

Ward Shabha: A New Dimension for Boosting up Womens' Empowerment in Grass Root Levels

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Abstract

Women's absolute segregation from decision making process in any sphere of the society or the state has been a globally practised phenomenon and the picture of womens' detachment from exercising power has more or less been same everywhere around the world in general and the developing or the poorer countries in particular. Since the very formation of UNO, special importance was put to include women in all the development activities specially in the grass root levels and the actors of globalization and democracy, like World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), set it almost as the precondition to ensure women's participation in the development projects in the local levels for gaining financial benefits, and loan, and as such the countries worldwide, the developing countries like Bangladesh in particular keep a special look to strengthen the local government structure through ensuring active participation of women undertaking various pragmatic initiatives and 'Ward Shabha' (WS) has been the latest edition in the list that has been introduced through the 'Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, 2009, aiming to expand the local administration and development activities accessible towards the extremely grassroot mass and more specially to the marginalized people who have always been unfortunately deprived of getting access into the distribution and allocation of state resources. The key focus behind the introduction of 'Ward Shabha' thus is therefore to boost up the spirit of peoples' empowerment through decentralization and 'Ward Shabha' thus is expected to contribute significantly to reach the government services as near as possible to the doors of the people living in the remote areas keeping women's' better involvement in the process in mind.

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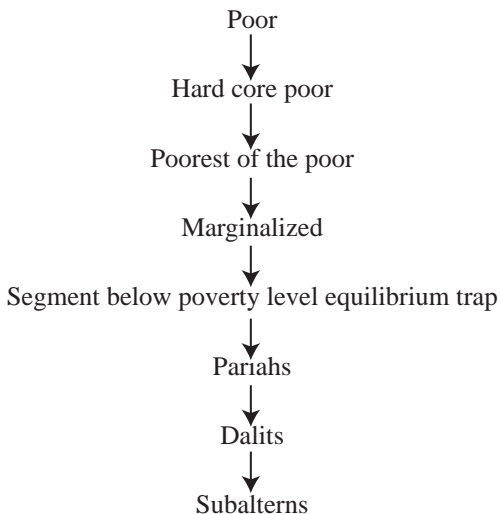
Background of the Study

In the recent past, it has widely been emphasized and also accepted in many cases that the matter which can make development faster, accountable, transparent and spread uniformly at the way through the country is none other than local governance (Khatun, 2013). The key principle is that men should be given the opportunity to think for himself, work for himself and even make mistakes for himself and it might be thought that this opportunity helps him to build self-awareness to see his own problems and to find his own ways and means to solve there, at the same time it helps in an analysis of the society and situation in which he lives and to define his own role in relation to them, and it is to be aimed to help individuals and groups to achieve these objectives (Jahangir, 2013). According to UN declaration, "the term local self-government refers to a political sub-division of a nation or a state which is constituted by law and which has substantial control of local affairs including the power to impose taxes or exact labour for prescribed purposes the governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected" (Siddiqui, ed. 1995). Decentralization is thus a shift from national to local, centre to periphery, international to indigenous, global to glocal (Choudhury, 2017). Decentralization makes functional relation of centre with periphery or local tier as intergovernmental partnership coequals, (Rhodes, 1981). It is also said that these two are interdependent government organizations (Rhodes, 1986). And the proposals mentioned in the 'Ward Shabha' through strengthening the process of decentralization have, nevertheless widened development process including for both men and women.

A 'Ward Shabha' could be an ideal avenue of ensuring good governance in the lowest level of the public administration, there is a rising concern about the effectiveness of the platform as evident in numbers of recent studies (Blair, 2012, Democracy Watch, 2014). The main duty of the 'Ward Shabha' is to review all the development activities in the ward and it is possible to inform people about the actual scenario including the government allocation to the UPs through 'Ward Shabha' (Ahmed *et al.*, 2014).

