in 2022.			
Date and signature	Project Manager	29 September 2022	

2 Introduction

The reporting period – Jan to Jun 2022 – is the first half of what was meant to be the final year of implementation of Aparajita III as per the project's existing contract. However, the Annual Plan of Operation (APO) for 2022 was finalized at the beginning of the year in terms of what would be feasible and realistic without any attempt to use up the project's remaining funds by 15 January 2022, the end date of the project. Moreover, by the beginning of the second quarter, the possibility of an extension of the project – at the minimum a no-cost extension up to 30 June 2023, or preferably a cost extension for a longer period – began to be explored and a proposal submitted in this regard was under consideration by SDC as of the end of the reporting period. As part of the development of this proposal, there was an initial plan to revise the APO 2022 for the second half of the year by reducing the volume of activities at Union and Upazila levels considerably, and by rescheduling some other activities by taking into consideration a longer timeframe for their implementation. Such considerations, along with about a month's suspension or downscaling of field activities due to a resurgence of Covid-19 cases starting in late January, led to some deviation in the implementation of planned activities compared to the original plan as per APO 2022. However, in the end, there were no major deviation in the overall status of field implementation, as shown through the key details presented in this report.

2.1 Background

Aparajita: Political Empowerment of Women (Phase III) has been designed by building on the achievements and lessons of its previous phases (Phase I: 2011-2015, and Phase II: 2015-2017), with more exclusive focus at the Union Parishad level in the current phase and being more geographically focused than before. There is also another new dimension in the form of an intermediary management agency, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, which has overall responsibility of coordination and technical guidance, whereas national NGOs working as implementation partners (PNGOs) are responsible for field-level implementation in target working areas. Grouped into six broad 'clusters' that correspond to six out of eight administrative divisions of the country, these working areas comprise of all the unions (540 in total)¹ of 62 target Upazilas located in 16 districts. A total of four PNGOs have been responsible for managing field operations in the six clusters as shown below:

Aparajita implementation partners and their working areas

S.N.	Cluster	PNGO	# Districts	# Upazilas	# Unions
1	Barishal	Rupantar	3	11	102
2	Khulna	Rupantar	2	11	84
3	Chattogram	Khan Foundation	2	9	95
4	Rajshahi	Khan Foundation	3	10	79
5	Rangpur	Democracywatch	3	10	95
6	Sylhet	PRIP Trust	3	11	85
Total	6	4	16	62	540

The primary stakeholders of the project are grassroots women leaders, commonly referred to as "Aparajitas", who consist of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) of Union Parishads, i.e.,

¹ As of January 2022, the total number of unions in Aparajita working areas stands at 540 instead of the previous total of 541 as one union in Syleht became absorbed in the City Corporation.

women elected on ward member seats reserved for women, as well as Potential EWRs (PWRs). From the beginning of the project until mid-2021, the total number of these Aparajitas were around 8115 (@15 per union, including 3 EWRs and 12 PWRs per union, for 541 Unions). However, as a result of the Union Parishad elections that took place through various phases starting in June 2021 and continued through 2022, non-Aparajitas (i.e., women not previously included in Union-level Aparajita networks) who got elected as UP members on reserved seats for women (and on general member as well as Chairman seats in a few cases) in UP elections in Aparajita working areas got inducted as “ex-officio” members of union-level Aparajita networks as and when they came on board. In this way, some 621 new EWRs have come on board as new members of Union-level Aparajita networks in a total of 513 unions in which UP elections took place between June 2021 and June 2022. Thus, as of June 2022, the total number of Aparajitas that the project engages with as primary stakeholders is around 8700 women leaders in 540 Unions.

2.2 Context

As indicated already, because of the Union Parishad elections that took place all over the country, including in 513 Unions in Aparajita working areas between June 2021 – June 2022, during the reporting period, project staff members have had to make an extra effort to develop rapport with newly elected UP bodies in most places. Furthermore, in connection to the UP elections, political disputes, including factional conflicts within the ruling party, required project staff members to maneuver carefully and tactfully to find the right time to engage both primary and secondary stakeholders in project activities. Accordingly, several activities implemented during the reporting period had to be tailored to the overall context of newly elected UP bodies as well as other factors or consequences associated with the elections.

In addition to the changes in the context brought about by UP elections, implementation of planned activities had to be adjusted to some other developments as well. Among these, one was a resurgence of Covid-19 infections starting in late January, leading to suspension, or downscaling, of many activities for about a month. Moreover, while usual annual floods restricted mobility to varying degrees in many working areas, many Aparajita working areas in Sylhet cluster were particularly hard hit by severe floods starting in mid-June, leading to suspension of all project activities for weeks.

3 Achieved Outcomes

The goal of the Aparajita III is to contribute to equal participation, representation, and leadership of women in local governance. Towards this goal, and in line with the three planned outcomes and related outputs, the project has been implementing various activities involving both primary and secondary stakeholders. Thus, under the first intended outcome, it has been working to enhance the knowledge, skills, and confidence of over 8,000 union-level women leaders or ‘Aparajitas’, who consist of both elected women representatives (EWRs) and potential EWRs (PWRs) in 540 unions, to help them effectively participate in local government institutions (namely Union Parishad) and local governance processes. Alongside the first intended outcome, the project has also been implementing activities under two other outcome areas that relate to promoting greater support among influential persons and local bodies for women’s political empowerment, and attention to policy issues in the same direction. By design, interventions under the latter two outcomes are meant to build on the results of the interventions under the first outcome area, with self-advocacy by the primary stakeholders having been adopted as a key approach of the project.

