

# FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: ASSESSING GRIEVANCE REDRESS SYSTEMS IN BANGLADESH'S UNION PARISHADS

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## ABSTRACT

Bangladesh's 2015 Grievance Redress System (GRS) policy envisages a web-based, trackable complaint mechanism at every tier of government, but whether this has reached the Union Parishad (UP), the lowest tier of local government, remains unclear. Using an exploratory qualitative design in two Union Parishads (Batiaghata and 1 No. Jalma) in Khulna district, this study examines whether a digital GRS has been established at the UP level, how it functions where present, and where absent- why implementation has stalled. Data were collected through five key informant interviews with UP officials and twenty in-depth interviews with service recipients, analyzed thematically. The study reveals that no digital GRS exists in either studied UP; grievance handling relies on complaint boxes and face-to-face communication. Officials attribute this to limited budget, lack of manpower, and unclear directives, while cautioning that an online-only system could exclude residents who are not literate or lack smartphones; a digital divide that makes offline channels more accessible at present. In its absence, accountability is maintained informally and, sometimes, through brokerage or escalation to higher authorities. These results are limited to two Union Parishads in Khulna district, and the study offers cautious recommendations for treating digital and offline grievance handling as complementary.

## Introduction

Local government is the lowest tier of government. It is referred to as “local” because it is closest to the people and the community (Henderson, 2018). It is crucial to act as a catalyst for social development and transformation because it represents the local community’s interests on a micro level, which leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the well-being and contentment of its residents (Alam & Nickson, 2006). Local councils serve as conciliation courts in various nations, resolving minor conflicts locally. Local government is crucial for average residents because of its universal tasks and duties, with minimal interaction with higher levels (Alam, 2009).

Since independence, African countries have pursued decentralization reforms, delegating powers to local governments, although challenges in administrative capacity and resources persist (Loquai & Le Bay, 2007). Commonwealth Asian countries, such as India, face complexities in managing mega-cities with multiple tiers. India’s three-tier *panchayati raj* system (1992) and Pakistan’s extensive 2001 reforms

reflect progress (Alam, 2004; Alok, 2006; Schiavo-Campo & Sundaram, 2000). The Pacific experiences varying decentralization, with PiLGAN fostering governance networks. In the Caribbean, decentralization is uneven, with minimal structures in some nations (Alam, 2009). Bangladesh's two-tier system, particularly Union Parishads, promotes rural development (Bhuiyan, 2011; Ehsan, 2020). Effective local governance relies on Grievance Redress Systems (Chowdhury, 2023), ensuring trust and responsive service delivery (Gray, 2002).

Grievance redress mechanisms (GRMs) are institutions, tools, approaches, and procedures used to seek and offer a resolution to a grievance (Asian Development Bank, 2010). GRM is a vital component of governance and public administration, aiming to improve the quality of services provided by government agencies. Hasan (2017) emphasized that the GRM enhances the integrity of public administration and services. The development of the Internet and online services has facilitated the growth of the GRM in the G2C paradigm (Das et al., 2020). Grievance Redress Systems (GRS) have become increasingly important in ensuring the openness, responsibility, and responsiveness of public institutions, making them a crucial part of successful administration in many countries (Rana et al., 2015). Abbas et al. (2019) discussed three grievance redress systems, namely, LAPOR, GRS in BD, and CPGRAMS. LAPOR, a complaint website in Indonesia, and the Bangladeshi government's GRS are online platforms for individuals to file complaints, while CPGRAMS is a centralized system in India.

Mohapatra (2016) argues for the revision of citizen complaint resolution procedures in India to improve institutional operations and address governance problems. Kulkarni (2019) suggests that effective communication channels can help identify and promptly address issues, while two-way communication can help resolve perception issues. The ultimate goal should be to reduce the number of complaints by identifying problem areas and making serious efforts to address them.

The RTE grievance redress procedure in Karnataka has been found to have issues in both design and execution. The current mechanism is overwhelmed by the high volume of complaints, making it difficult for the government to address them on time (Das et al., 2020). Hubli-Dharwad's local government has implemented decentralized interfaces, such as zonal offices and grievance redressal systems via mobile and web-based platforms, to enhance citizen accountability (Van Teeffelen & Baud, 2011). In Jammu & Kashmir, applicants have multiple channels to submit complaints, including web, fax, phone, mobile device, video, CD-clip, or upload electronic evidence. Each complaint is assigned a unique number for tracking purposes. (Chaudhary & Sugandhar, 2020). The SEBI's online grievance redress mechanism, SCORES, allows investors to file complaints, monitor their progress, and view resolutions (Maheshwari, 2016a). Some companies offer contact information for inquiries without specifying whether it can be used for complaints. Sharekhan provides chat boxes, forms, email addresses, and hotline numbers for complaints, but their grievance redress mechanism policy is unclear (Balasubramaniam et al., 2021). However, people may be discouraged from seeking redress if they believe that a grievance procedure is not fair, accessible, efficient, and effective.

