

Citizen Participation in Bangladesh's City Corporations: A Qualitative Systematic Review of Formal Institutions, Political Brokerage, and Citizen Influence

Md Nahidul Islam

Associate Professor, Department of Public Administration, Comilla University, Bangladesh.

Email: nahid@cou.ac.bd Orcid; ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3227-7165> Scopus Author ID: 59178926700

Kazi S M Khasrul Alam Quddusi

Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Chittagong, Chittagong, Bangladesh. Email: khasru@cu.ac.bd

Md. Hashem Reza

Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, Gopalganj Science and Technology University, Gopalganj, Bangladesh. E-mail: hashemreza@gstu.edu.bd

Kamrun Nahar Jharna

Lecturer, Department of Public Administration, Gopalganj Science and Technology University, Gopalganj, Bangladesh. E-mail: kamrunnahar@gstu.edu.bd

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative systematic review synthesizes evidence on citizen participation in the 12 city corporations in Bangladesh during the period under review, focusing on formal participatory institutions, political brokerage, and institutional authority. Four bibliographic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Bangladesh Journals Online) were searched, and citation chasing, hand searching, and grey-literature retrieval were performed for English-language publications from 2009 to March 31, 2025. Following the removal of 372 duplicates, 882 studies were independently screened by two reviewers (Cohen's kappa = .82), and 52 studies were included and appraised using the CASP or MMAT as appropriate. The analysis is based on Arnstein's power-based understanding of participation, supplemented by Fung's design dimensions and Fox's voice/institutional "teeth" distinction. Formal participatory opportunities are well recorded throughout the corpus, but the evidence does not show a consistent link between the existence of such opportunities and citizen influence. The most common forms of participation are informational or consultative, and there are barriers to shared authority in the form of agenda control, non-binding outputs, central fiscal and administrative dependence, and brokered access. The review offers two interrelated concepts: a structurally embedded tokenism ceiling and a typology of substitutive, parasitic, and bridging brokerages. These concepts attempt to account for the possibility of apparently participatory institutions existing in conjunction with selective, mediated influence. There is still limited evidence to show participation in digital services, causal service outcomes, and variation across cities, and the literature is focused on Dhaka and Rajshahi only. Conclusions thus do not make general statements about all city corporations but are mechanism-based.

1. Introduction

Urbanization has been occurring rapidly in Bangladesh, with the urban population rising from 33.6 million in 2011 to 52.0 million in 2022, causing strain on urban infrastructure and local public administration (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022; World Bank, 2017). City corporations decide or

execute matters related to roads, drainage, garbage collection, public places, licensing, expenditure on development, and basic services. Participation is thus important in terms of the legitimacy of the process and the allocation of urban resources.

The institutional structure for participation is not “empty.” The Local Government (City Corporation) Act of 2009 allows for the election of a mayor and councillors, women’s reserved seats, standing committees, and various representative and administrative functions (Government of Bangladesh, 2009). Open-budget meetings, citizen charters, coordination forums, grievance redress mechanisms, community organizations, and digital reporting channels are examples of administrative and donor-supported reforms that have been added. However, the literature consistently refers to a disconnect between ‘access’ and ‘influence.’ Meetings can take place after key decisions have been made, recommendations can be non-binding, and political or administrative elites can be in control of who comes to the meeting, what is on the agenda, what information is available, and what is done after the meeting (Huq, 2014; Swapan, 2016b; Waheduzzaman & As-Saber, 2015). It is not the question of whether participatory institutions exist, but under what conditions formal voice becomes consequential authority and accountable response.

This is also a distribution problem. In Dhaka and other urban areas, people with low income, migrants, informal-settlement dwellers, and citizens whose tenure is insecure depend on intermediaries to obtain documents, utilities, protection, or to reach officials (Banks, 2008, 2016; Banks et al., 2011). Although the number of women has risen, this does not always result in equal numbers of women in budgets, committees, or executive decisions (Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010; Pranab Kumar Panday, 2008). This connection between participation, equality of urban citizenship, and distributional issues is also part of SDG 10 and SDG 11 (United Nations, 2015). The capacity to access space, speak, elicit a response, and secure a remedy can be unequal, and a formal invitation to participate can coexist.

This gap can be attributed to the process of political brokerage. Studies on urban poverty, party networks, and informal political order in Bangladesh reveal that citizens often interact with the state via councillors, party activists, local leaders, mastaan networks, NGOs, and community organizations, and not through a direct relationship between citizens and the state (Banks, 2016; Jackman, 2019; Lewis & Hossain, 2022). While brokerage may be exclusionary based on loyalty, status, and/or discretionary favors, it may also serve as a way of linking marginalized groups to agencies and facilitating collective negotiations. The analytical question is thus to differentiate between participation in which authority is redistributed and mediated access that generates a benefit but not citizenship rights or lasting citizenship. Where party-centered local competition and clientelistic control impact access to representative institutions, this problem is exacerbated (Sarker & Nawaz, 2019).

Since the political transition of August 2024, there has been a greater need for systematic synthesis. The elected mayors of all 12 city corporations were dismissed, and administrators were appointed, which changed the electoral accountability of urban administration. However, most of the institutional structures of urban administration remained intact (Baharam Khan & Helemul Alam, 2024). The evidence collected in this review mostly relates to the era of elected city governments and should thus be viewed as a starting point for future studies and not as evidence of the performance of corporations under the leadership of administrators.

This review addresses four questions.