The achievements of Aparajita project to date have been considerable in some key areas. For example, at the level of Union Parishads, grassroots women leaders supported by the project (“Aparajitas”) are participating in larger numbers, and are more actively engaged, in various UP committees. There are also indications that more women continue to be included in different committees of political parties at local levels, where there have been project-supported self-advocacy by the “Aparajitas” to implement a government directive to have at least 33% women in such roles. It also seems significant that if we look at the results of the recent UP elections (which started in June 2021, later than originally scheduled because of interruptions caused by Covid-19 and continued through the present reporting period), both the rates of participation of women in these elections and their success rates are higher in Aparajita working areas than in the rest of the country.

In what follows, under each outcome area, descriptions of some indicative achievements along with other relevant information have been provided to illustrate the kinds of results that are beginning to be achieved.

3.1 Planned Outcomes

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

In alignment with Outcome 1, the project has been working to strengthen the capacity of potential and existing women leaders and in turn their agency through increased networking, resourcing, and participation in different local public fora. Issues of “motivation” and “resources” are closely intertwined. It is assumed that constraints regarding motivation and resources can be overcome through the combination of i) achieving an economic status that allows to invest time for civic and political activities, ii) knowledge and skills on practices of good local governance and representational politics, and iii) expanding support networks for women leaders.

As one of its priority activities under Outcome 1, the project has been orienting grassroots women leaders in its working areas on how to participate in UP elections and encouraging as many of them as possible to contest not only on reserved seats for women, but also on general ward member as well as Chairman seats. It may be mentioned that there is a widespread misconception (often perpetuated by influential men who are not necessarily open to women’s political participation and empowerment) in all clusters that women can only contest for reserve seats in UP elections, and that the positions of Chairman and general ward member seats are for men, with only three ‘reserved seats’ providing opportunities for women to hold office. Against this backdrop, through various means, the project has continued to inform all interested women in Aparajita working areas of the actual opportunities available for them in seeking to become EWRs. Judging by the results of the UP elections that have taken place so far, it seems that there has been some growing interest among Aparajitas and other women in politics, including in contesting for both general seats and reserved seats for women. In this regard, some indicative statistics are shown below based on the results of UP elections as of the end of February 2022, by when UP elections were held in a total of 4136 UPs, including 507 in Aparajita working areas, out of a total of 4572 UPs in the whole country (and 540 UPs in Aparajita working areas).

Selected aspects of the UP elections held from June 2021 to February 2022	APJ working area	Rest of the Country	Total (BD)	Remarks
Number of UPs in which elections have been held	507	3,629	4,136	Total number of UPs: Bangladesh 4572, APJ working area 540
Average no. of women candidates	11.75	10.51	10.66	In Aparajita working areas, the women

Selected aspects of the UP elections held from June 2021 to February 2022	APJ working area	Rest of the Country	Total (BD)	Remarks
per UP for reserved seats				candidates/winners under consideration include women who were not necessarily formal members of the Aparajita networks earlier (though they have been inducted into these networks following the elections).
Number & percentage of women candidates for Chairman seats	46 9.07%	79 2.18%	125 3.02%	
Number & percentage of women who won on Chairman seats	11 2.17%	34 0.94%	45 1.09%	

N.B.: The data shown in the above table are as collected by field colleagues along with some gathered from published sources that have not necessarily been verified adequately as up-to-date data could not be found on official websites or any other sources.

As the table above indicates, if we compare the participation and performance of women candidates who contested for various seats in the Union Parishad elections in terms of Aparajita working areas versus the rest of the country, then significant differences may be noted that suggest that the efforts of the project have been quite successful in encouraging a significantly higher proportion of women to participate in Union Parishad elections. Moreover, significantly higher percentage of women also emerged as winners on general seats (Chairman, general ward member).

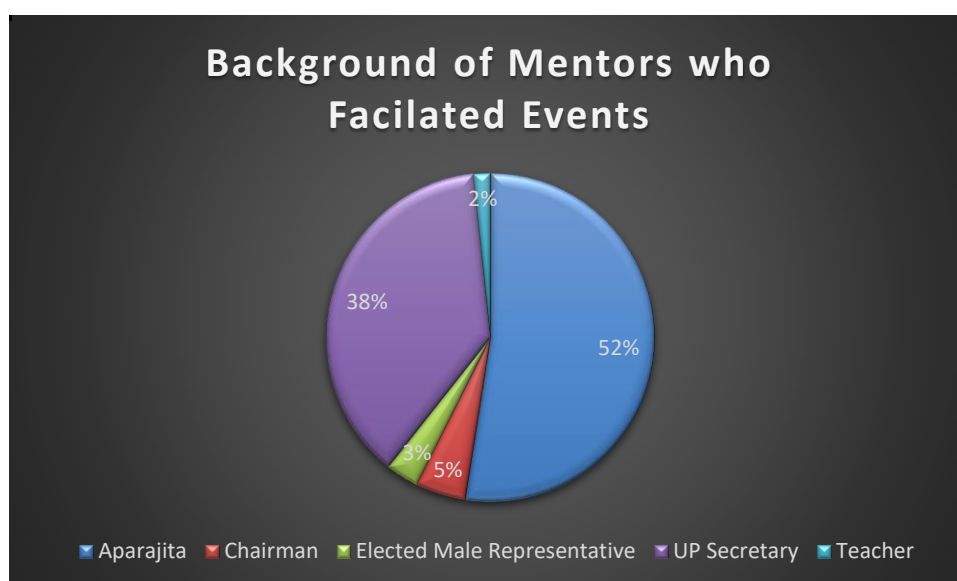
The Aparajitas as well as some former “non-Aparajitas” who emerged as winners in the recent UP elections indicate diverse backgrounds and paths of the women involved, with one common motif, that of having overcome various odds, most of which are rooted in systemic forms of gender inequality. As the case stories compiled in Annex 4 show, the EWRs have diverse profiles including former housewives, poor women, single women, widows, and so on, many of whom became EWRs after joining Aparajita networks as PWRs. While many of the stories have been presented as that of individual successes (e.g., Stories 1-3), there is indication that in many cases, group solidarity and united efforts of Aparajitas have been behind the emergence of many of them as winners (Story 4). Then there are a handful of exceptional individuals, such as Chandan Sharmin Rumki, who stand out as having joined a rare group of female UP Chairmen in the entire country (Story 5). While there are some EWRs who have been on a winning streak for several elections in a row (Story 6), it is noteworthy that a significant proportion of the winners have become EWRs for the first time, with their involvement in the Aparajita network as PWRs having provided an important boost to them. However, it may also be noted that there are also many former “non-Aparajitas” who won in the recent UP elections, and thus became inducted into the Aparajita network as its “ex-officio” members. The story of one such new Aparajita, as presented in Annex 4 (Story 7), indicate that at least some of the EWRs may find themselves in these roles as proxies of male family members with political ambitions of their own, though even in such cases, there is room for the women under consideration to assert their own agency.