In Indonesia, communication gaps between public service providers and minority communities hinder access to information. Communities' reluctance to report issues due to mistrust of grievance handling further reduces complaint rates (Haryani et al., 2017). Efficient grievance redress systems (GRS) enhance credibility (Bah et al., 2015). The Philippines' Kalahi-CIDSS GRS promotes accountability, addressing financial mismanagement and policy violations (Jr and Permejo, 2021). Multiple complaint channels, such as social media, calls, and emails, have shortened resolution time from 98 days in 2012 to 32 in 2013 (Patel et al., 2014). Vietnam integrates grievances into workflows with formal procedures, timeframes, and

notifications (Golan, 2010). Nepal's REDD+ GRM reduces corruption and empowers vulnerable groups (Mahal & Kathmandu, 2015). Lebanon's complaints focus on resources and bureaucracy. Complaint rates rose in 2017 with patient satisfaction calls; by 2020, Facebook became the preferred channel (Hammoud et al., 2022).

In Bangladesh, the grievance redress system (GRS) is crucial for improving administrative justice in public administration (Mashaw, 1983). However, few dissatisfied citizens file complaints due to socioeconomic factors such as corruption in government agencies and bureaucratic structures (Felstiner et al., 2017; Harris & Partington, 1999). The main sources of complaints are corruption, as people often feel powerless to stop it in their daily lives. Institutional and ministry reports on GRS are scarce (Rana et al., 2015). The manual GRS was initially implemented by the government of Bangladesh in 1986 (Sharmin et al., 2023). The Global Review of Grievance Redress Mechanisms in World Bank Projects 2015 highlighted the benefits of a well-designed Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM), including cost-effectiveness, prioritization, and accountability (Mahmuda, 2018). The Bangladeshi government introduced the GRS in 2007 as part of reform initiatives. The system aimed to improve public services, reduce corruption, and enhance transparency and accountability in public administration. The GRS was later revised in 2008 to address specific complaints and improve transparency (Alom, 2021). Bangladesh's 23 ministries established a grievance redress system in 2008, which was later criticized in 2009 and revised in 2018. The government urged ministries to meet standards and introduced awards for staff involved in complaint reception. Field offices were directed to designate a weekday for public complaints, ensuring prompt resolution (Alom, 2021; Mahmuda, 2018). The GRS in Bangladesh, which has been regularly used since 2014, aims for impartiality, community relations, transparency, and public power exercise. With 21 districts operating an online system, most services are at the Upazila level (Alom, 2021b; Jr & Permejo, 2021; Mahmuda, 2018). The Bangladesh government has implemented the GRS to enhance transparency and accountability, but existing studies primarily examine national grievance redress mechanisms or sector-specific grievance systems. Little empirical evidence exists on how the officially prescribed GRS functions within Union Parishads, where citizens most frequently interact with the state. This study addresses this gap by examining whether a digital GRS has been established in two Union Parishads in Khulna district as envisaged by the 2015 national policy, how it functions where present, where it is absent, what challenges have hindered its implementation, and how these local governments attempt to maintain transparency and accountability through offline means.

## Theoretical Framework

The Cabinet Division created the 2015 Bangladeshi GRS, a comprehensive framework that guarantees citizen satisfaction, accountability, and transparency in government systems. In Bangladesh, the GRS offers a user-friendly experience using both online and offline complaint methods. Highlighting the convenience of online submissions, they guarantee quick reporting of problems, prompt answers, and resolutions (The Cabinet Division, 2015).

This framework was used as a policy-derived assessment checklist rather than a causal or explanatory theory. Its purpose is not to theorize why implementation gaps occur in general or through what mechanisms grievance systems produce accountability, but to operationalize the dimensions specified in the 2015 GRS policy so that their presence or absence can be systematically identified at the Union Parishad level. Framed this way, the study is organized around three linked questions: whether a digital GRS has been established in the two studied Union Parishads as envisaged by national policy; where it has been established, how it

functions in practice; and where it has not, what implementation challenges account for its absence and how these Union Parishads maintain transparency and accountability through offline means.

Modes of filing grievances are essential for ensuring accessibility. An effectively structured system enables residents to lodge grievances through diverse routes, thus assuring the inclusion of individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Chaudhary & Sugandhar, 2020; Patel et al., 2014). The implementation of an anonymous complaint system is a notable attribute that enhances transparency while protecting individuals who may be apprehensive about facing retaliation for expressing their opinions. This fosters a culture of transparency and ensures that public officials are held responsible for their actions (The Cabinet Division, 2015).