- (1) How and at what levels is citizen participation documented in the city corporations of Bangladesh?
- (2) What are the barriers and enabling conditions that frame citizen participation?

- (3) How can the influence of institutional authority, clientelism, and political brokerage be understood as a mechanism that explains the extent to which voice is translated into influence; and
- (4) Which reform priorities and research questions are supported by the evidence?

This study makes two theoretical contributions with a common theme. First, it proposes the notion of a structurally embedded tokenism ceiling, which helps to account for the possibility of a proliferation of participatory mechanisms, but where influence remains focused on informing, consultation, and placation. Second, it constructs a typology of brokered participation that distinguishes between substitutive, parasitic, and bridging types of intermediation. Both are offered as middle-range synthesis ideas based on the evidence reviewed and not as universal ideas of participation.

2. Conceptual and Institutional Framework

2.1 A Clear Conceptual Hierarchy

The new structure has a limited hierarchical structure. The main theoretical reference is Arnstein's (1969) ladder, as the main outcome of interest is power, and the distance citizens travel along the ladder from being informed or consulted to partnership, delegated authority, or citizen control. The ladder is helpful as it helps avoid the automatic assumption of empowerment when it comes to attendance, consultation, or disclosure. Meanwhile, the ordered rungs do not account for the fact that a formally participatory venue is composed in a certain way, communicates in a certain way, or has a certain decision rule. Fung's (2006) design dimensions are thus used as a second layer of the diagnostic lens, which is about who participates, how participants communicate, and what authority is given to the process.

Third, a more specific diagnostic is taken from the social accountability scholarship. Fox (2015) makes a distinction between citizen voice and the institutional 'teeth' to create answerability and enforcement. This is important for the current review, as voice can be achieved through a complaint mechanism, public hearing, and open budget meeting and does not require an agency to respond, justify, correct, or implement. Thus, the analytical sequence employed here is access to a participatory space, quality of voice and deliberation, decision authority, answerability, enforcement, and material outcome. Co-production is considered a potential implementation outcome, and decentralization and clientelism are considered contextual conditions that impact the authority and incentives for participatory institutions.

Table 1. Conceptual hierarchy used in the review

Level	Concept	Function in this review	Key diagnostic question
Primary theory	Arnstein (1969)	Classifies depth of citizen power	How much influence do citizens actually have?
Secondary design lens	Fung (2006)	Examines participant selection, communication, and authority	Who participates, how, and with what decision-making power?
Accountability lens	Fox (2015)	Separates voice from answerability and enforcement	Does voice trigger a reasoned response, remedy or sanction?
Contextual power lens	Cornwall (2008); Gaventa (2006)	Locates invited spaces within wider power relations	Who controls the boundaries, agendas, and terms of participation?
Synthesis concepts	Tokenism ceiling; brokered participation	Explain recurring patterns in the Bangladesh evidence	Why does formal access often stop short of shared authority, and how does intermediation alter this pathway?

The framework also references the literature on invited space to explain that although formally opened spaces are indeed opened, they are not completely separated from other power relations (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, 2006). This insight is not included in another parallel theory. Rather, it defines the location of the power issue: participation is conducted within the confines of institutions that are already politically defined in terms of boundaries, agendas, resources, and connections with decision-makers. This means that a venue may be officially open while in fact being under the control of a few people. The relevant unit of analysis is not the meeting per se but the participatory pathway linking the entry, voice, authority, response, and outcome.

2.2 The Structurally Embedded Tokenism Ceiling

The structurally embedded tokenism ceiling is the idea that there is an upper limit to participation that is rarely exceeded because of a combination of three factors: participatory outputs are non-binding or weakly connected with a commitment to respond; the authority of decision makers is limited at the city level due to central fiscal and administrative dependency; and there is political or clientelist filtering of access to decision makers and benefits. It is not just a change of name: tokenism or elite capture. In addition to Arnstein's identification of tokenism as a level of participation, Mansuri and Rao (2013) and Waheduzzaman et al. (2018) explain how power can influence formally participatory spaces, while Cornwall (2008) explains how invited space is a level of participation. The tokenism ceiling concept, however, identifies a recurrent mechanism-level configuration of weak local authority, non-binding procedures, and brokerage, which makes shallow participation persistent, even when participatory institutions are repeatedly set up.

This is a medium-level offer. This does not mean that there is a ceiling on all city corporations or all mechanisms or that there is no movement beyond consultation. Instead, it raises an empirical question: What has changed in the ceiling when a participatory mechanism is seen as more consequential? Therefore, evidence of a partnership should not be based solely on attendance or consultation. It should demonstrate some elements of shared authority, a duty to provide a binding or reasoned response, predictable resources, verified implementation, or enduring collective capacity.

2.3 Brokerage As A Cross-Cutting Mechanism

Brokerage is introduced at the conceptual level as it alters the formal design to access. The review considers brokered participation to be citizen influence that is going through an intermediary who has an impact on access to institutions, information, resources or decisions. An intermediary can be a councillor, party activist, local strongman, community leader, NGO, professional organization, or other. In itself, brokerage does not necessarily imply clientelism. Whether it is democratic or not depends on how it extends equality of access governed by rules or how it makes access dependent on loyalty, discretion, or dependence on the government.

