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Is a powerful but corrupt public manager more trustworthy? Lessons from the case of rural local government in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT
A survey experiment was conducted at the Union Council level in Bangladesh to gauge if citizens emphasise the power of the public manager (popularly known as Chairman of the Union Council) more than their corrupt practices. The analysis gauges that perspective based on citizens' perception of public managers' trustworthiness at the local level. The chronic absence of empirical research on local government public managers in a country from the Global South prompted us to focus on Bangladesh to carry out this research. The analysis of the two independent sample populations in the survey experiment suggests that local citizens have normative trust in less powerful but honest public managers. Our findings highlight that citizens in rural local government in Bangladesh have a certain degree of normative political awareness, which allows them to evaluate the public manager's trustworthiness, not merely based on the power distance or patriarchal culture.

Introduction

Do we trust corrupt public managers? Most of the time, people would answer 'No'. But how about a corrupt public manager possess different types of power that French and Raven (1959) discussed? Managers who lead public organisations tend to focus on position power as the followers are fascinated by their leaders' power and later performance (Van Wart 2014). However, as an external element of public organisations, citizens often evaluate public managers through service delivery performance (Hamm 2019; Van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003). Interestingly, while analysing service delivery

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performance, a bunch of existing research found a negative association between public managers' abuse of power, which is one of the measures of corruption, and citizens' trust in them (Beesley and Hawkins 2022; Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2022; Xiao et al. 2020; Kim and Lee 2012). On the other hand, an opposite argument is presented that signifies a positive association between abuse of power/corruption and trust in public sector incumbents when the governance system follows an autocratic approach (Gründler and Potrafke 2019). What do these two different arguments signify?

These two different arguments signify three things. First, citizens tend to evaluate service delivery performance by considering the extent of corruption and making judgements about public managers' trustworthiness. Second, an autocratic approach to governance can play an essential role in understanding the context in which service delivery performance is evaluated to decide whether public managers are trustworthy. Third, abuse of power as a measure of corruption does not explicitly discuss public managers' powers. These three aspects highlight the possible implications of public managers' power and trustworthiness in a governance setting. Therefore, considering the third aspect, we intend to contribute to contemporary research on public service delivery performance by focusing on the 'power' of the public manager of a local government institution in Bangladesh. We selected the lowest tier of local government in Bangladesh for our research. The lowest level is Union Council, and that institution's elected Chairman plays the manager's role. So, in this paper, the public manager of the Union Council refers to the person elected as Chairman and head of that local government institution. It is important to note that Union Council follows the 'Council-Mayor' model, where the people directly elect the mayor/chairman, and that person is responsible for managing service deliveries (Nelson 2011).

There are two additional justifications for choosing 'power' as a missing piece in the ongoing dialogue on public service delivery performance and citizens' trust in office bearers. First, abuse of power as a significant determinant of the extent of corruption in a government institution needs to be realised from a citizens' perspective about the extent of power the incumbents possess. It means that while perceiving an incumbent as less powerful in the institutional mechanisms, citizens will merely think that that person cannot abuse power. In other words, how would someone abuse that if someone does not have power? Perceptions like that may affect how much citizens would trust the public managers. Second, power distance is evident in every culture that comprises socio-political, economic, and administrative settings (Hofstede 2001). In a high power-distance cultural structure, citizens can be critical of corruption in public service delivery but still perceive the public officials as trustworthy (Jamil and Baniamin 2020; Baniamin, Jamil, and Askvik 2020). Therefore, Prior research indicates that power possessed by the

public manager could influence citizens' perception of trustworthiness. Interestingly, we do not have empirical evidence to infer the interaction between power, corruption, and trust in a local government context (Holdo 2022; Noda 2017). Hence, this research aims to explore and find any possible variation in the local government public managers' power results in variation in their trustworthiness to the citizens.

The gap in the literature

Contemporary Literature has given insufficient attention to how and why people trust the public managers of a local government institution. For example, Noda (2017) studied the Japanese metropolitan government and showed that public managers, who lead those institutions, are vital in creating a conducive environment for participatory governance that generates a higher level of trust. However, it was not clear from Noda's (2017) findings how people perceive the public manager's power. Like Noda (2017), Beshi and Kaur (2020) studied how good governance practice pushes the level of trust in the local government institutions and their incumbents without including the analysis of the citizens' perception of the incumbent's power. While studying the roots of trust in local government in Western Europe, Fitzgerald and Wolak (2016) showed several factors, like power distance between the national and local government, as an essential determinant of trust in the local institutions and their managers. Nonetheless, Fitzgerald and Wolak (2016) did not include variables like local public managers' power to understand how public trust in local government institutions shapes in Western Europe.

While we found that the discussion of the power of public managers in a local government setting is rare, we acknowledge that Holdo (2022) empirically studied the dynamics of local government public managers' communication and commitment made during elections that affect people's trust in them. For example, Holdo's (2022) study forwarded some crucial factors like the local government public managers' commitment to better service delivery and communication. Still, there needs to be more evidence that people's perception of the local public manager's power influences the credibility of the pledges made by them (the public managers) during the elections. Additionally, Zhong (2014) empirically investigated why people trust the local government in Chinese urban areas. In his investigation, Zhong (2014) demonstrated that transparency, service delivery performance, and participatory decision-making process facilitate higher levels of trust. Identification of those factors could have portrayed a clearer picture of whether the perceived power of the local government mayors played a role in influencing the level of trust. Thus, we miss the discussion of the power of the local government public managers, which can open a new channel of empirical

studies as Purdue (2001) argued that understanding the power dynamics in society could help realise the complex nuances of trust in the public managers.