Effective handling of complaints requires complaint categorization. To facilitate priority redress, the GRS in Bangladesh uses an organized process to classify complaints according to severity and urgency (Hammoud et al., 2022). An impartial grievance resolution process is ensured by the creation of a separate redressal body. Credibility to the system is increased by having a separate organization committed to resolving citizen problems. A vital component of efficacy in redressal is timeliness. By ensuring that citizens obtain timely solutions, the Redressal Time that has been set down serves to increase citizens' satisfaction and faith in the system (Mohapatra, 2016; Rana et al., 2015). By enabling citizens to track the progress of their complaints, a progress-tracking system promotes accountability and transparency throughout the complaint resolution process (Maheshwari, 2016). If a person is unhappy with the original resolution, an appealing system allows them to pursue additional remedies. This reaffirms the dedication to justice and fairness.

The mechanisms for verification and investigation highlight the dedication to a careful and objective review of complaints, guaranteeing that decisions are based on factual data. The Blacklisting System strengthens the preventative component of the GRS by acting as a deterrent to persistent misconduct (The Cabinet Division, 2015). Based on the literature and Bangladesh's 2015 GRS framework, the analytical dimensions used in this study are shown in Figure 1.

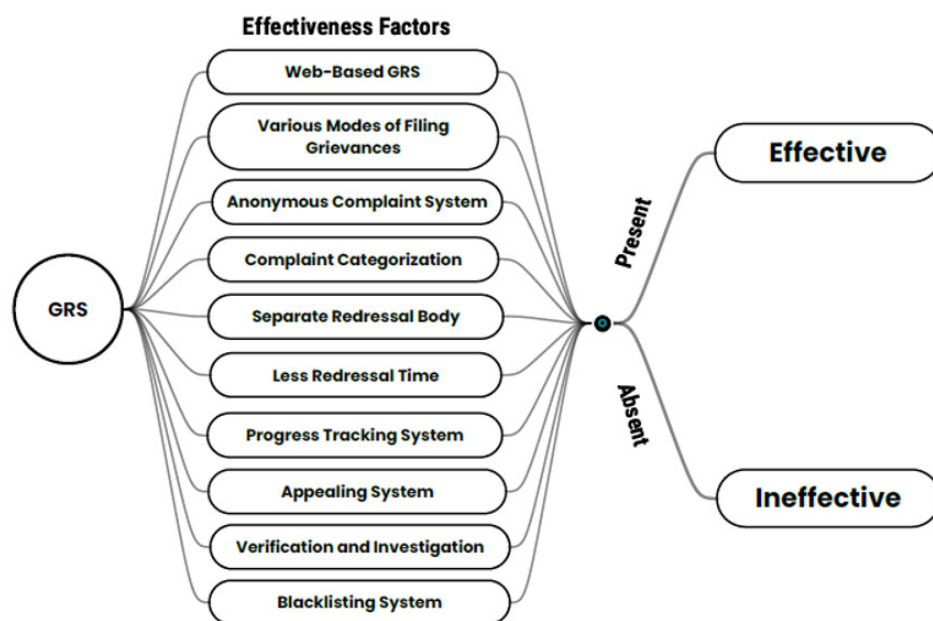


**Figure 1.** Theoretical Framework of Grievance Redress System Effectiveness

Source: Developed by the authors from secondary data

These dimensions are used descriptively, as markers of whether elements of the national GRS design have reached the local level, and not as a claim that digitalization by itself constitutes effective grievance redressal. Therefore, the framework serves to identify which elements of the 2015 GRS are present at the Union Parishad level and, where absent, to examine the offline arrangements that Union Parishads use instead.

## Methods

An exploratory qualitative inquiry was employed to assess the grievance redress system of Union Parishads in the Khulna district. This design was chosen because qualitative research allows the researcher to gain a high level of information from direct participation in subjects' actual experiences (Creswell, 1994; Williams, 2007), which suited the study's aim of understanding how grievance handling actually works on the ground rather than how it is meant to work on paper. Batiaghata and 1 No. Jalma was selected as the study area primarily on the grounds of feasibility rather than a deliberate case-selection rationale: the study had no external funding, so only two Union Parishads could realistically be covered within the available time and budget. The specific UPs were chosen purposefully among the Union Parishads that the research team could access in Khulna district, rather than being purposively matched on institutional or socioeconomic characteristics. The findings should accordingly be read as evidence from these two Union Parishads rather than as representative of Union Parishads in Bangladesh.