There are three levels of synthesis: substitutive brokerage occurs when a brokerage replaces an ineffective or inaccessible formal brokerage. Parasitic brokerage occurs when party/elite networks infiltrate a formal participatory mechanism and influence who is selected to participate, the agenda, or follow-through. Bridging brokerage occurs when an intermediary links groups that are not part of the mainstream with mainstream institutions without either losing or enhancing the group's collective voice. These labels are inconsistent with the terms used in the main studies. They are second-order categories that have emerged in the revised synthesis that group a recurrent set of empirical configurations across studies of urban poverty, local political consolidation, community organization, and mediated access to services (Banks, 2008, 2016; Cawood, 2021; Jackman, 2019; Lewis & Hossain, 2022).

2.4 Legal And Institutional Setting

The Local Government (City Corporation) Act 2009 introduced binding city-wide participatory budgeting, compulsory ward citizen forums, elected mayors and councillors, and reserved seats for women, but not an overall system of binding participatory budgeting across the city. Other mechanisms have evolved through administrative practices and donor-supported projects, such as coordination bodies, open-budget events, citizen charters, grievance-redress systems, community development structures, and digital structures. The resulting institutional field is a mix of legislative representation, administrative information, project consultation, grievance systems and informal political brokerage.

There is a lack of continuity and enforceability in the literature on this topic. Standing committees can be inactive or inaccessible to citizens; consultation on budgets can be an afterthought for key decisions; charters for citizens can be unknown or poorly enforced; and project-based committees can be weak after the end of the project (Asian Development Bank, 2012; P. K. Panday, 2019; Waheduzzaman & As-Saber, 2015). These observations suggest that participation will be limited if institutions offer opportunities for voice but not for authority, accountability, or resources.

3. Methodology

3.1 Review Design And Reporting

This qualitative systematic review aims to synthesize the fragmented literature of empirical, mixed methods, conceptual, and gray literature on citizens' participation in the city corporations of Bangladesh. Qualitative description can be used for a relatively low-level synthesis of reported practices, and thematic synthesis can be used to develop higher-level explanations (Sandelowski, 2000; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Reporting was performed in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). There was no a priori registration of the review protocol. This limitation is explicitly stated, and the recorded search information is different from the reconstructed search syntax to minimize the risk of retrospective overstatement.

3.2 Information Sources And Search Strategy

Studies in English were searched from 2009 to March 31 2025, 2025 in four bibliographic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Bangladesh Journals Online (BanglaJOL). Database searching was complemented by backward reference searching, citation chasing, hand searching, and targeted retrieval of relevant grey literature because of the incomplete coverage of complex social-science evidence by bibliographic indexes (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). A combination of participation terms, urban local government terms, and the names of Bangladesh or cities were used for the search. The last searches were conducted on March 31, 2025, and only English full-text articles were retrieved.

The retained review record includes the basic Boolean logic, field coverage, and source yields but does not include an archived copy of all platform queries. Table 2 distinguishes between the recorded logic and reconstructed syntax, which is specific to the platform. Reconstruction was added to enable the search structure to be replicated without the appearance of a post hoc reconstruction as a historical search log. This is a limitation of the methodology and should be remedied in future versions by saving export files and the full search history during the search process.

Table 2. Search sources, yields, and replication syntax

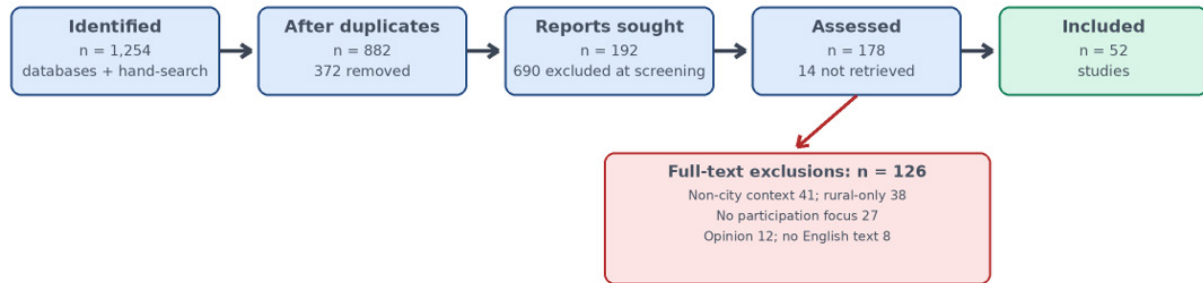
Source	Records	Coverage	Search logic/syntax status
Scopus	486	TITLE-ABS-KEY	Reconstructed: TITLE-ABS-KEY((participation OR engagement OR "citizen voice" OR accountability OR "social accountability" OR "co-production" OR "citizen charter*" OR grievance) AND ("city corporation*" OR "urban local government*" OR municipal* OR pourashava*) AND (Bangladesh OR Dhaka OR Chattogram OR Chittagong OR Khulna OR Rajshahi OR Sylhet OR Barishal OR Rangpur OR Cumilla OR Comilla OR Narayanganj OR Gazipur OR Mymensingh))
Web of Science	332	Topic	Reconstructed: TS=((participation OR engagement OR "citizen voice" OR accountability OR "social accountability" OR "co-production" OR "citizen charter*" OR grievance) AND ("city corporation*" OR "urban local government*" OR municipal* OR pourashava*) AND (Bangladesh OR Dhaka OR Chattogram OR Chittagong OR Khulna OR Rajshahi OR Sylhet OR Barishal OR Rangpur OR Cumilla OR Comilla OR Narayanganj OR Gazipur OR Mymensingh))
Google Scholar	274	First 20 result pages	Recorded concepts were searched in combinations; reconstructed examples: "citizen participation" "city corporation" Bangladesh; "urban local government" participation Bangladesh; citizen charter grievance city corporation Bangladesh; brokerage clientelism urban Bangladesh.
BanglaJOL	118	All fields, English outputs	Reconstructed keyword combinations using participation, accountability, citizen charter, city corporation/urban local government, and Bangladesh/city names.
Hand-search/citation chasing	44	Reference lists and key-author citations	Backward and forward searching of included and conceptually central studies; targeted grey literature retrieval.
Total before deduplication	1,254		