Downe et al. (2013) highlighted that understanding the behaviour of the elected local government public managers becomes a critical factor that impacts public trust in local government. Notably, the behaviour of local government public managers, if perceived by colleagues and the public, necessarily involves power relations (Heinelt 2013). Therefore, examining local government public managers' power based on citizens' perceptions is vital to fill the gap in the Literature that intends to grapple with the dialogue on trust in government. Hence, an investigation of the unknown and undiscovered territory, like the 'power' of and trust in local government public managers, would add to the theoretical framework of trust in local government.

The importance of investigating local government public managers' power and its connection with trust in Bangladesh can fill additional gaps in the Literature. For instance, we hardly know about the rural-level context of a developing country like Bangladesh when we talk about local government service delivery performance and citizens' trust. Previous research on service delivery performance and citizens' trust in a local government primarily examined urban areas from Western and East Asian strong economies as the rural local government did not receive a significant attention (see Holdo 2022; Beshi and Kaur 2020; Noda 2017; Fitzgerald and Wolak 2016; Van Ryzin 2015, 2007; Zhong 2014; Heinelt 2013). Moreover, context and culture are different across different countries, and we need to acknowledge that the perception of people may vary due to the variations in context and culture. Christensen, Yamamoto, and Aoyagi (2020) found that factors affecting trust in local government are different in Japan than in Norway. Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2013) argued that in a high power-distance culture, transparency in governance depicting negative information about the government has a more substantial negative impact on the trustworthiness of the institutions. Therefore, the value of Bangladesh's context would be crucial for filling the gap in the contemporary evolutions in dialogue on comparative service delivery performance and trust across cultures because empirical analysis of public managers' power is not readily available to draw a broader inference for similar cultural landscapes in the Global South. Additionally, scholarship on Bangladesh's local-level public service management and citizens' trust in government (see Jamil and Baniamin 2020; Baniamin, Jamil, and Askvik 2020; Askvik and Jamil 2013) does not offer much evidence of whether, despite rampant corruption, a high level of trust in the government and sometimes in their incumbents is the outcome of the public officials' power. Therefore, this research would be valuable to explore the scenario at the rural level in

Bangladesh that not only can fill the gap but also help devise appropriate policy measures in the country.

Conceptualizing power, corruption, and trust

Power and corruption

Power is commonly defined in social sciences as the social production that determines actors' capacities, actions, beliefs, or conduct (Barnett and Duvall 2005). Power is relative and can be realised based on the relationship between two or more parties and their subjective understanding of their capacity to influence each other's beliefs and actions (French and Raven 1959). Moreover, since abuse of power measures corrupt practices of an incumbent (see Beesley and Hawkins 2022; Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2022; Xiao et al. 2020; Kim and Lee 2012), we embedded the concept of corruption in the discussion from the power abuse angle.

French and Raven (1959) laid out five categories of power that are widely used across industrial, organisational, and social psychology research. The five power bases include *legitimate*, *coercive*, *reward*, *referent*, and *expert*. Legitimate power comes from the position one holds in an organisation or society. Coercive power is the ability to demote or withhold any reward. In contrast, reward power is the capability of someone who can give rewards to others as social, political, and financial benefits. Referent power is based on identification with or desire to be associated with the agent. Expert power is based on the perception that the agent can provide the target with special knowledge (French and Raven 1959).

In addition to French and Raven's (1959) five categories of power, Yukl (1989) discussed political power. Political power is the ability of people or an institution to control resources and decision-making that affect the different groups in society. In other words, political power can be an alternative expression of legitimate, coercive, and reward power because Yukl and Falbe (1991) argued that French and Raven's five categories of power (French and Raven 1959) need to be realised from the position and personalised dimensions. For example, people using their legitimate position can punish or reward a specific person or a group. Hence, the legitimate, coercive, and reward power can be reconceptualised as the position-power. Additionally, the referent power requires socio-political connection and social capital, which often comes from personal capacity within a socio-political sphere. Expert power is also a capacity (Yukl and Falbe 1991) that an individual may possess due to the expertise achieved by experience, education, knowledge, and wisdom (Guerrero, Anderson, and Afifi 2011).

However, we contextualise these categories of power to reconceptualise those. We argue that personal sources of power, like referent and expert

power, can also be an outcome of an individual's position. For example, a local government public manager may be perceived as an expert because they were elected to be the head of the institution. Citizens may perceive that a public manager, having multiple terms in the office, would have grown a certain degree of expertise because of doing the same managerial tasks for a more extended period (Powell and Powell 2000). The social and political connection of the local government public manager would be their referent power as the people may perceive that the head of the local government institution has the social and political connection, which can be helpful to get things done for the betterment of the people in the local area. Thus, we echo Guerrero, Anderson, and Afifi (2011) that the five power categories are interconnected and can be interdependent to grow or diminish.