Data were collected through 20 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with service recipients (14 men, 6 women) and 5 key informant interviews (KIIs) with UP officials using purposive sampling. Service recipients were eligible if they had received a service and filed at least one complaint at the studied UPs; data collection among this group continued until no substantially new themes emerged from successive interviews, at which point thematic saturation was judged to have been reached. UP officials, by contrast, were selected according to their availability: five officials across the two UPs were accessible and willing to be interviewed, while others could not be reached or scheduled within the study period. The five KIIs should therefore be understood as a near-complete account of the accessible officials at these two UPs rather than a saturation-based sample in the same sense as the IDIs.

Both interview types were conducted in person, guided by an interview checklist with follow-up questions developed from the relevant literature, and lasted 25–35 min for IDIs and 35–50 min for KIIs. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and manually coded by color for thematic analysis, since no paid qualitative software was available. Standard ethical procedures were followed, including informed consent and assurances of confidentiality. The nine GRS dimensions informed the interview checklist and gave the coding an initial structure; therefore, the analysis was not purely inductive; however, themes were ultimately built from what respondents actually said, and material that did not fit the predefined dimensions was retained as an additional, inductively derived theme rather than forced into the existing framework.

## Results and Discussion

### Major Services

The Union Parishad is the lowest tier and a vital community center of the local government that offers a variety of basic services, including attestation, issuing certificates, managing public safety net programs, and providing advice on agriculture and health. It also manages village court proceedings and offers a food-friendly program, offering rice at a discounted rate of 10 tk per kg. The Union Parishad also provides

disaster relief, focuses on infrastructure development, and public safety. It also assesses tax holding and issues business certificates and trade licenses to support community development. The decentralized local government of BD prioritizes social welfare and actively participates in Village Government Federation (VGF) and Village Government Group (VGD) activities. It acts as a comprehensive community center, handling documentation requirements and promoting citizens' welfare through various projects and activities.

### **Web-Based GRS**

A grievance redress system is a mechanism that allows individuals to voice their concerns and have them resolved within a government or organization. It ensures an open and effective procedure for reporting problems, receiving prompt answers, and resolving them. These systems, whether web-based or incorporated into organizational structures, prioritize customer satisfaction and accountability. Participants consistently reported that grievance redress remains overwhelmingly dependent on face-to-face interactions despite the government's commitment to digital governance. The Batiaghata and 1 No. Jalma Union Parishad's grievance redress system is dualistic, with people using complaint boxes or direct communication with Union Parishad members to voice their dissatisfaction. However, when problems are serious, people seek a hierarchical process involving higher officials, such as the secretary or chairman. For the most part, they take their complaints directly to the UP officials and sometimes to the Upazila Parishad officials. As mentioned by a different respondent,

*"Generally, we go to UP chairmen or secretaries for our grievances. They hear our grievances and sometimes suggest lodging an application. After that they take action."*

(Respondent No: 09, Age-43, Female)

Respondents emphasized the offline nature of grievance redressal, with in-person meetings and physical complaint boxes being the main routes. The system also includes informal avenues for addressing issues and direct connections with authorities.

### **Informal Brokerage and Accountability without a Digital GRS**

Respondents also described a parallel informal route. Beyond the absence of a formal digital channel, the interviews point to an informal governance layer that coexists with and partly substitutes for the formal GRS. Respondent 10 described paying the UP Chowkidar so that he would speak to the UP Secretary on the respondent's behalf when a direct approach to the chairman failed; and the account of a land dispute that went unresolved through the Union Parishad and the Upazila level for two years, only being settled after the complainant appealed personally to the chairman's sense of standing in the community and the Upazila chairman intervened directly, illustrates a similar pattern. One respondent said,

*"Generally, we go to the chairman but sometimes they overlook our problems or avoid our grievances. Then we go to the UP Chowkidar for help. If we give them some money, they help us. They talk with the UP Secretary and convince them of our services."*

(Respondent No: 10, Age-48, Male)

In this light, complaint boxes are not simply an underused channel but are described by one respondent as having been installed partly "to shield UP officials from restiveness to higher officials," which pushes citizens back toward direct, personalized contact with office holders. Read together, these accounts suggest

that in the absence of a working digital GRS, transparency and accountability at the Union Parishad level rest less on documented procedure and more on informal brokerage, personal access, and the willingness of citizens to escalate a stalled complaint to a higher-level official. This is a vulnerable form of accountability: it depends on a complainant's social capital, time, and willingness to pay an intermediary, and it offers no guarantee of consistent treatment across cases. It is reported here as an emergent, inductively derived rather than as a formal test of corruption or clientelism.