The main focus of 'Ward Shabha' thus is to make the local people connected with the initiatives undertaken for them who are used to remain into darkness about the facilities they legally possess from the society and the government and the relevancy of 'Ward Shabha' is thus more significant

from women's point of view as they are always the most ignorantly marginalized class of the society. And thus the shed of light through 'Ward Shabha' is to concentrate on them who are:



(Source: Hasanuzzaman Choudhury, 2017)

Evolution of Local Government and Women's Poor Representation

Local government is the oldest form of government and it has been practised either in urban or rural areas in one form or in other in the sub-continental regions. In the modern time, however, local government began to flourish during the British regime with the promulgation of number of acts began with the "Village Chowkidari Act, 1870" (Elliot, 1966). Notwithstanding that, Lord Ripon's resolution declared on 18 May, 1882 (Rahman, 2000). laid the foundation of the local government in the rural areas in British India and based on Ripon's Resolution "The Bengal Self Local Act" was passed in 1885 (Elliot, 1966), and the resolution had three tiers-District Board, local Board and Union Committee. Since then Union body has an active functioning tier of local government throughout the Indian subcontinent including Bangladesh.

The history of UP is through much older but it always lacks the active representation of women in the administrative body. To uplift the condition the government of Bangladesh has introduced several reforms in

government mainly local government system to foster peoples' participation to ensure good governance (Sarker 2006). After independence various initiatives have been undertaken to promote Local Governance in Bangladesh as mentioned in the constitutions of Bangladesh regarding women's participation in Local Government. As article 28(2) of the constitution states that women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life. To bring into reality the constitutional requirements, several local government laws were passed. Including among Union Parishad (Ordinance No. LI of 1983) provided for three women member in the Parishad. The Local Government (Union Parishad) (Amendment) Act, 1993 has reserve three seats for women members. But the overall performance of women's participation was extremely marginal. The following two figures will reveal it.

Table 1: Scenario of women representation in Union Parishad

Election Year	Number of UP	Women Candidate	Elected women Chairman
1973	4352	-	1
1977	4352	-	4
1984	4400	-	4+2=6
1988	4401	79	1(1%) About
1992 1993	4450	115	13+11=24

Source: Election Commission Report 2003

And the situation demanded more pragmatic steps to strengthen the Local Government with more participatory for women and Local Government (UP) Act 1997 was a significant inclusion for boosting up women's participation in UP where direct elections for women was included and advancement to some extent could be detected as revealed in table 2 as followed.

Table 2: Scenario of women's participation in general and reserved seats in 1997, and 2003 in UP.

Post	1997 Election			2003 Election		
	Candidate	Winner	Winning Percentage	Candidate	Winner	Winning Percentage
General Member	456	110	24.12	617	85	13.78
Reserved seats	44969	12828	28.5	39419	12669	32.1

Source: Election Commission Report 2003

And with this continuous efforts to strengthen the Local Government, the provision of WS has been introduced at the Union Parishad Level through the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009, where special emphasis was given to ensure greater participation of women in the grass root levels. Prepared based both on primary (direct observation) and secondary data (books, journals, articles, websites) this article is divided into three sections. The first section includes the objectives of Ward Shabha, as mentioned in Local Government (UP) Act, 2009, and the second section is the deliberation of relatively an ideal WS where women have considerable access to participate. And the third section of the paper will make an effort to sum up about the effectiveness of WS to encourage women to be more participatory followed by some recommendations based on our observation of a WS with which we have prepared our study.

Ward Shabha: A New Dimension of UP

The emergence of Ward Shabha in the Local Government Structure has been the initial outcome of the Ward Development Committee under the "Local Governance Support Project Learning and Innovation Component" (LGSP-LTC). During the care taker government under Fakruddin Ahmed, the local Government Committee was formed and the committee chaired by AMM Sawkat Ali recommended the Ward Shabha to be formed in each of the nine Ward of the UP and prepared a draft act for UP which got approved, and the then care taker government promulgated a UP law in the form of ordnance where 'Ward Shabha' was included. The later elected government led by Sheikh Hasina did not ratify the ordinance and passed the act known as Local Government (UP) Act 2009 where Ward Shabha got an elaborate structural frame work and succeeds to gain significant public

attention as a new body of expanding the local government in a more comprehensive way.

Objectives of Ward Shabha

In the section 2 of the Local Government (UP) Act, 2009 the details of the Ward Shabha including its formation structure, activities power, duties and responsibilities are mentioned which are as followed.

A Ward Shabha shall consist of the persons, registered on the voter list of the respective ward. Open meeting at ward-level.