Moreover, we agree with Guerrero, Anderson, and Afifi (2011) that power is subjective and often perceived by different people in multifarious ways based on the kind of relationship, situation, and interdependencies between the parties in a contract. For instance, an individual X would perceive a local government public manager Y as powerful if the public manager can reward X or accomplish specific tasks for the well-being of X. In doing so, the public manager may provide extra benefit to X. However, X would still perceive that the public manager is powerful because he/she met the individual needs. In such an instance, the personalised relationship determines the perception of public manager Y's power. The dependency of X on Y shows the extent of power distance which is practically very high in Bangladeshi culture (Jamil and Baniamin 2020; Baniamin, Jamil, and Askvik 2020; Askvik and Jamil 2013). Where there is a high-power distance, agents are perceived as powerful and enjoy the privilege of having many dependents in the personal, social, political, and economic spheres. In a high-power distance and dependency situation, X would take clues from Y's position power and personalised power to frame the perception. On the contrary, there could be people who would perceive Y's use of power to give an extra service to X as an abuse of power because the public manager used his/her capacities deriving from the position and personal resources to violate the expectation of equal treatment of everybody. Thus, the perception of power varies and will depend on an individual's judgement.

Even though people's perception varies regarding a public manager's power, we want to underscore that perceived abuse of power still signifies that the person in a public office has power. Perception is the outcome of critical deductive reasoning based on evaluation from some objective cues (Aronson, Wilson, and Akert 2010). It means subjective evaluation to create a perception would require some objective clues. Those clues will help individuals evaluate others and make a judgement. Therefore, we conceptualise power as the capacity of the actor(s) to influence a person's interests. No matter how much variation persists in individuals' perceptions, the capacity derives from the

legitimate position and personal resources, including social, political, and financial. At the same time, we define abuse of power as the capacity of the actor(s) to spread fear among the people that they can control others' resources, rights and actions by violating the legitimate principles of their position. In this research, corruption means physical and psychological coercions deriving from the public manager's social, political, and financial resources, indicating the extent of power abuse in delivering services and carrying out duties.

Trust

Trust is an interdisciplinary concept that blends sociology, political science, and psychology perspectives, often focusing on the dyadic relationship between individuals and the general perception of individuals, groups, and institutions (Newton and Zmerli 2011). Trust is a set of beliefs and expectations that a partner's actions will benefit one's long-term self-interest (Hardin 2006, 2002; Kramer and Carnevale 2001). Hardin (2002) defines self-interest as encapsulated interest. By encapsulating each other's interest in a particular activity, a trusting relationship can continue between two parties. Different scholars have identified different types of trust. For example, Uslaner (2002) describes two forms of trust: generalised and particularised. The trustor may have only some information about the potential trustee and thus tend to generally trust the trustee (Uslaner 2002). For example, X may not know Y well but still trusts that Y will not do any harm. In contrast, particularised trust believes that only specific individuals or individuals involved in a particular network or group can be trusted (Hardin 2006; Uslaner 2002). For example, particularised trust signifies that the two parties get involved in a dyadic relationship with an encapsulated interest (Hardin 2006). It means, A trusts B to do X (Hardin 2006, 2002). In a particularised trust-based relationship, the trustors want to see the trustees serve their interests. In other words, compared to generalised trust, the trustor would have specific information and close encounters with the trustee in a particularised form of trust.

    This research only considers particularised trust to see how people evaluate and shape their perceptions to judge the local government public manager's trustworthiness. We use the particularised trust theory because the research explores how individuals perceive the public manager when they know his/her power and service delivery performance. The theory of particularised trust highlights that individuals need specific information to judge trustworthiness (Hardin 2006, 2002; Uslaner 2002).

Study hypotheses

According to French and Raven (1959), power means the capacity of an agent or actor. At the same time, better public service delivery requires multifaceted

individual and institutional-level capacities (Hamm 2019; O'leary and Vij 2012; Van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003; Van Thiel and Leeuw 2002). It means better-performing public managers would possess more power than their underperforming counterparts. Additionally, a significant implication of better public service delivery necessarily indicates an increased level of citizens' trust in the incumbents and institutions (Beesley and Hawkins 2022; Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2022; He and Ma 2021; Xiao et al. 2020; Kim and Lee 2012; Van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003). So, a variation in the public manager's power would result in the degree of capacities he/she might need to perform the service delivery responsibilities. We argue that lesser capacity will not produce better public service delivery performance that an individual citizen would like to see from the public manager. As a result, the citizen would perceive the public manager as untrustworthy because he/she could not perform well in delivering the services.

The nuance of corruption denotes abuse of power in a public service delivery setting like local government (Hamilton and Hammer 2018). So, power will always be accompanied by corruption. Existing research suggests that public service delivery corruption would lower citizens' trust in incumbents and institutions (Beesley and Hawkins 2022; Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2022; Xiao et al. 2020; Robbins 2012; Rothstein 2011; Rothstein and Uslaner 2005). Hence, we can say that investigating power variation and its impact on citizens' trust would still provide some implicit indication of power abuse possibilities if evaluators in citizens do not have information on corruption. Therefore, citizens would evaluate both power and corruption together to decide how much the public manager can be trustworthy. So, we hypothesise that variation in public managers' power and their corrupt practices will vary their trustworthiness.