### Modes of Filing Grievances

The Union Parishad accepts grievances through various offline channels, including written submissions and direct communication. Complaint boxes are used to write complaints, which are checked weekly. Oral complaints are also accepted, and the Union Parishad aims to solve them as soon as possible. However, people prefer direct correspondence or phone calls because of processing time concerns. The Union Parishad does not have an online complaint system but plans to upgrade it soon. One KII respondent said,

*"..... They can also submit their written complaint directly to us without using the complaint box. No, we do not have an online complaint system. But we are planning to upgrade our system to online in the near future."*

(Respondent No: 01, Age-38, Male)

People often go to the Union Parishad chairperson or secretary to submit grievances, as this is the easiest and most effective way to complain. These observations highlight the existing reliance on offline grievance filing procedures and the potential for online upgrades in the future. However, a case found that complaint boxes were ineffective. As respondent 11 mentioned that,

*"I once went to the Union Parishad to get the citizenship certificate. They asked me for 50 tk. Then I told them that the citizenship certificate was free. You get 25 Tk instead of 50 tk. Not everyone can pay 50 tk. But they told me that it was a government fee. I then checked the list of local government services and found that there was no mention of any fee. I then told them to show me where the government fee was. Then they got angry with me and said that I could not get the citizenship certificate anywhere except from them. So, do not talk too much. Then I submitted a written complaint in their complaint box, but there was no response from them even after a few days. Then I called the UNO sir and informed him about my problem. He later called the UP chairman and told him to provide the free service of a citizenship certificate. Then they contacted me and gave me the citizenship certificate for free. Since then our Union Parishad has given free citizen certificates."*

(Respondent No: 11, Age-26, Male)

There are complaint boxes in the Union Parishad, although they are mostly inoperative and exist only in name. These complaint boxes seem to have been installed to shield UP officials from the restiveness of higher officials. This compels the public to complain directly to UP officials.

### Digital and Offline Channels as Complementary Mechanisms

The study finds that there is no digital GRS system available in the studied Ups. However, the UP officials made a strong statement about the effectiveness of digital GRS at the local level. UP officials did

not reject digitalization but doubted it could be the main channel locally. Most service recipients have limited education, do not use smartphones, or lack internet access; therefore, an online-only system would create a new barrier: citizens would have to ask others or visit a computer shop to file a complaint, adding another intermediary to a process already marked by brokerage. Officials still acknowledged the benefits of digital channels, notably anonymous filing and progress tracking. This evidence comes mainly from officials' accounts. One official said,

*"Digital GRS can make complaints easier, especially through anonymous filing and tracking. However, many people here do not use smartphones or have internet access. If it becomes online-only, they may need someone else or a computer shop to submit complaints, creating another intermediary. Digitalisation is useful, but it cannot be the only channel at the local level."*

(Respondent No: 04, Age- 49, Male)

These accounts point to complementarity rather than substitution. Offline channels (in-person filing, functioning box, written receipts, and complaint register) are what most citizens can reach, while digital tools mainly serve functions that offline channels perform poorly, such as anonymity and tracking. Digitalization would help only if built on a working offline base; alone, it would widen the access gap documented here.

### **Anonymity: Official Perceptions and Citizens' Lived Experience**

The officials and citizens gave contradictory accounts. Officials stated that anonymity is maintained in sensitive cases through private conversations and restricted access to information:

*"UP maintains anonymity. However, we do not need to maintain anonymity for every case. Some complaints do not require anonymity. These can be solved openly. However, if the complaint becomes sensitive, we maintain anonymity so that no one can take advantage of it or can do any harm....."*

(Respondent No: 03, Age-42, Male)

Citizens described the opposite: complaints require a physical visit to the UP, so complainants cannot conceal themselves, even when facing powerful individuals.

*"Dissatisfied with the management process. In terms of anonymity, sometimes we feel afraid to complain. Because we have to visit the UP for complaint. Sometimes our complaints against those people whom to we complain. And sometimes we need to complain against powerful individuals but we can't conceal ourselves. That poses a threat towards us. Anonymous complaint system could help us from this threat but there is no system like that."*

(Respondent No: 15, Age-42, Male)

Officials mainly talk about keeping complaints confidential after they are received, while citizens are more concerned about being identified when they submit a complaint. Both views can be true: officials may keep complaints confidential within the office, but citizens may still have no practical way to remain anonymous when filing. This difference shows that officials focus on formal procedures, while citizens focus on the risks they face. Therefore, officials' assurances of confidentiality do not necessarily mean that citizens feel safe or protected. Sealed complaint boxes and, in the future, digital filing could provide additional options alongside physical complaint submission.