While the proportion of Aparajitas who contested and won in recent UP elections have been considerable, what is perhaps more significant is that among those who participated in the elections but did not win, many continued their engagement in local governance processes (and in project-supported events) with renewed resolve. Such Aparajitas – true to their identity as *Aparajita*, a feminine Bangla word meaning ‘undefeated’ and having the connotation of ‘resilient’ – are not losing heart because of defeats in UP elections; rather, they are increasing their resolve to strive harder for serving the community and/or seeking office in future (Stories 8-9).

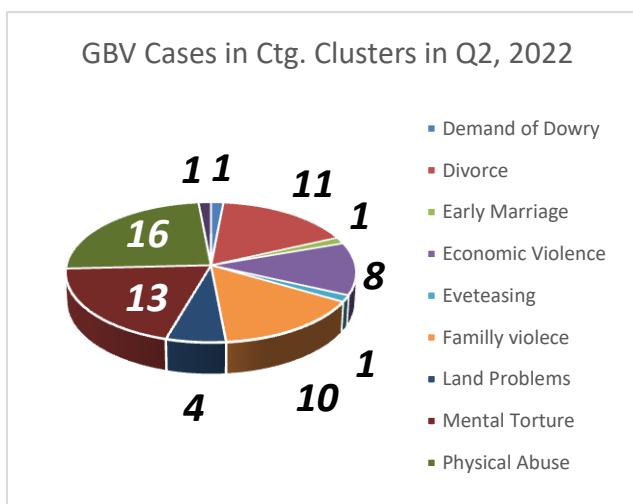
Overall, Aparajitas supported by the project are making a difference in many areas of local governance processes, ranging from finding greater spaces for women in a UP (Story 10), to addressing GBV (Story 11) and acting as a panel Chairman (Story 12). Some indicative facts and figures, as reported by different clusters, are mentioned below as examples of the kinds of

concrete changes that reflect the greater roles of Aparajitas in local governance process at the union level:

- In the context of reconstitution of various committees – such as Standing Committees and Union Development Coordination Committees (UDCCs) – of the Union Parishads following recent UP elections, Aparajitas successfully joined in significant numbers in these committees. For example, in Rangpur cluster, where there are 95 unions, as of June 2022 a total of 492 Aparajitas have joined various UP Standing Committees, whereas 350 Aparajitas became members of UDCCs. This means, in addition to the 285 EWRs (@3 EWR/union in 95 unions) who are ex officio members of these committees, the number of PWRs who joined the SCs and UDCCs are 207 and 55 respectively.
- During the reporting period, a growing number of Aparajitas became more actively involved as “mentors”, facilitating various training events and meetings. For example, out of 61 persons who played such roles in Barishal cluster, more than half (52%) came from among Aparajitas.



- Various incidents of GBV continue to be reported by all clusters, while EWRs and other Aparajitas have also been reported to have been actively involved in addressing many of these cases. For example, during the 2nd quarter of 2022 (April – June), a total of 66 GBV cases were recorded in the working area of Chattogram (Ctg.) cluster. These cases included different incidents ranging from divorce (11), family violence (10), mental torture (13) and physical abuse (16). Of these incidents, 11 cases were reportedly solved by local mechanisms of alternative dispute resolution (“shalish”), including 4 cases solved by Aparajitas.



Outcome 2: Influential [groups], men and local institutions support effective inclusion of women in local political life in the selected districts

Through Outcome 2 the project aims to change attitudes of influential groups, political institutions, and local leaders towards greater space for women in the public sphere. The primary group involves the stakeholders closest to the women leaders themselves: the spouses and families of aspiring and Aparajitas. The secondary groups include members of the local business, finance, academic, legal, faith based and other sectors. It is assumed that the constraints on the demand side will be addressed through i) strategic targeting and engagement with families which demonstrates the benefits of women's empowerment for families, ii) the collaboration with "champions" (women/men/youth) in the respective formal and informal institutions, who will be supported in sensitizing their organizations and informal networks on the beneficial aspects of women's empowerment and political participation, iii) promoting democratic spaces for women's participation in local governance processes, iv) the catalyzation of inter-party issue based political dialogue, and v) cooperation with and the accompaniment of the political institutions along the electoral cycle.