H1: Change in local government public managers' power will vary their trustworthiness.

Since we focus on observing the trust in the local government public managers from a more particularised point of view that derives from the idea of a dyadic relationship between the people and the public manager, there are some important reasons why the concept of performance signifies the connection between power and trust. Regardless of the ethical or corrupt approach, people perceive someone as powerful or exercising power based on their performance. Performance is a vital indicator of power. For instance, a local government public manager may have a solid political network with the central government political leaders, which can bring more financial and logistic support for implementing development projects to the local area in a country like Bangladesh (Lewis and Hossain 2022). Needless to say,

implementing development projects would indicate how the public manager performed. Notably, in Bangladesh, the central-local government power distance is high and local government often heavily depends on the central government for resources (Lewis and Hossain 2022). So, local government public managers with that political network could get more resources and implement more development projects in the local area. As a result, that public manager would be seen as a person with adequate referent power. Thus, the public manager will be perceived as trustworthy due to their role in bringing more funds for development in the local area through his/her referral capacity.

On the contrary, a public manager who does not have a connection with the central-level political leaders and follows a more formal way of seeking resources from the central government will eventually signify his/her low level of referent power and performance. Considering the culture of central-local relations in Bangladesh, the public manager needs to have an informal relationship with the central political leaders to succeed enough to get local development funds. Hence, the shortages of funds will indicate the public manager's lack of capacity and performance. Thus, we assume that the citizens would prefer a more powerful public manager for their development.

However, more power could produce more corruption (Jain 2001). A powerful person can have more opportunities and avenues to abuse power, as Jain (2001) argues. On the other hand, more power comes with greater responsibility in the post-New Public Management (NPM) era (Wanna 1999). Research also suggests that greater responsibility with more power would develop a sense of ethical behaviour leading to lesser corrupt practices (Lloyd 2009). In a high-power and greater responsibility-scenario, public managers are expected to behave in a more democratic way where accountability and transparency receive the highest priority (Lloyd 2009). Nevertheless, we want to emphasise the culture of local-level politics in Bangladesh. In a high-power distance and patron-client culture, the public managers at the local level in Bangladesh tend to maintain their status quo and do not open all necessary channels of accountability and transparency (Lewis and Hossain 2022). It means public managers with more power will not assume greater responsibility. If they do not assume greater responsibility, we expect they will likely be involved in more abuse of their power than their utilisation for the greater public interest.

A few prior research suggest that a corrupt public manager would not be perceived as trustworthy (see Robbins 2012; Rothstein 2011; Rothstein and Uslaner 2005). Nevertheless, we acknowledge the political culture in Bangladesh and assume that public managers without power will not be able to deliver the services as individual citizens want. People in rural Bangladesh are poor and seek various benefits from the local government public managers that meet their self-interests, eventually promoting

a patron-client relationship in the community (Panday 2019; Zafarullah 2015). Thus, powerful public managers can be corrupt, as Jain (2001) argues. Still, these public managers can meet many individuals' self-interest by using their power in the context of local government services in Bangladesh. Additionally, citizens tend to trust those with power as they know that it often gets difficult to fulfill their needs in Bangladesh (Jamil and Baniamin 2020; Baniamin, Jamil, and Askvik 2020). We argue that the citizens would likely counter the pervasive culture of corruption with corruption. In other words, when local citizens face discrimination getting a service from a central government agency, they may rely on the local government public manager's referent power to navigate the discrimination. In such a case, the citizens are using an informal means to bypass the formal procedure, like a complaint, which signifies the abuse of power on the public manager's part and violates formal ethical procedure. If the local public manager successfully helps the citizens through informal means, he/she would likely be perceived as trustworthy. Therefore, considering the cultural structure of Bangladesh and the theoretical terrain related to power and corruption, we hypothesise that corrupt public managers with more power will still be perceived as more trustworthy than public managers who are ethical but lack power.

H2: Local-level citizens in Bangladesh trust corrupt but powerful public managers more than honest but less powerful ones.

Study setting: rural power structure in Bangladesh

Historically the power structure in the Indian Subcontinent highlights two significant features – first, the domination of elites over the disadvantaged. Second, the patriarchal culture helps sustain the trend of accepting the domination of elites by those who do not have enough resources (Lewis and Hossain 2008). Surprisingly, the status quo never changed in thousands of years. Moreover, the hierarchical formation of religion that strengthened the grip of patriarchy in the rural Indian Subcontinent is still prevalent in modern Bangladesh, which emerged as an independent country through several political and social transformations in the last six centuries (Bose and Jalal 2022; Gunaratne and Weiss 2014).