### **Discretion in Handling: Categorization and the Absence of a Separate Redressal Body**

The UP has no formal categorization system. Officials prioritize by urgency and sensitivity, for example, family conflicts before road construction (Respondent 05), and refer complaints beyond their control upward (Respondent 03), without written criteria. The chairman and secretary also handle complaints themselves, as no separate redressal body exists. The chairman welcomed the idea of one:

*“We do not have a separate redressal body. I (chairman), UP Secretary generally look after those complaints and redress complaints. However, it would be very beneficial if there is a separate redressal body.”*

(Respondent No: 04, Age-49, Male)

A participant also suggested creating a separate body with skilled members to handle complaints more quickly. Since the same officials may receive and decide complaints and may sometimes be the subject of those complaints, the outcome can depend heavily on individual decisions. This study did not examine whether this resulted in bias, favoritism, or corruption; therefore, no such conclusion can be made. However, the findings show that there is no clear separation of roles or written criteria to guide these decisions.

### **Timeliness and Progress Tracking**

Officials reported a typical resolution time of 7–28 days. Participants described far longer delays: five months for a water problem (Respondent 13) and two years for a land dispute, resolved only after the Upazila chairman became involved:

*“I had a problem with my land once. I bought land 30 years ago, but there were some shareholders in that land. There was a problem with this. Then I filed a case in the Union Parishad, after that in the Upazila. But there was no solution. It just took time. Later one day I said to the chairman, See you are a respectable person, learn to retain respect. If I get the land in measure, then arrange for me to get the land. If not, I will not be able to respect you anymore. After two years, the upazila chairman, union council chairman, and vice chairman solved the problem together.”*

(Respondent No: 06, Age-65, Male)

These cases are illustrative rather than representative but show that the stated timeframes are not binding. No system acknowledges complaints or updates citizens; Respondent 13 reported:

*“No, I didn’t get anything about the status and progress of my complaint during the redressal process. Even we had to go many times to the UP to know the progress.”*

(Respondent No: 13, Age-39, Male)

Repeated visits impose time and travel costs and favor those with personal access. Tracking need not be digital: a receipt with a reference number and a complaint register would address the gap offline, with digital tracking added later.

### **Verification, Investigation and Appeals**

Officials described an appeals procedure involving re-examination and information from other sources, although one account shows how far this depends on local capacity.

*“In cases of dissatisfaction with redressal outcomes, the Union Parishad provides an appeals process. Then we have to see how much their words are justified. We justify it according to our limitations. We take information from others. We investigate their complaints again. Complaints can be of various types.”*

(Respondent No: 01, Age-38, Male)

None of the participants mentioned using the formal appeals process. Instead, dissatisfied citizens said they usually approached the UNO or Upazila Chairman informally. Citizens also felt that complaints were not properly verified. This suggests that the formal appeal process may not be well known or commonly used, while further action often depends on personal connections. Officials described how the system is supposed to work, whereas citizens described how it works in practice. The statement that complaints are handled “according to our limitations” also suggests that investigations depend more on local capacity and individual judgement than on standard procedures.

### **Blacklisting of False Complainants**

The UP does not have a formal blacklist system. Instead, officials record the names of those judged to have lodged false complaints and issue a warning, a practice confirmed by a second official.

*“Unfortunately, we do not currently own a specialized blacklist system. Alternatively, we document their name and administer a cautionary notice.”*

(Respondent No: 03, Age-42, Male)

The absence of a blacklist should not be read as a weakness. Blacklisting may discourage legitimate complaints, where power asymmetries already exist, as citizens’ fear complaining against powerful individuals. The informal warning practice is arguably the more pressing concern: deciding what is “false” rests with the officials who handle complaints, and given weak verification, unproven complaints may be misclassified. Transparent verification and a chance to respond before any warning matter more than a blacklist. This study did not examine how often warnings are issued or against whom.

### **GRS Implementation Gap**

UP officials offered a fairly consistent account of why a digital GRS has not been established locally. They reported that no clear instruction or implementation plan had come down from higher administrative tiers; therefore, meetings had been held on the topic without translating into a concrete rollout. They also pointed to the absence of budget allocated for the purpose and the lack of dedicated manpower: operating a digital GRS would require staff time and technical skills that the Union Parishad does not currently have. Several officials added that even if a digital system were introduced, it would need a substantial information and awareness campaign before ordinary residents could use it, since most service recipients are not familiar with online complaint procedures. One Up Secretary said,

*“..... First of all, we did not receive any specific instructions from the higher authority to establish an online GRS system in the UP. Yes, we did a meeting on the UP’s digital services where we talked about this, but since then we did not get any instructions or budget allocation to establish it. Besides, if we establish one, it will require separate manpower, which we lack. Also, the service receivers will not feel comfortable at all, because most of them don’t know how to use an online system on their own.”*

(Respondent No: 01, Age: 38, Male)

Implementation is blocked not by a single missing feature but by unclear directives, resourcing, staffing, and the groundwork needed for citizens to use a digital channel once it exists.