3.3 Eligibility And Screening

Eligibility was organized based on the logic for qualitative evidence synthesis (Cooke et al., 2012) for SPIDER, as follows: Studies were included if they investigated citizen participation, engagement, voice, accountability, grievance, co-production, or a concept of state-society interaction relevant to the context of a city corporation in Bangladesh or an explicitly comparative urban-local-government context that produced findings relevant to city corporations. All empirical qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, and conceptually grounded studies were included, as well as methodologically informative grey literature reviews. Studies conducted only in rural areas, studies not conducted in Bangladesh, publications lacking a participation and/or accountability component, opinion pieces lacking an evidentiary basis, and publications for which the full text was not available were excluded.

Two reviewers independently reviewed the titles and abstracts of 882 of the 1,254 identified records after the removal of 372 duplicates. Inter-reviewer agreement was good (Cohen's kappa =.82), and any disagreements were discussed, and when needed, a third reviewer (McHugh, 2012) was used to settle disagreements. The full-text assessment of 192 reports resulted in 14 reports not being retrievable. The remaining 178 reports were evaluated, and 126 of these were not included as they did not have a relevant

city context (41), were rural only (38), did not have a focus on participation (27), were opinion pieces (12), or lacked an English full text (8). A synthesis was conducted using 52 studies. Exclusion may be underestimated at earlier stages of screening because of the lack of systematic coding of language in each title and abstract in English.



Dual independent screening; Cohen's kappa = .82; searches completed 31 March 2025.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow of study identification and selection. All database, hand-searched, and gray literature records followed the same dual screening procedure.

3.4 Critical Appraisal, Extraction, And Synthesis

Qualitative studies were appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist, and quantitative and mixed-methods studies were appraised using the MMAT as appropriate (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018; Hong et al., 2018). Confidence weighting was performed based on appraisal, not automatic exclusion. Reports with limited methodological transparency that were contextually rich, however, might be useful for identifying mechanisms and were not interpreted to be equally important as transparent, triangulated studies. The extraction grid included study context, design, and selection of participants, participatory mechanism, authority for decision-making, brokerage and/or intermediation, inclusion, accountability response and reported outcomes.

The synthesis was done from line-by-line coding to descriptive themes to higher-order analytical themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008). There were two coders making coding decisions; an audit trail was maintained, and source extracts were kept to differentiate reported evidence from the evidence of the reviewers. Sensitivity checking involved checking the source type, period, city, and tone of the findings. This is relevant because implementer reports are more likely to highlight successful participation than peer-reviewed and independent grey literature, and academic publications might also be more likely to focus on problem-centered accounts.

All 52 studies were included in the coding corpus. Table 3 presents an analytically influential list of studies that include particularly rich evidence for the synthesis, but it is not a comprehensive list of the studies. This review did not attempt to quantify the effects of themes using the frequency of the theme as an effect measure, nor did it consider repeated mentions as statistical prevalence. Rather, the confidence in a theme is based on the consistency of the theme across multiple source types, time periods, and settings, the consistency of the theme with extracts from the sources, and the quality of the methodology of the studies that support the theme. To distinguish this, findings are reported as broadly recurrent, recurrent but concentrated, or evidence-limited, instead of being given retrospective counts that were not pre-specified.

The typology of brokered participation was created during second-order synthesis. The main studies show that there are concrete patterns, such as dependence on intermediaries, party gatekeeping, mobilized attendance, NGO facilitation, community organization, and selective access to services. These

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configurations are compared using labels analytically derived from the author: substitutive, parasitic, and bridging. In this regard, the manuscript does not distinguish typology from the primary study authors' direct study reports, and mechanisms are not typology in and of themselves, but rather mechanisms at the level of synthesis.

Table 3. Evidence backbone and role in the synthesis

Study and context	Design	Principal contribution to synthesis
Banks (2008), Dhaka	Comparative ward study	This shows broker-mediated service access and the potential of collective organizations.
Jamil & Panday (2012), Rajshahi	Interviews and documents	It shows coordination failure and corruption as constraints on citizen influence.
Swapan (2014), metropolitan planning	Citizens and planners compared	This shows distrust, low awareness, and discouraging perceptions of outcomes.
Banks (2016), Dhaka	Political-economy fieldwork	Shows how party and mastaan networks gatekeep resources and political access in Pakistan.
Panday (2017; 2019), national/urban local government	Institutional and reform analysis	Links central control and nonbinding forums to shallow participation.
Jackman (2019), Dhaka	Long-term qualitative research	It explains informal mediation, party incorporation, and political control.
Cawood (2021), Dhaka	Three urban-poor networks	It shows how federated organizations can scale their voices while remaining vulnerable to donor dependence.
Lewis & Hossain (2022), urban localities	Repeat fieldwork	Identifies circumvention, capture, brokerage, and parallel organizations in local political consolidation.
Ahsan et al. (2024), local councils	Comparative qualitative study	Citizen charter performance varies with awareness, official willingness, and monitoring.