There are indications that various activities aimed at sensitizing various categories of secondary stakeholders continue to produce some tangible results, albeit on a limited scale, in Aparajita working areas. These results range from elected male representatives showing proactive measures to accommodate the demands and needs of their female colleagues, the appointment of women in key positions in political parties, or more gender-equitable allocation of resources in UP budgets. The following are some indicative examples as gleaned from the quarterly reports prepared by different clusters:

- As of March 2022, three Union Parishads in Bagerhat district of Khulna cluster allocated specially designated rooms for Aparajitas to conduct their meetings. In the same cluster, because of the proactive measures taken by the Chairman of another UP, two of the three members of the Chairman Panel were selected from among the three EWRs, including the No. 1 Panel Chairman (Case Story 13).
- In Barishal cluster, a newly elected UP Chairman who believed that he was able to win the UP elections because of the support of women voters started taking proactive measures to include EWRs in various activities of the UP, leading to what an EWR termed as a noticeable change in terms of gender sensitivity at the UP (Case Story 14). In the same cluster, another Chairman emerged as a champion of women's political empowerment by allocating a special budget head for Aparajita network (Case Story 15).
- In Rangpur cluster, an Aparajita from Gangachra Upazila of Rangpur has been selected as Women Affairs Secretary in the main committee of the district Jatiya Party. Similarly, in the same cluster, an Aparajita named Rahima Parveen Lovely of Auliapur Union of Sadar Upazila of Dinajpur district has been elected as a general member of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Dinajpur district committee.

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

Through Outcome 3 the project intends to address structural constraints in the political and electoral systems which restrain women from participating in the democratic process. It is expected that issues like the implementation of the 33% rule (RPO), the low level of representation of women through general seats, or the need for clarification/ strengthening of roles and

responsibilities of women members in the local councils will be addressed through the following mechanisms: i) Policy analysis and dialogue, ii) alliances for advocacy, iii) social media and communication strategies, and iv) knowledge sharing and learning.

During the reporting period, further reviews of a set of six studies, conducted by cluster teams under the guidance of PCU during the Covid-affected period in 2021, were conducted and draft summary versions have been prepared for the purpose of sharing with different stakeholders in abridged forms. A plan was adopted to use such documents in connection to various activities with advocacy dimensions (including activities under Outcome 2) in line with the project's advocacy strategy. The development of IEC materials in line with these studies, as started in 2021, continued during the present reporting period as well, and there have also been progress towards updating the project's website further. Most of the high-profile events planned under this outcome under APO 2022 - such as national level dialogues with policy makers and central political leaders – were meant to be held during the second half of the year. On the other hand, a few meant to be held during the reporting period had to be postponed due to various external factors ranging from disruptions caused by Covid, ramadan-affected public schedules, and floods.

4 Outputs and Performance as per APO

Output 1.1. Potential and elected women representatives have enhanced capacities for effective participation in the governance processes, institutions (LGI, health, education, law and order, agriculture) and political parties at selected districts

Under this output, there were a total of four activities implemented during the reporting period, as shown in the table below with relevant details. (N.B.: As noted earlier, a total of 623 newly elected EWRs have joined the Union Aparajita networks after the Union Parishad elections held during the period from June 2021 to June 2022. Of these new Aparajitas, about half had been inducted into the Aparajita networks in 2021, and the remaining during the present reporting period, and all have been engaged in other project activities as and when they came on board.)

Activity	Cluster	No. of events	Participants (Aparajitas)	% of target covered
1.1.2 Training of Aparajitas on BASIC concept on WPE (targeting new EWRs to be inducted as new members of the APJ network)	Chattogram	2	33	100%
	Rajshahi	2	36	100%
	Barishal	3	20	91%
	Rangpur	6	136	100%
	Sylhet	9	76	100%
	Total	22	301	98%
1.1.3. Training [of EWRs] on Gender & UP governance (with focus on EWRs' Roles and Responsibilities)	Chattogram	11	264	93%
	Rajshahi	10	232	98%
	Khulna	11	225	89%
	Barishal	18	263	86%
	Rangpur	10	237	83%
	Sylhet	11	239	94%
	Total	71	1462	90%
1.1.4 Training of WLs on different topics: Standing Committees & UDCC (all EWRs & PWRs)	Chattogram	95	1371	96%
	Rajshahi	79	1182	100%
	Khulna	84	1150	91%
	Barishal	102	1392	91%
	Rangpur	95	1267	89%
	Sylhet	85	1193	94%

Activity	Cluster	No. of events	Participants (Aparajitas)	% of target covered
	Total	540	7346	91%
1.1.5 Support to WLs for peer teaching/learning (Quarterly meetings of Union APJ networks)	Chattogram	147	2114	96%
	Rajshahi	237	3453	97%
	Khulna	168	2255	89%
	Barishal	204	2544	83%
	Rangpur	190	2373	83%
	Sylhet	170	2188	86%
	Total	1116	12859	89%

N.B.: In Khulna cluster, A1.1.2 was completed in 2021. Under Activity 1.1.5, there have been two rounds of quarterly meetings of Union Aparajita networks in most unions of all clusters, but in Rajshahi, a third round of meeting was conducted, whereas in Chattogram the second round of meeting was not completed in many unions. The same participants have been counted more than once in the figures shown above. The % figures shown represent average percentage of participants present per meeting in the corresponding cluster.

Output 1.2. Potential and elected UP women representatives have enhanced motivation and confidence for effective political participation in the selected districts.

This Output focuses on practice-oriented application of knowledge, capacity and confidence developed under output 1.1. Capacitated Aparajitas, i.e., elected, and potential women representatives (EWRs/PWRs) are provided additional training where needed, e.g., in terms of orientation on UP elections. Under this output, a total of 1885 Aparajitas (including EWRs as well as PWRs) from 62 Upazilas were trained on how to dialogue with political parties and other stakeholders, and most of the 1620 EWRs in 540 UPs, along with some PWRs included as members of UDCCs, were supported to participate in and raise their voices in UDCC meetings.