## Discussion

This study examined whether a digital Grievance Redress System (GRS), as envisaged by Bangladesh's 2015 policy ([The Cabinet Division, 2015](#)), has been established in two Union Parishads (Batiaghata and 1 No. Jalma) in Khulna district, how it functions where present, and how these Union Parishads maintain transparency and accountability in its absence. The findings show a grievance system that remains primarily offline and personally mediated. Citizens rely on complaint boxes and direct, face-to-face contact with officials rather than any web-based channel, unlike the Jammu and Kashmir Government Grievance Cell, which already operates an effective online platform ([Chaudhary & Sugandhar, 2020](#)). This is not simply a technology gap but a broader implementation gap between national policy and frontline administrative practice, visible across informality, discretion, accessibility, and accountability, rather than any single missing feature.

Systems such as the Philippines' multi-channel complaint process ([Patel et al., 2014](#)) and Jammu & Kashmir's web, fax, phone, and video options ([Chaudhary & Sugandhar, 2020](#)) illustrate what a fuller digital rollout could look like, but they cannot be used as templates that Union Parishads can simply adopt. Officials in this study did not reject digitalization; they doubted it could be the main channel locally, since most service recipients have limited literacy, no smartphones, or no internet access, and an online-only system would force them to rely on a relative, a neighbor, or a computer-shop operator to file on their behalf. This adds another intermediary to a process already marked by brokerage. Digital and offline channels are therefore better treated as complementary rather than substitutable. A digital layer could add anonymity and tracking for those who can use it, but a functioning offline channel remains necessary regardless.

This offline reliance coexists with an informal governance layer rarely captured in GRS checklists. Service recipients described paying an intermediary to reach the secretary and escalating a stalled complaint to the Upazila chairman or the Upazila Nirbahi Officer when the Union Parishad itself failed to respond. Because the same officials who receive complaints often also decide them and are sometimes their subject, outcomes can depend heavily on individual discretion rather than documented procedure; a pattern that sits uneasily with the integrity that grievance mechanisms are meant to safeguard ([Hasan, 2017](#)). This is reported as a vulnerable, informal form of accountability rather than a tested finding of corruption or clientelism, which this study was not designed to measure.

A similar gap separates formal design from lived experience regarding anonymity. The national GRS recognizes official, staff, and public complaints ([The Cabinet Division, 2015](#)), and anonymity is widely considered essential to a functioning local GRS, particularly for citizens complaining against powerful individuals ([Hoel et al., 2020](#)). Officials in this study described maintaining confidentiality informally once a complaint is received. However, service recipients described the opposite problem that filing a complaint at all requires a visit that exposes their identity. Both accounts can be true simultaneously. Officials focus on procedure after submission, and complainants focus on exposure at the point of filing; neither resolves or cancels out the other.

The same discretion marks complaint categorization and the absence of a separate redressal body. Officials prioritize by urgency and sensitivity rather than written criteria, broadly consistent with how

complaints in Lebanon are informally grouped around resource, billing, and access concerns (Hammoud et al., 2022), Bangladesh's own GRS designates a Grievance Redressed Person to handle such complaints across departments (The Cabinet Division, 2015), a role the studied Union Parishads have not filled. Mohapatra (2016) argues that good governance requires authorities to take citizen grievances seriously and address them in a timely manner. Here, the chairman and secretary both receive and decide complaints, which the findings show lacks a clear separation of roles, although the study cannot establish whether this produces bias or favoritism in practice.

Timeliness shows the same slippage between policy and practice. Rana et al. (2015) set a 20-day standard for addressing complaints, and officials in this study cited a comparable 7–28-day norm; yet, participants described delays of five months and, in one case, two years, resolved only once a senior official intervened personally. No system currently acknowledges a complaint or updates a citizen on its progress, forcing repeated visits that favor those with personal access. India's web-based SCORES system, which allows investors to track a complaint using a unique registration number (Maheshwari, 2016) and the time savings such tracking can offer (Chaudhary & Sugandhar, 2020), illustrates a workable model. A simple offline receipt and complaint register could achieve much the same before any digital system is built.

Appeals follow a similar pattern. Officials described a formal appeals procedure requiring a designated appellate officer (The Cabinet Division, 2015), and investigations conducted “according to our limitations,” yet no participant in this study reported having used this formal route; dissatisfied citizens instead approached the Upazila Nirbahi Officer or Upazila chairman informally. Officials described how the system is meant to work, citizens how it works in practice, and the distance between the two suggests that the formal route is either poorly known or rarely trusted, with verification depending more on individual judgement than standard procedure.