Table 4. Breadth of support for major synthesis themes

Theme	Evidence-breadth judgment	Interpretive implication
Formal mechanisms often stop at information/consultation	Broadly recurrent across periods and source types	Strong support for shallow influence, but not identical practices in every corporation.
Agenda control, elite mediation, and brokerage	Broadly recurrent, with richest evidence in Dhaka and Rajshahi	Strong mechanism evidence is geographically concentrated.
Central fiscal/administrative dependence	Recurrent in institutional and reform literature	Plausible structural constraints on local responsiveness and discretion.
Gender, tenure, and poverty-related exclusion	Recurrent but unevenly disaggregated	The direction is credible, the but intersectional magnitude is not estimable.
Project dependence and durability problems	Recurrent but concentrated in donor-supported mechanisms	Supports institutionalization concerns, not universal failure claims.
Digital participation improves accountability	Evidence-limited	No confident effect direction can be established.
Participation causes better service outcomes	Evidence-limited	Causal effects cannot be estimated from the corpus.
Post-2024 administrator-led participation	Not established by the search-period evidence	Requires new longitudinal research.

4. Findings

4.1 Evidence Profile, Geography, And Temporal Variation

The designs of the 52-study corpus are mostly qualitative, single-city, or small-comparative. Empirical attention is highest for Dhaka and Rajshahi, while the other city corporations have received limited attention. This concentration limits the extent to which it can be generalized at the city level. The review thus considers recurring patterns as mechanisms present in the available evidence and not as evidence that they are identical participation dynamics that take place in every corporation. Political competition, administrative capacity, exposure to donors, city size, settlement informality, and fiscal position could create significant variation at the local level that is not well captured in the literature.

Likewise, the literature evolves over time. Previous research highlighted institutional deficits, coordination issues, and unequal access to services, while more recent (mid-2010s) research has focused on the lack of trust, decentralization, party capture, and political mediation. Later research examined the persistence of participation, urban poor networks, citizen charter performance, and variations in implementation (Banks et al., 2011; Cawood, 2021; Jamil & Panday, 2012; Lewis & Hossain, 2022). These changes are not a controlled time trend due to variations in the underlying studies in terms of the city, design, and research question. However, they indicate that the evidence base is evolving to recognize that participation is not just about attendance and is a political and institutional process.

Ethnographic and interview-based studies are usually methodologically rich and provide detailed accounts of mediation and exclusion and local political practice, but have few outcome measures or counterfactual designs. National institutional analyses provide an explanation of legal and financial barriers and may lose sight of the variation across cities. The use of mixed-methods, comparative, and repeated fieldwork designs remains rare. The evidence is thus strongest with regard to the identification of mechanisms and weakest with regard to the estimation of causal effects or the comparison of the size of effects across city corporations.

4.2 Forms And Depth Of Participation

Some of the documented mechanisms include ward-level meetings, open budget events, public hearings, standing committees, coordination committees, citizen charters, grievance-redress systems, and digital reporting systems. Of these mechanisms, the most consistent pattern of support is for shallow participation rather than no participation. Citizens can be provided information, can have a say in priorities, and can make complaints, but the evidence examined rarely shows any delegated powers, binding decision rights, or a sure commitment for decision-makers to say how citizens' input influenced an allocation or policy. However, evidence does not show a uniform pattern of the formal presence of a mechanism and the degree of influence in practice (Ahsan et al., 2024; Huq, 2014; P. K. Panday, 2019).

The difference is highlighted in the budget and ward forums. An open meeting can help make the process more transparent and give citizens a platform to express their priorities. However, influence is limited if information is too late, agendas are set, participation is limited, or recommendations are not linked to a duty to respond. In such circumstances, attendance is not evidence of a change in citizens' decisions but of access. There are standing and coordination committees that can provide more continuity; however, these can be limited in membership, lack public visibility, are dominated by the executive, or are dependent on projects. All of these design elements bring many documented mechanisms closer to informing, consultation, or placation than to partnership in Arnstein's terms.

Citizen charters and grievance systems are other examples of the trade-off between disclosure and enforceability. A charter can help establish standards of service to be expected, and a grievance procedure can help reduce the “transaction” costs of grievance. However, their accountability value is dependent on whether complaints are recorded, a duty bearer is identified, they are responded to in an open process, whether they are escalated if not resolved, and whether they are independently verified. There is a lack of awareness, monitoring, and implementation, which is weak and variable (Ahsan et al., 2024; Chowdhury & Panday, 2018). Thus, these mechanisms should be considered accountability chains, not merely the number of institutional innovations.

4.3 Political And Institutional Constraints

Political economy evidence shows that there are concrete practices that can result in formal participation being emptied. Selective invitation/mobilization, agenda control by office holders, substantive requests being funnelled through councillor or party networks, discretionary access to projects or documentation, and reliance on intermediaries for services or protection are all included in the studies reported (Banks, 2008, 2016; Jackman, 2019; Lewis & Hossain, 2022). Hackenbroch and Hossain (2012) also demonstrated the influence that powerful actors can have on access to public space and water. These mechanisms have been reported in the literature. They collectively change the conditions of participation at the level of synthesis in three ways: (1) who can participate; (2) what claims are eligible for participation; and (3) whether claims are dependent on political relations for follow-through.

Central fiscal/administrative dependence occurs at another level but can lead to similar results. City corporations have little autonomy or discretion over key resources, approvals, and administrative authority, which are still centralized (Jamil & Panday, 2012; P. Panday, 2017). Participatory forums can turn into “forums for the sake of forums” if local authorities cannot reliably mobilize resources to respond to citizens’ priorities. Central dependence can also have a positive impact on political incentives, incentivizing local leaders to invest in ties with central authorities or party networks instead of engaging in open bargaining with residents. This mechanism is a recurrent structural explanation supported by the literature reviewed, but the extent of the constraint is not estimated in comparison with all corporations in the sample.