Activity	Cluster	No. of events organized	Number of Participants (All APJs in case of 1.2.1)
A 1.2.1 Orientation of EWRs, PWRs on how to dialogue with political parties and other relevant stakeholders	Chattogram	9	281
	Rajshahi	10	316
	Khulna	11	329
	Barishal	11	322
	Rangpur	10	298
	Sylhet	11	339
	Total	62	1885
1.2.4 Interface meetings with service providers at LGIs (UDCC Meetings)	Chattogram	66	1218
	Rajshahi	79	1567
	Khulna	138	2740
	Barishal	102	1622
	Rangpur	120	2426
	Sylhet	85	1894
	Total	590	11467

N.B. For A1.2.4, the target was to support an average of 1 meeting per UP during the reporting period. The number of participants include Aparajitas as well as other UDCC members.

Output 1.3. Potential and elected women representatives are empowered to bargain effectively through activating their network (of Aparajita) and existing networks.

Activity	Cluster	No. of events organized	Participants
1.3.1 Supporting WDF* meetings *Women's Development Forum (Upazila-level) <i>Note: In many Upazilas, two rounds of meeting have been</i>	Chattogram	13	341
	Rajshahi	26	526
	Khulna	30	485
	Barishal	22	353
	Rangpur	12	290

With capacity, confidence, and exposure, Aparajitas are more capable of engaging with different stakeholders. To establish these stronger linkages within themselves and at the Upazila level, the project facilitates activities as shown in the table below whereby they can interact directly with other relevant stakeholders, and with Aparajitas from across the Upazilla:

<i>supported. Participants have been counted twice in such cases.</i>	Sylhet	17	343
	Total	120	2338
1.3.2 Supporting meetings of Standing Committees and other relevant Committees	Chattogram	104	341
	Rajshahi	119	2025
	Khulna	151	2173
	Barishal	101	1417
	Rangpur	117	1793
	Sylhet	102	1732
	Total	694	10793
1.3.3 Interaction with sectorial experts <i>Note: These are Upazila level events, which could not be completed in some Upazilas in two clusters.</i>	Chattogram	9	261
	Rajshahi	10	293
	Khulna	11	300
	Barishal	11	301
	Rangpur	6	147
	Sylhet	11	317
	Total	58	1619
1.3.4 Strengthening/upgrading of informal women's networks at different levels	Chattogram	2	61
	Rajshahi	3	91
	Khulna	2	56
	Barishal	0	0
	Rangpur	0	0
	Sylhet	0	0
	Total	7	208
1.3.5 Supporting District WDF meetings (Six-monthly)	Chattogram	0	0
	Rajshahi	0	0
	Khulna	1	30
	Barishal	3	75
	Rangpur	1	9
	Sylhet	3	75
	Total	8	189

N.B.: In case of A1.3.4 and A1.3.5, activities will be completed later in many cases.

Output 2.1 Influential groups are aware of and understand the rights and the value of women's political participation in the Union and Upazila Parishad

Under this output, a total of three activities – as shown below– were implemented in six clusters except in case of A2.1.2 that was not completed in many cases as originally planned. This was due to a temporary hold put on this activity in anticipation of a possible revision of APO 2022 in connection to a project extension being considered. Under this output, a total of 12,452 persons (including 7276 men) representing family members of Aparajitas, community leaders and others in 260 unions were sensitized on gender roles and relations. Similarly, a total of 624 youths (including 320 male) were sensitized on similar topic through school-based events in 74 schools. Finally, most of the UP personnel in 539 unions (including some 5390 male elected representatives) were also oriented on gender and women's political empowerment.

Activity	Cluster	No. of events	No. of Participants
A.2.1.1 Sensitization of family and community	Chattogram	39	1769 (Male 805)

members on gender roles & relations	Rajshahi	39	1645 (Male 1065)
	Khulna	42	2376 (Male 1192)
	Barishal	51	2913 (Male 2297)
	Rangpur	47	1950 (Male 924)
	Sylhet	42	1799 (Male 993)
	Total	260	12452 (Male 7276)
A2.1.2 Sensitization of youth and community on gender roles and relations Note: This activity (involving school students) was not implemented in two clusters, and only partially implemented in others, during the reporting period due to a reason already described.	Chattogram	30	1215 (Male 558)
	Rajshahi	26	1306 (Male 577)
	Khulna	0	0
	Barishal	0	0
	Rangpur	5	223 (Male 117)
	Sylhet	13	624 (Male 320)
	Total	74	3368 (Male 1512)
A2.1.3 Gender & WPE sensitization orientation for Elected Male Representatives (EMRs) Note: The numbers of participants shown include not just the male members of UPs, but EWRs as well as UP secretaries (if present). In Barishal cluster, A2.1.3 could not be held in one UP due to ongoing conflict of the Chairman with other elected representatives.	Chattogram	95	1259
	Rajshahi	79	1142
	Khulna	84	1095
	Barishal	101	1314
	Rangpur	95	1350
	Sylhet	85	1070
	Total	539	7230

Output 2.2. Political parties at the local level are aware of and understand the rights and the value of women's political participation in the Union and Upazila and District Parishad.

Under this output, the main activity implemented during the reporting period in all clusters was A2.2.1, involving interaction of Aparajitas with political leaders at Upazila levels. Altogether, several hundred political leaders in 58 Upazilas were engaged in dialogues with Aparajitas, and expressed greater understanding of and support to their demands, through such interactions.