Rural societies in Bangladesh have been plagued with poverty, and there exist two groups of people. One group has the ownership of access to financial, agrarian, human, and political capital, and the other does not have land ownership and often finds themselves in a dire condition of poverty where the inequality and the patriarchal fabric of the society do not often allow to make progress in breaking the shackles of

subordination (Lewis and Hossain 2008). The power distance has always been high between these two groups, which interestingly influenced the perception of local-level public managers' performance and trustworthiness. Jamil and Baniamin (2020) argued how the culture of high power distance due to the pervasive and deep-rooted social fabric of inequality and resource-based determination of power could not influence rural citizens' tendency to evaluate public managers solely based on their performance. Rural citizens tend to submit themselves to local politicians, public officials, bureaucrats, and land owners and often evaluate them as trustworthy even though the service delivery performance is poor (Jamil and Baniamin 2020; Rahman 2020).

Therefore, the context of rural power dynamics in Bangladesh highlights that the legacy of inequality in resource distribution, religion-based hierarchy like caste and submitting to the elders, and patriarchal practice to dominate women and other poor groups play a pivotal role in sustaining the power distance that Hofstede (2001) identified. The hierarchical culture and the determination of power based on access to resources often stifled the voice of the poor in rural Bangladesh (Rahman, 2014). However, there has been some recent progress in rural Bangladesh as the citizens can participate in public meetings by the Union Council to give their voice. Nevertheless, it is still a more significant challenge for the powerless and subjugated people to get their opinions reflected in local politics and policy implementation due to the dominance of political parties in national power and field-level bureaucrats (Lewis and Hossain 2022, 2008). It means the local-level elected public managers have several challenges in serving the local community. For example, local public managers could overcome these challenges by enhancing financial, social, and political capital. Notably, a consistent drive for securing those three capitals makes the public managers more hungry for power and status quo resulting in social power distance and the paradox of citizens' trust in institutions not led by high-performing incumbents like Jamil and Baniamin (2020) and Baniamin, Jamil, and Askvik (2020) found.

Experimental design

Since this research attempts to explore a new aspect in the studies of trust in local government, we conducted an experimental design study as scholars argue that experimental designs provide more robust and reliable results to make a significant contribution to the existing knowledge of management of a public institution like local government (James, Jilke, and Van Ryzin 2017). Additionally, comparing empirical results of a specific context with others for further generalisation would be helpful if the study is conducted following the norms of experimental design. For instance, previous experimental research on local government service delivery added significant evidence

for future cross-cultural studies (see Noda 2019; Grimmelikhuijsen and Porumbescu 2017; Andersen and Hjortskov 2016).

We designed an experimental survey where respondents were randomly given the vignette. We created two questionnaires to eliminate any confusion for the enumerators in randomly distributing those. In other words, the questionnaires were different in terms of the vignette. All other questions were identical for those two questionnaires. The questionnaires were in the native language, i.e., Bangla, for the convenience of both participants and the enumerators. The experimental survey was conducted in March-April, 2022, and five administrative divisions[1] were chosen randomly. Later, through a lottery, three Union Councils were selected for Rajshahi, Rangpur, Khulna, and Barishal divisions. Five Union Councils were selected from the Dhaka division because Dhaka has the most population compared to all administrative divisions[2] (Table 1). The research design received ethical approval from the Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies (IDMVS) at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, on 26 February 2022. The approval reference number is ERC (EXT)-11/262022.

The survey team recruited the respondents by going to the largest market area (Weekly Hat) and randomly asking the people if they wanted to participate in the survey. The largest market (Bazar) is a weekly gathering of vendors in a particular UP. Although there are many villages in one UP and many such gatherings of vendors happen weekly for each village, we chose the largest market area, which is generally observed as one gathering within a single UP jurisdiction. It is important to note that the selection of the local market area gave access to more people from different gender and socioeconomic background. Hence, higher representativeness was an advantage for recruiting participants from a large gathering where people from diverse backgrounds come and shop. Hat. Although people tend to get busy while shopping and could have easily turned over the survey participation request, the rejection rate was very low (10%).

To ensure the data collection credibility, the enumerators were given extensive training. We selected the enumerators from each sample Union so that the respondents do not feel like talking to strangers. We purposefully did such enumerator recruitment as participants might ask for an introduction of them to find a degree of trust and comfort in responding to the

Table 1. Sample size.

Administrative Divisions	Number of Union Councils	Final sample Population
Dhaka	5	140
Rajshahi	3	70
Khulna	3	90
Barishal	3	68
Rangpur	3	78
Total		$N=446$

Table 2. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Frequency (*n*)	Percentage (%)	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Control Variables						
Gender						
Male	294	66.00				
Female	152	34.00				
Age	446		39.48	13.00	18	75
Education						
Illiterate	28	6.31				
Literate	47	10.59				
Primary	47	10.59				
Secondary	77	17.34				
SSC Pass	52	11.71				
HSC Pass	75	16.89				
Bachelors	65	14.64				
Masters and above	53	11.94				
Monthly Family Income (BDT)	446		41875.75	378869.4	0	8000000
Monthly Family Expenditure (BDT)	446		35047.02	355030.4	0	7500000
Model Variables						
Vignette						
Less Powerful and Honest	223	50.00				
More Powerful and Corrupt	223	50.00				
Trust in the Public Manager						
Very High	72	16.14				
High	182	40.81				
Low	143	32.06				
Very Low	49	10.99				

questionnaire. We conducted two training sessions with the enumerators so that they understand the process and maintain the procedure for data credibility based on the participants' preferences and the local setting's culture. Additionally, the enumerators clearly explained to the participants that the vignette does not portray the local public manager. They told the participants that this is a hypothetical representation of a public manager they would need to consider in responding to the questions.