The conditions of civics and organizations are also important. Limited awareness, lack of trust, lack of information, documentation needs, fear of repercussions, and practical costs of attendance can inhibit participation (Swapan, 2014, 2016a). These should not be considered as individual deficits. Citizens can rationally choose not to attend venues if they have not seen results, and seemingly high attendance can be superficial if it involves being mobilized by political actors or if it is not binding on the government. This can be one of the reasons why awareness campaigns can lead to increased attendance but not to a change in authority.

The enabling conditions are in the same corpus. Organized community groups can help coalesce scattered demands and minimize the individual risk of engaging with officials. NGOs can help facilitate, translate, and provide continuity, and reform-minded officials can help facilitate access to information and regular engagement (Cawood, 2021; Waheduzzaman & As-Saber, 2015). Such improvements can be more believable if they are integrated into ongoing administrative duties and budgets. If a project or individual leader is the only one who convenes, facilitates, and/or monitors, the gains can be diminished if there are changes in funding or leadership. The synthesis thus differentiates between facilitated and institutionalized participation.

Table 5. Directly reported constraints and synthesis-level interpretation

Evidence status	Observed/reporting pattern	Synthesis-level interpretation
Directly reported	Selective invitations, mobilized attendance, agenda control	Entry and voice may be formally open but are politically managed.
Directly reported	Requests routed through councillors, party actors, or local intermediaries	Formal routes coexist with mediated accesses.
Directly reported	Weak coordination, limited local discretion, central dependence	Local actors may lack the authority/resources to convert their voices into action.
Directly reported	Low awareness, distrust, documentation barriers, fear of reprisal	Participation costs are distributed socially and institutionally.
Directly reported	NGO facilitation and organized community groups improve access	Collective organizations can reduce dependence on individualized brokerage.
Author synthesis	Non-binding outputs + constrained local authority + mediated access	These mechanisms jointly constitute a structurally embedded tokenism ceiling.

4.4 Gender, Tenure, Poverty, And Intersectional Exclusion

Reserved seats have led to improved descriptive representation of women, although there is no evidence of an impact on executive decision-making, committee control, or development resources. Panday (2008) calls this larger issue representation without participation, and Nazneen and Tasneem (2010) refer to the gains in voice within the overall constraints of institutions and gender. Access to participatory spaces can also be influenced by care duties, mobility, and security of venues, intimidation, and social norms around speaking in public for ordinary women.

Another axis of exclusion is tenure and documentation. Low-income migrants and informal settlement residents may be more reliant on discretionary intermediaries (Banks, 2008; Banks et al., 2011) because they do not have documents that prove their voting status or eligibility for services or recognized residence. The corpus cannot estimate intersectional effects, as these are not reported simultaneously in the literature, for example, on gender and income. However, it is reasonable and in line with the evidence to assume that disadvantages are compounded if citizens are subjected to several barriers simultaneously. Future assessments should thus be broken down into who is present, who speaks, whose ideas are noted, and whose claims receive a response.

4.5 Digital Participation: Expanded Access, Uncertain Accountability Effects

Some entry costs can be lowered by using digital channels and helplines and by having online grievance systems for residents to submit complaints without having to attend a meeting or office. This can be helpful to citizens who have limited time and/or mobility. Meanwhile, access is contingent upon devices, literacy, connectivity, and a sense that it is worth using and safe to use a channel. More importantly, the review revealed little independent evidence regarding response times, rejected cases, repeated complaints, distribution of complaints by neighborhood, appeal outcomes, or differences between online and offline users.

However, failure is not the correct conclusion; it is uncertainty. The evidence examined in this review provides evidence that digitalization has the potential to broaden the reporting funnel, but does not allow a confident statement to be made on whether digital participation will lead to enhanced accountability, equity, or service outcomes. Efforts to evaluate should consider the number of cases submitted and not

just the number of cases resolved, and should include who is using digital channels, how many cases are resolved, how fast, why, and with what distributional impact.

4.6 From Participation To Accountability And Outcomes

There is no easy causal statement that “more participation equals better services” that can be made based on the corpus data. A better reading is a pathway from participation to accountability. There must be a way for citizens to enter a process; their claims must be accurately recorded; there must be a responsible office that has a duty and capacity to respond; resources and enforcement must be provided for implementation; and outcomes must be verified. There are a number of mechanisms in the evidence reviewed that are weak, from recording voice to delivering a response.

Where more believable improvements are reported, there is generally more than just consultation involved, but also organization and implementation. In some cases, community-based organizations (CBOs) and intermediary non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have negotiated with water providers to provide access to water and other services to settlements that are excluded from the process, resulting in co-production, where the collective voice is linked to service provision (Banks et al., 2011; Cawood, 2021). These instances must be carefully considered. There is no guarantee that citizens can control larger plans or budgets to achieve a successful service connection; intermediaries can re-enact the hierarchy.

There is limited quantitative evidence demonstrating that the level of depth of participation is related to service quality, distribution, trust, or repeat participation. Organized programs are not selected, no baseline measures are taken, and follow-up is weak, which makes it difficult to estimate causal effects credibly. Thus, this review identified potential causal pathways and evaluation points, but not effect sizes. This should be followed from entry to record, response to enforcement, and outcome, and be traceable.