Activity	Cluster	No. of events	Participants (male & female)
A.2.2.1 Interactive Meeting with Political Leaders at UZP & District Level	Chattogram	9	297
	Rajshahi	10	392
	Khulna	11	441
	Barishal	11	397
	Rangpur	8	274
	Sylhet	9	350
	Total	58	2151

There was only one event of a second activity, namely A2.2.4 (Monitoring/tracking of political leaders & APJ to identify policy gaps) during the reporting quarter. This is an activity similar to A2.2.1, but held at the district level. In the one event organized in one district in Chattogram cluster, there were 39 participants present.

Output 2.3. Sub-national government institutions are aware and convinced about the rights and the value of women's political participation in the Union, Upazila and District Parishad.

Under this output, two activities were planned during the reporting period as per APO 2022. The following table present relevant details in relation to these activities:

Activity	Cluster	No. of events	Participants (male & female)
A2.3.1 Meetings with public service to address women rights and participation issues N.B.: This activity is meant to involve Upazila level events, all of which were not completed during the reporting period as planned, but would be completed later.	Chattogram	9	232
	Rajshahi	10	272
	Khulna	0	0
	Barishal	0	0
	Rangpur	0	0
	Sylhet	2	52
	Total	21	556
A 2.3.2 Planning and budget allocation meeting to address women's rights issues N.B.: Planned events could not be held in two unions for different reasons: 1) St. Martin Island, Cox's Bazar district, because of its remoteness; 2) a UP in Barishal had an ongoing conflict between the Chairman and other elected representatives.	Chattogram	94	1397
	Rajshahi	79	1325
	Khulna	84	1632
	Barishal	101	1592
	Rangpur	95	1635
	Sylhet	85	1136
	Total	538	8717

It may be mentioned that under Output 2.3, a third activity, A.2.3.3 ('Learning/meeting to increase women participation in public service committees' was not planned in 2022. However, in one cluster, one event originally planned in 2021 but postponed was completed during the early part of 2022.

Output 3.1. Constraints in the policy and legal framework including their enforcement related to political empowerment of women are addressed.

Under this output, there was one national level event (A3.1.2: National level workshop [e.g., with PSC] for sensitization on WPE/policy dialogue) and six regional events (A3.1.3: Dialogue/interaction between MPs/APJ leaders on national issues) planned during the reporting period as per the APO 2022. However, for various reasons, these events could not be held on time, and were shifted towards the end of the year. However, further revision and updating/abridging of six studies conducted in 2021 under A3.1.1: Analysis and framing of policy reviews and strategy development were undertaken as planned. It may be mentioned that the six studies were as follows:

SN	Topic	Brief description of the problem/issue and focus of relevant studies/position papers/IEC materials	Cluster
1	The Role of Elected Women Representatives in LGIs (with focus on Union Parishads)	EWRs are often unable to perform their roles and responsibilities not so much because they lack necessary knowledge or skills, but because others around them do not support them The study focused on roles of EWRs in LGIs as defined in relevant laws, with attention to practices/policy constraints that stop them from playing their roles effectively	Chattogram

SN	Topic	Brief description of the problem/issue and focus of relevant studies/position papers/IEC materials	Cluster
2	Women and UP Elections	Because of the provision of reserved seats for women in LGIs, women are often overlooked in nominations for general seats in elections; nominations (for Chair) are not done properly – those with money and connections are given preference at the expense of qualified candidates; nominated Chair candidates create panels by taking money from candidates for Member positions The focus of the study was on getting more women nominated on general seats in LGIs elections. Reports/IEC materials produced had information on what PWRs need to know to get elected, and challenges/opportunities for women to get elected not only as EWRs, but also on general seats.	Khulna
3	RPO provision of having women in 33% positions	Political parties have not met the target of having 33% women in various committees as per RPO provision. The original deadline (2020) has also passed, and no new deadline has been set. All this will continue to be a key advocacy issue for Aparajita project.	Rangpur
4	Youth engagement for Women's Political Empowerment	Engagement of the youth, including young women, in local political processes would be key to generating greater momentum for women's political empowerment in the future. The study/position paper focused on current opportunities, challenges, and practices in terms of youth engagement in LG processes (e.g., are the youth involved in UP VAW prevention committees?); are there any policy or practice level gaps? IEC materials will focus on how the youth, particularly young women, can participate in LG processes and contribute to women's political empowerment.	Rajshahi
5	Greater male support for WPE	Looking at influential men at various levels (UPs/political parties) as key audience, how can they support WPE effectively? Why should they do it (What's in it for them)? Women are working (and succeeding in many cases) against all odds; yet they can always use greater male support. The study/position paper focused on the extent to which male leaders at different spheres are supportive of or hinder women's political empowerment, and the extent to which current policies encourage them to maintain the status quo or seek change; IEC materials may focus on changes in policies and practices required, and male champions of WPE.	Sylhet
6	Addressing Women's Rights and Needs in UP Budgeting/Planning	UP planning/budgeting may be a practical area of work for EWRs and other Aparajitas to advocate for UPs to show greater understanding and support for women's rights and needs. How actively involved are the EWRs in UP planning and budgeting process? The study investigated current opportunities and challenges regarding women's participation and voice in the context of UP budgeting/planning.	Barishal

An updated document outlining the project's advocacy strategy, plans and initiatives to date, prepared by PCU and titled "Advocacy in Aparajita: Issues, Strategy and Initiatives" and dated 5 May 2022, was circulated to all partners (PCs and EDs) to serve as a common basis for discussion and action related to the project's advocacy work.

Output 3.2. Project lessons are capitalized and disseminated for improving political empowerment of women.