Open meeting at ward level

- (1) Each of the Ward Shabha in a UP shall organize, within its jurisdiction, at least 2 (two) ward meetings in a year, one of which shall be called the annual meeting.
- (2) The ward meeting quorum shall be constituted by the presence of one twentieth (5%) of the total voters of the respective ward; but no quorum is needed for the adjourned meeting which shall be organized at same time and same place after seven days.
- (3) The Union Parishad shall circulate a public notice properly, in an easily understood and accessible way, at least seven days before the date of the proposed ward meeting; a similar public notice shall also be issued in the case of adjourned ward meetings.
- (4) The UP Chairman shall confirm about organize ward Shabha meetings and the respective ward members shall preside over and conduct the meetings.
- (5) The female member of the reserved seat of the respective ward shall be the adviser of the ward Shabha.
- (6) In the ward meeting and local issues, including overall development activities, shall be reviewed; in the annual ward meeting, the respective ward member shall submit the annual report of the previous year and inform participants about all the ongoing development activities of the ward including financial affairs. The respective ward member and the Union Parishad Chairman shall justify the reasons, if any adopted decision has not been implemented.

Authority and Activities of Ward Shabhas

- 1) The Ward Shabha shall have the following authority, activities, and rights according to the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009 and procedures specified under the rules:

- (a) Facilitate in the collection and circulation of information needed for the purpose of preparing the Union Parishad's development plans. These plans may be for five years and/or annual.
- (b) Prepare and transfer final lists of beneficiaries under government schemes based on specific indicators.
- (c) Preparation of the final prioritization lists of beneficiaries of various government programs (e.g.VGD, VGF, Old Age Program, Widow Allowance Program, etc.) on the basis of specified indicators. Finalized lists should be handed over to the Union Parishad and the lists have to be prepared based on consultations in the WS meeting.
- (d) Providing all necessary support at the local level for effective implementation of development programs.
- (e) Encourage local communities and assist them in the implementation of voluntary labor-based local development and service-oriented programs.
- (f) Advise the UP in order to select project locations or area for street lighting, safe drinking water facilities and other public health units, irrigation facilities, and other welfare programs.
- (g) Develop public awareness with regard to: cleanliness and hygiene, environment conservation, tree plantation, environmental protection and other social misdeeds. Including corruption, social harmony and good relationships among people of a different caste and/or profession, building organizations and organizing various sports and cultural functions;
- (h) Encourage, supervise and assist the beneficiary class or group, and those associated with various development programs in the ward;
- (i) Review the list of persons, who are included in various welfare programs of the government (i.e. widow allowance, maternity allowance etc.);
- (j) Preservation of various information regarding estimates of schemes to be implemented in different areas of the ward;
- (k) Provide detailed information about schemes and services under implementation;
- (l) Get informed about the justification for decisions taken by the Union Parishad regarding the ward;
- (m) Over seeing the progress of schemes taken in the WS and seeking reasons why decisions are not translated into actions;

- (n) Being involved in social awareness building activities such as health, sanitation, dowry, child marriage prevention, drug addiction etc.
 - (o) Identify shortcomings in services related to the supply of safe water, street lighting and other services in different areas of the ward and take necessary corrective measures;
 - (p) Facilitate parent-teacher relationships in various educational institutions of the ward;
 - (r) Enliven birth and death registration programs;
 - (s) Provide necessary assistance in self-employment and other economic activities;
 - (t) Execute other responsibilities as requested by the Government or the Union Parishad.
- 2) The Ward Shabha shall review various reports obtained in its general and special meetings. It will keep the public informed about various development budgets, work plans, item wise allocations of funds, estimates for preparation, expenditure for purchasing material for the work already implemented and for ongoing work, etc.
 - 3) Presentation and discussion of the audit report shall take place in the ward meeting and feedback provided to the Union Parishad for consideration.
 - 4) The Union Parishad secretary shall remain present in the ward meeting and prepare the resolution, take notes of the decisions taken, and present implementation progress in the next Union Parishad and ward meeting.
 - 5) The Ward Shabha may form one or more sub-committees for performing any general or special tasks; however, the number of sub-committee members shall not exceed 10 (ten), including 3 (three) must be women.
 - 6) Ward meeting decisions shall be taken based on the majority; however, whenever possible, decisions should be taken on the basis of a general consensus and with full participation of the female attendance.
 - 7) The Ward Shabha shall request application through notification from the beneficiaries and present the application received in the ward

meeting for scrutiny after proper investigation; after the scrutiny in the meeting, the final prioritization list of the beneficiaries shall be prepared based on the specified indicators and that shall be submitted to Union Parishad for approval.