Table 6. Participation-to-accountability pathway

Link	Typical failure	Evidence needed for stronger accountability
Access	Awareness, documentation, digital or physical barriers	Participation was disaggregated by gender, tenure, income, disability, migration status, and location.
Record	Agenda control, technical language, incomplete minutes	Published agendas, complete minutes, coded proposals, and traceable case identifiers were used.
Response	No duty to answer; unclear jurisdiction	Reasoned response, named responsible office and transparent status.
Enforcement	No sanction, budget, audit, or appeal	The completion, escalation route, and independent checking were verified.
Outcome/ learning	Self-reporting; no longitudinal follow-up	Service quality, distributional effects, trust, repeated use, and learning over time.

5. Discussion

5.1 What The Tokenism Ceiling Adds

The most consistent and positive observation of the review is not just the issue of low participation, but a patterned lack of connection between the participatory form and decision consequence. Capacity issues and civic limitations are not the only factors contributing to the lack of deep influence despite meetings, citizen attendance, and the availability of information. The structurally embedded tokenism ceiling is also more specific in its explanations, as it is based on three interacting mechanisms: non-binding

participatory outputs, constrained local fiscal and administrative authority, and mediated access through a political or clientelist network. While each of the mechanisms is found in the literature, the combination is used to demonstrate how the mechanisms can interact to create a low-influence equilibrium state.

This is not just an “Arnstein’s tokenism” restatement. Although Arnstein (1969) identifies a position on a continuum of power, he does not identify a configuration of institutions in Bangladesh that makes this position sustainable. Invited space scholarship has provided a way of understanding how participation is bound up in power relations, and elite capture research has helped to understand how powerful actors can dominate apparently participatory processes (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, 2006; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Fox (2015) explains why institutionalized voices can be more accountable, but voices without institutionalized teeth are less likely to have accountability. The tokenism ceiling concept combines these insights and proposes a mechanism-based proposition that participatory institutions are unlikely to transcend consultation if officials are not held accountable for a response, do not have the authority to act, and are operating within a network that selectively mediates access.

This idea also helps explain seemingly paradoxical observations. Low attendance can be a rational response to venues that make little difference, and high attendance can be a rational response to tokenism, where participation is mobilized or fails to result in a binding response. A ceiling can be temporarily exceeded in the case of project-supported participation if there is a change in one component by means of funding, facilitation, monitoring, and/or leadership, but gains are not secured without being included in regular rules, resources, and accountability systems. Thus, this idea should be tested as a comparison and not presumed by all city corporations.

5.2 Brokered Participation As The Central Interaction Mechanism

Brokerage is the most obvious way in which formal participatory institutions are connected to the political economy of which they form a part. The reviewed evidence demonstrates that citizens also access services, information, or protection via intermediaries, and local political actors mobilize and control the same intermediaries (Banks, 2008, 2016; Jackman, 2019; Lewis & Hossain, 2022). This does not imply that formal and informal participation are coded as two separate worlds. A ward meeting can be formally consultative but parasitically influenced by party networks; a citizen may be able to get a connection for water or electricity through a substitute brokerage because the formal system is not working; or an urban poor federation may be able to connect people to the agencies but maintain a collective voice.

The distinction between the political meanings of different types of intermediation is made by substitutive, parasitic, and bridging typologies. Substitutive brokerage may resolve an immediate access issue but may not provide the discretionary access that is desired. Parasitic brokerage can reduce the apparent participatory nature of an institution by influencing who gets in, the agenda, and/or the follow-through. When intermediaries lessen the information or organizational constraints without monopolizing the claim, they can be called bridging brokerages that can expand participation. The same intermediary may simultaneously play different roles on different issues and over time; therefore, the roles should not be permanently assigned to the intermediary but to a relationship and/or transaction.

This distinction helps prevent two normative mistakes. The first is to idealize informal access because it generates material gain. Loyalty, personal connections, or dependence on something are not the same as citizen empowerment. The second is to take the stance that all intermediation is antidemocratic. NGOs, professional or religious associations, and neighborhood associations can link citizens to institutions and facilitate such collective action. The issues relevant to the empirical questions are as follows: whether access

is rule-governed or discretionary, whether the claims are collective or individualized, whether citizens can bypass or exit the relationship without losing the services, and whether the intermediary is expanding or contracting the group's independent voice.

Table 7. Brokered-participation typology and evidentiary status

Type	Empirical configuration	Democratic diagnosis	Status
Substitutive	Brokers replace ineffective formal routes to obtain a service, document, or official contact.	Real access, but potentially conditional and unequal, is not equivalent to empowerment.	Author-derived synthesis category grounded in reported mediated-access cases.
Parasitic	Broker or party networks penetrate a formal venue and shape participants, agendas, or follow-through.	Formal participation may remain consultative or tokenistic, despite visible attendance.	Author-derived synthesis category grounded in reports of capture, mobilization and agenda control.
Bridging	Intermediaries connect excluded groups to institutions while supporting collective organization and voice.	This can support inclusion or co-production if authority and monitoring are genuinely shared.	Author-derived synthesis category grounded in community networks and facilitation evidence.

5.3 Reform Implications And The Limits Of Prescription

The results indicate that reinforcing the accountability linkage of existing forums is more important than establishing new forums. The evidence is most relevant to principles, not narrowly specified interventions, and includes earlier and clearer disclosure, more inclusive entry, traceable records of citizen claims, identifiable responsibility for response, transparent grievance status, institutionalized convening, and predictable resources for implementation. The following principles are based on recurring problem areas in the corpus.