Blacklisting deserves similarly careful treatment. The GRS allows a persistently dishonest complainant to be placed on a blacklist at the Grievance Redressed Person's recommendation (The Cabinet Division, 2015), and its absence here might look like a weakness. From an accountability standpoint, however, the risk cuts both ways. Blacklisting could deter frivolous complaints, but could just as easily discourage legitimate complaints where power asymmetries already discourage citizens from challenging powerful figures. The more immediate concern is that officials already informally label and warn complainants they judge dishonest, with no transparent criteria or chance to respond, a practice that deserves more scrutiny than its formal absence.

Taken together, beyond cataloguing which GRS features are present or absent, the Union Parishads examined here show an implementation gap sustained by informality, official discretion, uneven accessibility, and an accountability that rests on personal relationships rather than documented procedure. The Philippines, Lebanon, and Jammu & Kashmir remain illustrative rather than directly comparable, given their very different administrative capacity and institutional design (Chaudhary & Sugandhar, 2020; Hammoud et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2014). But together with Bangladesh's own 2015 GRS design, they suggest that closing this gap will require strengthening offline procedures, clear criteria, acknowledgements, and defined roles; alongside, rather than instead of, any future digital rollout.

## **Policy Implications**

Although the Government of Bangladesh has established comprehensive GRS guidelines, this study reveals a substantial gap between national policy and actual practice in the two Union Parishads examined here. The recommendations below follow from what officials and service recipients described in the

interviews and are recommended as directions for policy attention and further evaluation rather than proven solutions.

First, digitalization should proceed as a complement to, not a replacement for, existing offline channels, and should be sequenced to match local capacity. Extending the national online GRS platform to Union Parishads would therefore need to be accompanied by explicit guidance, funding, and staffing before a web-based system can function in practice. Any online system should be paired with a sustained information and awareness campaign and a continued, well-functioning offline channel to address the digital divide. Unique tracking numbers, SMS notifications, and real-time status updates could plausibly improve transparency and reduce administrative delays for citizens who are able to use them; however, this study did not evaluate these features directly and cannot confirm their effect on outcomes.

Second, protecting complainants should be a policy priority. The absence of anonymous complaint mechanisms may discourage some citizens, particularly those reporting on influential individuals or raising sensitive concerns, from coming forward; secure anonymous reporting channels could help address this. Any safeguard introduced against malicious or false complaints, such as a blacklisting mechanism, should be carefully designed and independently reviewed before being applied, since a poorly designed safeguard risks discouraging legitimate complainants as much as it discourages false ones, particularly where power asymmetries between citizens and officials already exist.

Finally, regular training for Union Parishad officials on grievance management and citizen-centered governance, combined with public awareness campaigns explaining grievance procedures and citizens' rights, would likely be needed before either a digital or a strengthened offline system could be used effectively by most residents, given the literacy and access constraints described by officials in this study. These measures are offered as reasonable directions consistent with the findings, not as interventions whose effectiveness this study has established; evaluating them directly is a task for future studies.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined whether a digital Grievance Redress System (GRS), as envisaged by Bangladesh's 2015 national policy, has been established in two Union Parishads in Khulna district, how it functions where present, and how these Union Parishads maintain transparency and accountability in its absence. The findings show that neither studied Union Parishad has established a digital GRS; officials linked this to unclear implementation directives, limited budget and manpower, and the groundwork of public awareness that a digital system would require. In its place, complaint handling relies on offline channels: complaint boxes and direct, face-to-face communication, supplemented by informal brokerage and, in some cases, escalation to higher-level officials when formal channels stall. This informal layer provides a degree of responsiveness but offers no consistent guarantee of fair treatment, and formal features such as anonymity, progress tracking, complaint categorization, and a dedicated redressal body remain largely absent. Read together, the findings suggest that strengthening accountability at the Union Parishad level requires attention to both the digital gap and the informal arrangements that currently substitute for it, rather than treating digitalization alone as the solution.

The findings point toward both institutional and technological directions for strengthening the GRS, sequenced so that offline access is preserved while digital options are developed: expanding digital grievance platforms as a complement to offline channels, introducing complaint tracking and anonymous reporting mechanisms with appropriate safeguards, designating grievance officers, and investing in public awareness and digital literacy. These are offered as plausible directions, not as interventions this study has shown to work. This study is limited to two Union Parishads and therefore does not capture the diversity of

GRS implementation across Bangladesh. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, employ mixed-method approaches, and conduct comparative studies across local government institutions and South Asian countries to generate broader evidence on how grievance redress systems influence accountability and public trust.

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