8) It should be noted that, the Union Parishad may not be allowed to change the prioritization list prepared and submitted by the Ward Shabha unless any irregularity is proved.

Responsibility of Ward Shabhas

(1) The Ward Shabha shall fulfill the following responsibilities:-

- 1 Provide information about development and welfare programs of the ward;
- 1 Participate activities related to the following: agriculture, fisheries, poultry and cattle farming, health and family planning, education, public health, communications, youth development, etc.;
- 1 Collect necessary socio-economic data including birth and death registration;
- 1 Participate in tree plantation & environmental improvement and the maintenance of a hygienic and clean environment
- 1 Create public awareness about social crimes, including women & child oppression, women & child trafficking, dowry, child marriage, acid throwing and corruption;
- 1 Maintain law & order and social harmony;
- 1 Encourage people to pay back various loans, as well as paying taxes, fees, rates, etc.;
- 1 Assist the Union Parishad in revenue collection through the mobilization and development of local resources;
- 1 Assist in the implementation of development and other social development programs involving voluntary labor. Also assist in the formation of local organizations;
- 1 Identify necessary measures on an emergency basis in the event of epidemics and natural disasters.

The Ward member should submit reports to the Union Parishad about the activities and responsibilities of Ward Shabha.

The Ward Shabha apart from its regular meetings may request the Union Parishad to call special meetings if need be Any expenditure without getting

the approved by the Ward Meeting will be treated as personal liabilities (The Local Government Act, 2009).

Study Findings

This section of the paper illustrates the key findings that have come out from our analysis of the WS activities and the attempts to have an informative deliberation of those findings.

Analysis

The Ward Shabha meeting was held on 22 July, 2018 at Shohagpur village mostly known as Bidhobapalli where the park army in assistance with Md. Kamruzzaman, the chief organizer of Al-Badar in greater Mymensingh killed had at least 164 member on 25 July, 1971 one by one and not a single male person was alive in that village (The Daily Star, 2015: 01). It was under ward 9 of 6 No, Kakorkandi Union, Nalitabari Upazilla in Sherpur district. Started at the yard of a local participant named Sohel Rana, the meeting was presided over by the ward member Amir Hossain. The chairman of UP, Shahidullah Talukdar Mukul was the chief guest in the meeting. The meeting began with an enthusiastic mood with the participations of significant number participants specially women as among 105 participants 45 were women. The meeting was conducted by the ward member Amir Hossain and Union Secretary Abdur Barek took all the necessary notes of the meetings that would be kept recorded as UP official documents.

Initially, the UP chairman taking the concern of the meeting president Amir Hossain, delivered an introductory speech regarding the various development activities in the WS and then informed the participants about the meeting agenda that was the analysis of the project planning of the fiscal year of 2018-2019 under LGSP, sponsored by WB and asked people to express their consent on the issues that should be included as priority base in planning. Most participants focused on increasing allocations in educational sector and take more inspiring initiatives to send children to schools particularly to girls including increasing sports facilities, arranging cultural programs and providing tiffin box to the students, enhancing infrastructural development including among, study related furniture's like chair, table, bench, board, etc.

Suklanabal, the advisor of ward no 9 showed her satisfaction for providing the maternity-allowance of 800 take per month for nearly two years but again appealed to the UP Chairman to include more women in the list and increase the amount of money. The UP chairman, in reply assured the participants to try utmost to increase allocation in conversation with the higher authorities. Again, in question of the UP chairman in the meeting regarding the development of communication, most participants expressed their high satisfaction remarking that the infrastructural development over the last 5 years have been outstanding and they can now reach to the Upazilla Sadar with in 15 minutes and all sorts of vehicles are transportable on the roads of the WS.