Table 8. Reform implications by evidentiary status

Reform domain	Evidence-linked principle	Author-derived design options for testing
Reasoned response	Citizen input should be traceable to identified decisions and responses.	Pilot response matrices, deadlines, and appeal routes; evaluate compliance and distributional effects.
Inclusive entry	Participation should reduce the documented barriers related to gender, tenure, poverty, and mobility.	Test-accessible meeting times, protected speaking opportunities, childcare support, and tenure-neutral entry.
Grievance accountability	Submissions should be connected to responses, escalations, and verifications.	Pilot dashboards, offline assistance, case sampling, independent audits and appeal mechanisms.
Institutional durability	Participatory mechanisms should not depend solely on external projects or individual leadership.	Create routine convening calendars, facilitation budgets, and administrative ownership, and evaluate survival after project exit.
Fiscal responsiveness	Local actors require the capacity to act on legitimate citizen priorities.	Test transparent transfer formulas or bounded ward-level discretionary funds before their wider adoption.

Not all the studies included systematically considered design options that could be useful, such as fixed response deadlines, childcare provided at meetings, protected speaking slots, external sample audits, or discretionary ward funds. Therefore, it is important that they are offered as author-generated treatment proposals for piloting and evaluation, and not as evidence-based treatments. This difference is significant with regard to policy credibility. It is possible for a design proposal to have a strong theoretical motivation but not be found in the review.

The first step that can be taken in a feasible sequence is to make administrative changes that make it easier to observe: publish agendas and decisions, publish the membership of committees, provide case identifiers, record reasons for accepting or rejecting, and make cases auditable. Medium-term reform is needed to ensure that participatory bodies have a routine budget and administrative tasks and are not project-dependent. In the longer term, issues of fiscal and executive power from the central to the city level are at stake. As reforms shift information, discretion, and resources, the politics of reform become more challenging. Therefore, the question of the feasibility of reform is not solely an administrative issue but rather a political economy issue.

6. Conclusion, Limitations, and Research Agenda

There is institutional evidence of citizens' involvement in city corporations in Bangladesh, but the evidence reviewed is typically superficial in its impact on decision-making. Multiple opportunities for entry and voice exist through ward forums, budget hearings, committees, citizen charters, grievance mechanisms, community structures, and digital platforms. However, there is no consistent evidence of shared authority or accountable outcomes despite the presence of these mechanisms. The most compelling argument incorporates non-binding participatory products, limited local fiscal and administrative powers, and political brokerage. These conditions combine to create the structurally embedded tokenism ceiling discussed in this review.

The second contribution of this review is to place brokerage at the heart of the formal-informal participation influence nexus. Substitutive brokerage is access that comes not from formal venues but from informal networks filling in the gaps; parasitic brokerage is brokerage that can come at the expense of the voice of excluded groups; and bridging brokerage is intermediation that connects excluded groups to institutions but does not necessarily monopolize their voice. These are not categories from the primary studies but were developed by the authors and will need to be validated in future comparative studies.

There are significant restrictions on these conclusions. The evidence base consists of English-language studies only, is geographically focused on Dhaka and Rajshahi, is methodologically diverse, and is largely cross-sectional qualitative research. Grey literature can provide context and depth but can be opaque and overstate achievement in implementation, and academic publications can have a deficit narrative. Fourteen sought reports were not retrieved; eight assessed full texts were excluded due to the lack of English text, and the language was not coded systematically at the title and abstract stage. The review protocol was not registered in advance, and there was inadequate storage and retrieval of the search histories in the databases. These restrictions decrease the level of repeatability and can limit the information from less studied corporations.

Another methodological constraint is relevant when it comes to causal inferences: the methodological structure. The corpus is useful for finding likely mechanisms, constraints, and institutional arrangements but is not useful for estimating the impact of participation on the delivery of services, trust, or equitable distribution. An example is digital participation, which is a particularly new and obvious form of

participation, but for which there is insufficient independent evidence to assess its impact on accountability. Similarly, post-2024 experiences with city corporations under the leadership of city administrators are not part of the empirical underpinning of the synthesis. The results are thus to be interpreted as a baseline for comparison based on the mechanisms, and not as an assessment of the existing administrative structure.

Future studies should focus on bilingual search, under-represented city corporations, longitudinal studies, and claim-level tracking from participation to outcomes. Several expectations are testable. Predictable resources and a responsibility to respond by local bodies may lead to more sustainable and impactful participation; heavy brokerage of access may lead to reduced and more conditional participation; project-based mechanisms may lead to reduced and more ephemeral participation; and governance change in 2024 may affect participation in terms of the selection of participants, participation rates, and the role of brokers. A comparative study of city corporations is needed to identify whether the tokenism ceiling and brokerage typology are translocal and move beyond the places that are currently the focus of the literature.

The key policy takeaway is relatively simple but important: participation should be judged based on the outcomes following citizens' engagement. The number of meetings or complaints made is not the only indicator; who is present, which complaints are recorded, who has to take action, the publicness of the reasons, the verification of implementation, and the distribution of results are also indicators. This change from a participatory form to an accountable consequence provides a better foundation for further research and institutional change.

Declarations

- Funding:** No internal or external funding was received for this study.
- Conflict of interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.
- Data availability:** This review is based on the cited publications and public statistical sources. This manuscript does not report a newly deposited extraction dataset.
- Ethics approval:** Not applicable because the study analyzed published and publicly available secondary sources.

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