Although the participants were recruited right at the exit of the weekly market, most of them, *n* = 300 chose to sit at the nearby tea stall (a small shop that primarily sells tea and snacks in rural Bangladesh) to take the survey. A few participants, *n* = 36 preferred to sit in a quieter place outside the market area but near their houses. All the participants were asked if they wanted to leave their addresses and contact details for the survey to be administered at their homes. However, *n* = 110 respondents gave their business and house address as they asked the enumerators to survey them either at their business location or at the house. Notably, 76% of the respondents took the survey on the same day they were recruited at the weekly market area.

The two vignettes had equal responses from each Union Council under each administrative division to reduce weight bias. The enumerators used each questionnaire one after the other. It means that after finishing the

survey with a questionnaire that presented vignette X to the participant, the enumerators surveyed with the next participant with the questionnaire with vignette Y.

There were two different vignettes for the survey experiments. One vignette narrated the elected Chairman of the UP as a powerful but corrupt public manager who sometimes performed well in local development. This vignette included the statement, 'Evidence has been found that your Union Parishad Chairman has been involved in various unethical activities including corruption of BDT 50 lac in the last year' as the factor of corruption. The same vignette also included statements for 'legitimate power' and 'referent power'. For example, 'However, due to his regular communication and very good relationship with the public managers of the ruling party that benefited him in the implementation of several development projects'. Additionally, 'reward power' and the statement added 'coercive power' factors- 'Besides, he informally settled at least 20 disputes in the last year and provided cash financial assistance to many poor residents from his personal funds. Many who have taken help from him say that he has special relations with ruling political public managers at the Upazila, municipal, and national levels'. It is important to note that the referent power by political connection can act as coercive power in Bangladesh. Many people in a hierarchical culture like Bangladesh think the person connected with the central government can exercise coercion as needed (Lewis and Hossain 2022). Moreover, Guerrero, Anderson, and Afifi (2011) argue that different power bases can overlap in certain settings or socio-political environments. Likewise, the position of the UP chairman as an elected public manager expresses the factor of legitimate power, which can have a reciprocal relationship with referent power. In other words, a person with strong referent power could win the election and gain legitimate power. Similarly, a person who wins the election and gets to the legitimate position of the UP chairman can use the legitimacy to build a strong connection with the central government or party in power, which is the expression of referent power.

The other vignette presented the scenario to the respondents so that the public manager is honest and lacks power, as the performance in terms of local development is not that good. This vignette included statements like-

> Your Union Parishad Chairman has acted with due integrity during the past year. He has done all the work following the law. This is his/her third time in the office. However, he/she had to face many problems in the implementation of development projects due to his/her lack of regular communication and good relationship with the public managers of the ruling party. He/she never misused his power as an elected public representative to commit corruption and immorality and never helped anyone to get special benefits. He/she was never influenced by any Upazila, district, or central public manager of his own ruling political party in performing the duties of the Union Parishad.

> Regarding social and financial assistance to the local people, he/she prioritizes the law and does not provide much financial assistance from his own funds.

In both vignettes, we included the statement indicating the number of times the public manager got elected for office. The number of times indicates the factor of expertise as Powell and Powell (2000) argue that the same person is elected multiple times and would become an expert in managing office affairs. Overall, the two vignettes presented two contrasting scenarios regarding the local government public managership. The respondents have asked the question about the trustworthiness of the public manager. The question was- 'How much trust do you have that the Chairman of the Union Parishad will help you with any of your needs?' We used a four-point Likert scale with reverse ordering where the highest number corresponded to the lowest value (1=Very High, 2=High, 3=Low, 4=Very Low).

The survey's descriptive statistics (see Table 2) highlight that there were more male participants (66%). One reason for that could be the extended period the males stay outside of their homes in a patriarchal society in Bangladesh. Additionally, we can see that a very low percentage of the respondents were illiterate (6.31). It indicates a more improved education level in rural Bangladesh. The descriptive statistics show more than 50% of the respondents had either high or very high trust in the public manager. However, it does not indicate the causal influence of power and corruption on trust. The next section provides more details about the analysis and results of the study.

Analysis and results

To test the hypotheses, we conducted two-fold analyses. First, we performed a nonparametric Mann-Whitney test to find whether there was any difference between the two groups in terms of their trust in the public manager. Here two groups were the two independent sample groups who were given two different vignettes with varying degrees of factors like power and corruption. We had to perform the nonparametric test because the dependent variable, 'Trust in the public manager', was categorical. To perform ANOVA, we needed a continuous dependent variable (De Winter and Dodou 2010). After conducting the Mann-Whitney nonparametric U test, we found a significant (Z = −2.26) (p = 0.02) difference between the two groups regarding their perception of the public manager's trustworthiness. It means variation in 'power' and 'corruption' significantly varies trust in the public manager of the Union Council. We further estimated the effect size to determine how much the variation in power affects the variation in the level of the public manager's trustworthiness. We used the equation $r = Z/\sqrt{N}$ to estimate the effect size. After running the Mann-Whitney U Test, we found $r = 0.11$. It means 11% of

the variance in the perception of the public manager's trustworthiness was caused by the variation in the public manager's power and practice of corruption.