Under this output, the updating of the Aparajita website (A3.2.1) continued as planned, with key contents developed in Bangla, and one poster was printed by a cluster (under A3.2.6) as per a plan adopted in 2021 to produce IEC materials linked to studies conducted under A3.1.1 (mentioned above). Of the other planned activities as per the APO 2022, one national event (a conference involving women networks and other CSOs under A3.2.2) was deferred due to the difficulty of finding a suitable time in the aftermath of Covid interruptions as well as other factors such as Ramadan. Similarly, while another activity (A3.2.5: Intra-cluster exposure visits of Aparajitas), which are meant to be implemented during the months from May to September of 2022, was not started by any cluster during the reporting period but are expected to be completed during the following months.

5 Finances and Management

5.1 Financial Information

During the reporting period, despite a brief period of interruptions caused by a renewed surge in Covid cases starting in late January, leading to temporary restrictions on movements and field activities, the situation improved relatively quickly compared to previous years. Thus this interruption did not have any significant effect on the overall rate of implementation of activities and corresponding burn rates.

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5.2 Management

At the beginning of the year, an Aparajita Coordination Committee (ACC) meeting was held in Sitakunda, Chattogram in January 2022, together with a joint field visit in which the EDs of all partner NGOs along with the Program Manager of SDC and the Country Director of Helvetas Bangladesh also joined. The key staff members of all clusters (PCs, CBCs, Cluster M&ECs, and Cluster F&ACs) along with members of the Helvetas-PCU team also participated in this meeting, which proved useful in finalizing, and developing a common understanding on, the Annual Plan of Operation (APO) of 2022. This APO was prepared by considering what would be feasible instead of trying to use of all the funds by the end of what was meant to be the final year of project implementation as per the existing contract.

In March there was an "all-staff retreat" in which almost all project staff members (except for a few who had not been well) came together in Cox's Bazar to look back on what they have achieved so far, the challenges that they overcame, and to develop greater common understanding on how to work together more effectively for the remainder of the project. Altogether, there were a total of 127 participants (including the EDs of four partner NGOs, but without counting SDC representatives who also joined some of the sessions) who went through various sessions spread

over two and a half days. Having been cancelled at the last minute twice in previous years due to Covid-19, this event proved both a morale booster as well as a good learning opportunity for all the participants, particularly the frontline staff members, who expressed great satisfaction in terms of developing clearer understanding on different aspects of project objectives, strategies, results achieved or expected, and lessons.

It may be mentioned that as per the original contract between SDC and HELVETAS, the implementation of Aparajita III would come to an end by 14 January 2023. However, as mentioned already, when APO 2022 was developed in January 2022, it was finalized in terms of what would be realistic and feasible, instead of aiming to use up all the available funds by 14 January 2023, the formal end date of the project as per the original contract. Against this backdrop, beginning in April 2022, possible options for an extension of the project began to be explored by all concerned. Subsequently, after several rounds of discussion and exchanges involving representatives of SDC, Helvetas Bangladesh and the four implementation partner NGOs, it was determined that there was sufficient justification for the project to be extended up to 30 June 2024. In deciding on this end date of the extension period, a key event in the political calendar of Bangladesh, namely the upcoming national elections expected to take place around December 2023, was taken into consideration, so that the project would be able to facilitate engagement of Aparajitas/proponents of women's political empowerment with some key stakeholders (such as members of parliament, national political leaders and the Election Commission) both before and after the national elections.

A field mission by Agnieszka Kroskowska, the GSE Coordinator and a Senior Advisor of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation based in its headquarters, took place in June 2022 with the objective providing technical support and advice in the elaboration and refinement of relevant strategies and plans, e.g., in relation to strengthening Aparajita networks, sensitization of secondary stakeholders, advocacy, and gender and social equity (GSE) mainstreaming. As part of the mission, she conducted a workshop with all PCs of six clusters along with members of the PCU on advocacy, involving practical exercises on how to engage with the key stakeholders in relation to the project's advocacy work.

6 Lessons Learnt

Despite some interruptions, including a period of no or little field activities for a few weeks due to Covid-related restrictions on field movement and floods, especially in Sylhet cluster, the pace and extent of implementation of field-level activities went much more smoothly during the reporting period than comparable periods in the two previous years. However, there was another challenge – more institutional in nature – that the project had to overcome as most of the 540 Union Parishads in the project's working area consisted of newly elected representatives, including EWRs who came from outside of Aparajita networks. Accordingly, field staff members had to work hard to develop necessary rapport with these new UP bodies, and in this regard, they found that if they took the time to do this well, it became easier for them to continue implementing planned activities at the UP level.

In the context of the UP elections that started in 2021 and continued through the reporting period, another challenge faced involved the adjustments that needed to be made in the composition and dynamics of Union level Aparajita networks, which now included PWRs turned EWRs, along with a total of over 600 newly elected EWRs who had not been in the networks before. On the other hand, there was the risk that many of the EWRs who contested in the UP elections but did not win could lose their interest in staying engaged with the Aparajita network. Nonetheless, it was observed that the solidarity and camaraderie among the Aparajitas were strong enough to help

counter such difficulties and help all members to refocus on their need to work together for a common cause – that of women's political empowerment – which went beyond individual circumstances or partisan considerations.

The interruptions caused by Covid-19 as well as the floods in Sylhet reinforced some lessons already learned in previous years, that many Aparajitas were always ready to rise to the occasion under challenging circumstances, and proactively took part in various measures to respond to the crisis and establish themselves as leaders by taking part in various initiatives such as collection and distribution of relief and to assist victims of gender-based violence that are seen to be on the rise in difficult circumstances.