In terms of the necessary initiatives to be taken immediately, most of the participants mainly women participants spoke about the dire need of a secondary high school for girls in the Union. As there is though a college in that Union but, girls have to undergo difficulties in different degrees for the want of a separate girls school for them. The UP chairman in reply expressed his strong vigor and eagerness to take the necessary steps to establish a girls school there and tried to talk with the honorable minister of agriculture, Begum Motia Chowdhury who is the MP of the Constituency and Upazilla Chairman about that and asked everyone to appeal untidily to the Minister as there has been a possibility of her visit of the Union in the next month and asked the ward member to form a committee who would work to raise public consensus about the establishment of a girls college.

Regarding the distribution of widow allowance all of the beneficiaries expressed their satisfaction to get their desired allocation but some of them asked the UP chairman to increase the amount of their aid. The UP Chairman in reply explained the cause of scarcity of allocation for them from the centre but assured to talk with the higher authorities including Upazilla Chairman, and the honorable Minister to allot increasing amount of resources for them. Again about 10 to 15 women showed their depression for not being included in the beneficiary list of widow allowance and the UP chairman asked the UP secretary to file their name in the record and take the necessary measures to include their name in the update about it in the next Ward Shabha meeting. Apart from that, the selection process of the beneficiaries of VGD, VGF, old age allowance were also discussed in the WS meeting.

The UP chairman then asked the two advisors Suresha Devi and Tamal Akter and the elderly Person of the area Jalaluddin, to express their views on the overall perspectives of the ward and by hearing their comments, the chairman told the UP secretary to take notes of the following issues.

- n Increase sanitation facilities in schools with special emphasis on girls students.
- n Arrange pure drinking water for both students and common people.
- n Increase more facilities and ensure the presence of doctors, nurses in the community clinic.
- n Raising awareness among people to come out from the practice of child marriage, committing violence against women and controlling population
- n Settle disputes in the village courts.
- n Adopting more empirical measure to generate employment.
- n Taking strict measures against those who carry drug and raise more awareness among young people to avoid drug;
- n And arranging cultural activities and promoting the talented boys and girls in the higher levels.

Face to face interviews

To have a better conceptualization of women's real participation, in the WS meeting a face to face interview was conducted through a semi-structured questionnaire and the participants in the interview were UP chairman, UP Secretary, WS advisor on female seat, WS member and two female members. The interview was conducted at the house of WS member Amir Hossain, on the same date day at 6.p.m and the exposed matters in the interview are as followed:

Meeting Topic

To answer the question what was the main agenda of today's meeting? The UP chairman said, various issued were discussed but the main topic was the project planning under LGSP, sponsored by the WB.

Meeting Participation

In answer to the question, "Was the participation of female members satisfactory?" Sukunabal the female advisor of the ward responded with satisfaction adding that. "The ratio of participants of male and female was 60:45 which was of course satisfactory in terms of our country."

Importance of Women

To answer the question, "Does the meeting take women's view into well consideration,?" Tarul Akter advisor of reserve seat responded with satisfaction and Suresha Devi, another advisor of reserve seat added that women usually feel comfortable to attend the meeting and share their views and the village court contribute significantly to settle disputes specially the traditional crisis women face in domestic life.

Audit Report

Regarding the question about whether regular audit has been done or not. The up chairman replied positively and asked the UP Secretary Abdul Barek to tell about the date of the last audit, "It was conducted on May, 2018 by a CA firm under WB." said the UP Secretary.

Main problem for women

To answer the question, "What is the main difficulty of girls in the ward?" the Ward member said, "We need a separate school for girls," Joining the ward member, UP chairman said that they preferred to establish a college and established Boruazani Shaheed Muktizoddha College. Girls are now getting higher education with boys in co-education schools but they hope to establish a girls school in the near future.

Allocations for the widow in Bidhoba Palli

And lastly in answer to the question of the unfortunate widow "How do you serve the widow of Bidhoba Palli"?. the UP chairman said, "Almost all of them are included into the widow allowance list." "They also get benefits from different projects and special houses with necessary facilities have been built for each of the widow of the "Bidhoba Palli," the chairman added. Fatema Begum one of the beneficiaries of the Bidhoba Polli added that they are getting monthly 2000 taka from Trust Bank under Muktijoddha Ministry and 500 taka from BRAC, an NGO under the UP supervision.