The question remains whether the corrupt but more powerful public manager is perceived as more trustworthy than the honest with lesser power. To test our second hypothesis, we ran an Ordered Logistic Regression (OLS) where the independent variable was the variable that identified the two independent sample groups. Next, we coded the honest but less powerful public manager's vignette story as '1', and the other story that portrayed a corrupt but powerful public manager was coded as '2'. In other words, in the OLS, our independent variable was categorical, whereas the outcome variable was the trust in the public manager with four ordered response categories. In our analysis, we expected that changing the vignette story from '1' to '2' would affect the trust in the public manager.

The regression analysis extracted a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.40$; $SE = 0.17$; $z = 2.27$; $p = 0.02$; CI $= 0.05$, 0.74) of the independent variable on the dependent variable. It means that a corrupt but powerful local government public manager would see a 0.41 unit decrease in their trustworthiness to the citizens. It is important to note that we coded the outcome variable' trust in the public manager' in reverse order. It means the highest response value corresponds to the lowest level of perceived trust. Therefore, the regression results signify that people do not trust corrupt but powerful local public managers more than honest but less powerful ones. In other words, our second hypothesis was not empirically proven. However, the findings that underline that people trust honest but less powerful public managers more than corrupt and powerful public managers have some crucial theoretical and empirical implications. Those implications need to be realised to better understand governance in a rural setting in a developing country like Bangladesh.

Discussion

The gap in the literature signified that we never had empirical evidence if the power of the incumbent has a vital place in the spheres of service delivery, corruption, and citizens' trust. This research makes novel contributions to the existing dialogue on citizens' trust in public managers from scholarly and practitioner perspectives. We present some important explanations of the results to delineate the theory and practitioner-oriented implications of the findings.

First, we want to highlight that previous research argues about citizens' blind trust in authority in the South Asian context (Jamil and Baniamin 2020; Baniamin, Jamil, and Askvik 2020; Askvik and Jamil 2013). The blind trust stems from the culture of upholding the status quo of power distance. In

other words, the high-power distance in South Asian culture somewhat makes the citizens trust the person in public office even though they often evaluate those incumbents' corrupt practices in public service delivery (Jamil and Baniamin 2020; Baniamin, Jamil, and Askvik 2020; Askvik and Jamil 2013). In other words, citizens tend to trust powerful but corrupt public managers in the high-power distance culture. This kind of tendency of trust indicates the submissive behaviour of the citizens (Peeters and Laguna 2021). Citizens often submit to the government and public organisations' dysfunctional policies and service provisions to avoid oppression and persecution by powerful incumbents (Peeters and Laguna 2021). In other words, the citizens would acknowledge the dysfunctions in the public services and policies but still may give the impression that they trust the incumbents. Interestingly, our findings contradict prior research that found that power distance influenced the citizens to trust public managers when the services do not meet the expected quality standards regarding corruption.

Our results suggest that citizens will not trust corrupt but powerful public managers. The result also indicates that the citizens in rural areas with a very high-power distance may not feel forced to submit themselves to the power of the incumbents. So, the culture of high-power distance and patriarchy would not have a greater influence than the ethical public service performance of a less powerful public manager. We believe the value of performance evaluation is still very high in relatively poor communities as the people would still prefer to have a less powerful but honest public manager running the office in a high power distance culture. We want to highlight that the experimental design gave us the opportunity to say that the citizens may tend to trust less powerful but honest public managers than more powerful but corrupt ones. However, the experimental design would not speak to the real-life scenario of rural Bangladesh, where poor and marginalised citizens do not have enough agency to raise their concerns about the election and political mechanisms, which frequently allow the powerful and corrupt public managers to run the union councils (Lewis and Hossain 2022).

It is important to note that rural people, mostly without enough agency to raise their voices against the authoritarian oppression of opposition, and absolute dominance of party in the national power, may only normatively trust less powerful but honest public managers. However, pragmatically, they are helpless to those powerful public managers who tend to use their money to buy votes from the poor and flex their muscles with the help of local goons to spread fear in the community to dismantle any opposition party politics (Lewis and Hossain 2022; Zafarullah 2015). It means, despite having the psychological tilt towards less power and honesty characteristics, the rural citizens have no choice but to elect the powerful and corrupt person as union council public manager. We argue that they sacrifice their normative preference because they need money and want to avoid antagonistic relationships

with the public manager, who can use their coercive power through the oppressive group of supporters and local political goons. Additionally, due to the linkage between national-level politics and local government elections, it has been observed that union council public managers linked with the party in national power bring more funds for local area development (Panday 2019; Zafarullah 2015). Thus, we also believe that, practically, citizens might have been sacrificing their normative preference for honest but less powerful public managers to see more money coming to the local area through the powerful and corrupt public managers.