One observation that has been noted by field teams in different clusters is that EWRs who got elected without being in the same unofficial 'panels' as the elected Chairmen find it much harder than others in performing in their roles effectively. There have even been cases of some EWRs not allied with the dominant groups of elected representatives being treated as persona non grata in their UPs. Such observations show that the path to women's political empowerment is a slippery one in Bangladesh, where successes gained over a certain period in the past could be undermined by new developments. However, even in such situations, the Aparajitas are trying their best to retain or regain their places at Union Parishads.

At another level, one lesson learned has been that while the EWRs and other Aparajitas face many challenges, as an institution the UP itself remains a weak one, making the objective of promoting women's empowerment in the context of UP governance even more difficult. For example, many Union Parishads are reportedly not functioning properly as financial allocations through a major project named LGSP, to which UPs have come to depend heavily, has been discontinued. In this context, many UPs reportedly have no clear idea as to how to raise necessary development funds. In any case, as reported frequently by the field staff members of Aparajita project, there is a demand for both technical and financial support to the UPs by many of the elected representatives of this LGI that still remains relatively weak.

In the current reporting period, the scenario regarding gender-based violence has also been quite challenging. In this context, Aparajita project has tried to monitor the situation through the field staff members and the Aparajitas who are on the ground. It has been encouraging to see many Aparajitas taking proactive measures to address GBV cases. Thus, despite challenging circumstances, the network of over 8000 Aparajitas in 540 unions have so far laid a solid foundation of experience and collective efforts on which future initiatives can be built.

As noted earlier, in the context of the recent UP elections that started during the second half of 2021 and continued through the reporting period, there have been significant increases at the level of interest shown by women in contesting for Chairman and general ward member seats in Aparajita working areas. Moreover, the proportions of women winning these seats were also higher in Aparajita working areas than in the rest of the country. Such an outcome indicates that if sufficient encouragement is provided, and a conducive environment is created, an increasing number of women will continue to come forward in claiming their rightful place as elected representatives. While this is certainly the case with Aparajitas, it is likely that women who did not originally belong to Aparajita networks may have also been encouraged, at least partly, by the demonstration effects of the Aparajitas. It may be noted that because of the provision of reserved ward member seats for women in UPs, there is a widespread misconception that women can and should seek offices on these seats only. While Aparajita project has been able to dispel this misconception to some extent, it is evident that a longer-term strategy for promoting women's

political empowerment in the context of local governance would be to remove various obstacles for women to join local political processes in larger numbers.

Although women in rural Bangladesh continue to face patriarchal barriers at various spheres including family, community, and local government institutions, the Aparajitas have shown that with determination and united initiative, they can overcome most challenges on the path to leadership. On the other hand, effective and equal participation by women in politics is still a long way off due to factors such as gender bias and nepotism of political leaders, and lack of proper enforcement of favorable legal and policy provisions that exist (e.g., the RPO provision of having 33% women in various committees of political parties), not to mention the absence of more proactive policy measures. At present, while there may be a handful of women leaders in local level committees of political parties, most of them do not seem to be able to play a significant role in the decision-making process. Often, in relation to women holding leadership positions, the role of men wielding influence from behind the scenes is there in many cases.

More generally, due to limited financial capacity and independence, many women candidates cannot participate in elections in the way they would like. Moreover, many eligible women candidates could not participate in the UP elections due to the patriarchal biases and barriers that they faced in securing party nomination. On the other hand, it has been proved that with the good will of the local administration, free, fair, and participatory elections are possible, and that if given the opportunity, many women can emerge as winners through such elections. At the same time, the experiences of the women who did participate in the UP elections and succeed despite many odds indicate some useful lessons, such as: a) capacity building of potential women leaders along with sensitization of their family members and other secondary stakeholders such as community leaders and male political leaders can help more women join local governance processes in leadership roles; b) as an effect of repeated candidacy of women in elections, the proportion of strong women candidates, and their acceptance in local communities, are increasing; and c) more women candidates are showing interest in running for chairman and general ward member seats.

The project's experience to date, based on feedback from diverse stakeholders including many Aparajitas, there is an emerging consensus that to promote women's political empowerment, all concerned must ensure proper implementation of the RPO provision for inclusion of 33% women in committees of political parties at various levels. In this regard, there is a need for the project to gear up its advocacy efforts with higher officials and policy makers at different levels, including at the national level, where the project's progress to date in terms of implementation of planned activities has been less than expected. Thus, there is need for the coordinators and directors of the implementing organizations to develop greater common understanding on what needs to be done, and how, in the coming months to make necessary progress in this area.

In terms of lessons learnt, one last point to note is that the opportunities for making fuller use of available ICT facilities remain to be explored further. For example, during the Covid-affected years of 2020 and 2021, the PCU-PCs team along with other thematic groups (e.g., M&E team, capacity building team, and finance team) learned to meet regularly and make useful exchanges on virtual platforms. At the same time, however, the experience of the "all-staff retreat" held in Cox's Bazar in March 2022 indicated that virtual interactions cannot be a substitute for old-fashioned face-to-face interactions for all purposes, and that there is a limit to which joint learning and reflection – not to mention team spirit – can be promoted on virtual platforms. In the same vein, as the project seeks to encourage Aparajitas to make greater use of ICT facilities, in moving ahead, such options should be presented as complementary to, and not substitutes for, face-to-face interactions among

the key leaders of the Aparajita network that will be expected to take on an increasing role in self-advocacy initiatives for women's political empowerment.

PART TWO: ANNEXES

6.1 Annex 1: Achieved outcomes

Attached as a separate file

6.2 Annex 2: Outputs and performance as per APO

Attached as a separate file

6.3 Annex 3: Financial Information

[Omitted]

6.4 Annex 4: Abbreviations, Photos, Case Stories etc.

Attached as a separate file.