Evaluation of the WS meeting on A Large Scale

The functioning of the ward shabha and all other performances related to them during the last five years (2011-2016) were not very encouraging (Ahmed, 2016). While analysing the root causes of the implementation of WS concept, Tofael Ahemd states that in some of the meeting women participate in relatively large number due to encouragement from non-government organizations (NGO) with special projects at grass root level in

different areas of the country. In non-project areas without NGO support meetings are not normally held (Ibid, 2016: 165). Again, regarding women's depressed participation in local government structure Shantanu Majumdar States , "poor and destitute women's find no scope for them to participate (Majumdar, 2015: 214).

There is however no denying of the fact, that peoples' overall participation in WS are still absolutely depressing let alone women. But after having a participation in the WS meeting directly and getting the views of the interviews, we come to develop some significant matters lied inherent for making the WS concept more fruitful and beneficial for the rural community, specially for women which can be inspiring for the WS around the country.

Firstly the role of UP chairman has extremely been crucial as far as the aims and objectives of the WS are concerned. The rural women who are usually conservative and do not like to come out in public gatherings can be inspired more to join WS meeting to express their views whenever they feel comfortable with the atmosphere and find themselves evaluated.

Secondly, the success of WS relies mostly on the spontaneous participation of the rural people who are somehow beneficiaries of the meeting and if, women can express their views freely and deliberately and if they are being rightly included in the distributions and allocations of state resources in various schemes like VGD, VGF, old age allowance, widow allowance etc, they use to join the WS activities on their own accord.

Thirdly, getting access to participate in the WS activities rural women avail the opportunities of village court and beg justice for the violence and discrimination committed towards them which ultimately contribute to boost up their self confidence and overall it causes a positive impact to uplift women's status in the society.

The study thus encourages us on the bright possibilities of establishing WS as a very effective local body for ensuring people's active participation in the development activities and of course influencing the authorities to be more accountable and perform their task with integrity and transparency as the practice of being authoritarian gets more easier whenever the rulers succeed to make people excluded from the decision making process. And thus, if, these democratic practices of the WS that we have come across

from our understanding of Ward Shabha meeting in Kakarkandi Union, Ward No. 9 can be properly practised and implemented, WS is expected to be a new hope of enhancing women's participation in local governance around the country.

Conclusion

To sum up over the last few decades the actors of development led by WB and IMF have almost successfully proved that the power of authority has to be decentralized and more pragmatic initiatives have been obligatory to include the local people into the local development activities as the local needs, problems, and the expected solutions are felt and understood better by the local people than by the central government and emphasis to a high extent has been given to get women integrated in all forms of activities in the grass roots levels. Decentralization has thus become a conjunctive process with so many categories of both normative and empirical atmosphere and environmental reality with concurrent operation of cognition and cognizance that keeps social contour of both geography and demography in consummate consonance making governance process possible (Chowdhury, 2017: 22). The major issue that the development thinker now emphasize much is people's access to participate in the social system as the United Nation Office of the High Commissioner for Human Right (OHCHR) states, "socially and politically excluded people are more likely to become poor and the poor are political mobilization" (OITCHR, 2002).

The focus is thus to involve people as largely as possible to uplift peoples real state in general and women's empowerment in particular and WS is no doubt, a new dimension through which people living in the grass root levels can be encouraged as the active participatories in all forms of development and different donor institutions like International Development Agency (IDA) of WB put it a precondition to strengthen local government for any kind of foreign aid.

Above all, the WS has now therefore been the demand of time and it has obviously had a vast scope to enhance women's participation and to make it a successful and effective one, scholars and related institution have provided various recommendations.

However, as far as the specific needs for women are concerned the following recommendations should be prioritized to see women more participatory in the WS:

- | Encouraging women to participate more in the local govt. elections.
- | Focusing on resource mobilization at the local level to decrease UP's dependence on the centre.
- | Increasing the number of women participants in the rural village court to ensure proper justice for women.
- | Allow women to speak freely and their views have to be prioritized in the decision making process.
- | Keep it free from parochial political considerations and ensure easy access to all classes of people as we come to find in our study of the WS in "Bidhobapoli".
- | And above all the outlook of people towards women have to be developed and to boost up confidence that women are capable of doing any task.
- | Ending Notes:
- | VGD = Vulnerable Group Development
- | VGF = Vulnerable Group Feeding.

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