Second, our findings have important implications for changing citizens' roles and possibilities of ensuring more participatory public management. Citizens' appraisal of less powerful local public managers' honesty and rule orientation to service delivery signifies possibilities of improvement in a country's local governance and management system that historically received criticism for corruption. Citizens' high level of awareness would help them avoid any prejudicial bias from age-old traditions in Bangladesh's rural society and politics. Rural citizens might have gained or nurtured the capacity to be essential stakeholders in local governance and management, which is desired by the NPM principles to improve service delivery as they normatively prefer less powerful and honest public managers.

Suppose, in a real-life situation, the less powerful local public managers know that the citizens appraise their honest and ethical style of service delivery. In that case, we think their performance would be better as public organisations often look to gain citizens' trust (Van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003). So, rural citizens, as suggested by our findings, with a normative preference for less powerful and honest public managers, indicates that they are not impoverished with the required awareness and understanding of the core values of public service. Thus, local government management in rural Bangladesh should utilise the citizens' normative understanding and let that flourish by removing obstacles like manipulated elections use of local goons that spread fear and deep-rooted poverty. Yang and Holzer (2006) argue that citizens' participation in public service performance measurement is vital in improving the service delivery system. Practitioners and scholars of public sector performance management would be happy to know that rural citizens in Bangladesh know the value of performance.

Third, we want to highlight some possible empirical factors behind our findings. The citizens who participated in this survey experiment had an opportunity to express their opinion as they hardly get regular opportunities to evaluate someone in public office in Bangladesh (Zafarullah 2015). Indeed, the participants in the survey experiment were not evaluating any real-life person. However, they were taking some critical clues from their cognitive standpoint to realise who is a less powerful but honest and more powerful

but corrupt service deliverer. Taking cognitive clues is a proven phenomenon in survey experiment methods that eventually strengthen the findings because the behavioural pattern identified through the analysis has realism in its structure (Blom-Hansen, Morton, and Serritzlew 2015). Hence, we think the participants considered the survey a platform to express their perceptions of an ideal local public manager's trustworthiness based on power and corruption. So, the normative value for the less powerful and honest public manager could be the expression of their frustration about the lack of opportunity where they cannot elect the ideal type of incumbent who has the same characteristics that the citizens normatively prefer.

Study limitations

An absence of qualitative data analysis could be taken into account as a limitation of the study. The survey experiment could not allow us to run the analysis with the data from real-life experiences and qualitative methods like Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII). FGD and KII also provide an additional in-depth understanding of the relationships between the key variables. However, vignette-based survey experiments provide essential clues from real-life experience when the participants respond to the items based on the vignettes (Blom-Hansen, Morton, and Serritzlew 2015).

Additionally, it was not within the scope of this research to analyse the in-depth data from FGD and/or KII. Instead, we intended to create a starting point in the scholarly discussion by exploring the relationship between concepts like power, corruption, and trust that hardly existed in a developing country's context. So, we suggest future research focus on conducting field or laboratory experiments and qualitative studies to build on our findings. A further limitation of the study resides in a single country case as we only focused on Bangladesh. Cross-cultural research on citizens' trust has found that cultural similarity may produce similar results (Jamil and Baniamin 2020; Baniamin, Jamil, and Askvik 2020; Askvik and Jamil 2013). Thus, lacking a generalised cross-cultural inference in this research helps us say that future studies can adopt a comparative lens to discuss variations in the influence of public managers' power on citizens' trust by culture.

Conclusion

This research aimed to find if powerful public managers' corrupt practices still extract a high level of citizens' trust in a society where power distance is very high. The results suggest that the citizens in a rural setting, where power distance is inevitably embedded in the culture, value the public managers' honest and ethical service delivery more

than merely submitting themselves to the powerful incumbent for some self-interests. Citizens prefer less powerful but honest public managers as they perceive them as trustworthy. Although we present the finding of no influence of cultural elements like power distance on citizens' trust in public managers, we think culture has multiple complex and interrelated components that require additional attention in scholarship and public service delivery practice.

Public service performance and management at the local level in a rural area of a country from the Global South need to realise that citizens could be sceptical about public service, as Van Den Bekerom, Van Der Voet, and Christensen (2021) suggest. However, it does not necessarily mean that scepticism would always come from cultural prejudice. Instead, this research echoes the school of thought that discusses public service performance by an incumbent that would influence citizens' predispositions to trust (Van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003). Despite being less powerful, public managers' honest and ethical public service delivery performance would help create citizens' cognitive framework, supplementing intergenerational, cultural, institutional, and experience of public service delivery performance-based predispositions (Dinesen 2013). Prior studies focusing on the Global North countries depicted the practice of ethical standards in public service to extract high-level citizens' trust (see Beesley and Hawkins 2022; Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2022; Xiao et al. 2020; Kim and Lee 2012). Our findings help us conclude that the desire for ethics in public service is a unanimous need across cultures that should be the priority of public managers regardless of their extent of societal power to gain a higher level of citizens' trust.

Notes

1. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936426/Bangladesh_Toponymic_Factfile_2020_final.pdf.
2. http://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/b343a8b4_956b_45ca_872f_4cf9b2f1a6e0/2022-07-28-14-31-b21f81d1c15171f1770c661020381666.pdf.

Disclosure statement

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