



Review Article

Local Government in Bangladesh: Women's Participation and Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Local government is the representation of the people in the periphery of any country. It is a self-governing system of locality. There are two types of local government- urban local government and rural local government. 'Women' is a mostly concentrated issue in wider governance arena in current Bangladesh where local government is not the exception. Despite comprising more than 50 percent of the total population, women's are deprived of political leadership opportunities and resources at all levels of the government. Women's equal participation in governance is not only a matter of participation or democracy but also it is very natural that women's interests to be taken into account as a strong stakeholder. Constitutional safeguard of Bangladesh can be seen as a milestone to ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in political power structure even at the local level to ensuring participation, strengthening the local government as well as for the sustainable development of Bangladesh. No doubt, as a step forward, the elected reserve seats for women help to promote participation and women access to the decision-making process, though not practically much ensured, and eventually promote women empowerment. The paper is basically based on the review of secondary materials. The study findings suggest that, After the two decades of such an exemplary footstep, the real scenario is not so pleasing. Due to social, political and cultural barriers, elected women members in local government institutions cannot play their effective role. This study seeks to critically evaluate the extent of women's political participation and empowerment in the local level institution like Union Parishad in Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

Local government is political sub-division which is locally ruled by local representatives elected or selected by the local people. It is a tool to empowering the local people to participate in the broader decision-making arena which sheds the light of opportunities on their daily lives in many ways. Participatory local government is one of the most significant mechanisms for ensuring good governance and strengthening local government body. The local representatives of a local body based on democratic ideas can promote the greater socio-economic emancipation of the people of the country that largely depends upon the maximum utilization of her people, both men, and women for its overall development (Khan, 2014). Though women constitute half of the total population of Bangladesh, their participation in both electoral and representation in politics is insignificant (Siddiqui and Kamal, 1995). Without the active

participation of women and the incorporation of women's standpoint at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development, and peace cannot be achieved (Khan et al., 2006; FWCW, 1995). There are several reasons why women are unwelcomed and facing grave problems in the advancement to their political and social empowerment. Gender division of labor, restrictions on mobility, lack of knowledge about local government functions, male resistance, gendered nature of local level politics; all have limited women's effective representation and participation (Nazneen and Tasneem, 2008). The constitution has given the right and opportunity for women to participate at the local level to the national level of government with reserved seat, but the fact is quite different. The elected female candidate's participation at the local level is not satisfactory despite the existence of reserved seats and a vibrant feminist movement (Jahan 1995). It is evident in the community that the political and

administrative structure, culture and norms are gender biased (Nazneen and Sultan, 2009). In the context of the present study, the Union Parishad, as the lowest tier of rural local government and one of the oldest local government forms in Bangladesh, has been chosen to examine the participation and empowerment of women in local government institutions. More specifically, this study is conducted to identify the extent of trends of women's participation and empowerment and critically analyze the reasons of women's lower participation in local level decision making and governance.

Methodology

This study is mainly based on the review of information collected from secondary sources. The data were collected by the way of consulting various documents such as gazette notification, annual reports, booklets, articles, books and journals, and newspapers. Some information is also collected from the sources on the internet.

Operational Definition

Women

Oxford Dictionary defines the woman as an adult human female. Women are half of the total population of the world and a strong stakeholder of the society. Apart from the domestic activities, they are contributing substantially to the national economy. The government has already prepared a National Policy for the Advancement of Women and made some noteworthy progress in implementing the National Action Plan, prepared in response to the Beijing platform for action (Mahtab, 2003). In spite of these achievements, the majority of women in Bangladesh have not been empowered to participate actively in the social, cultural, economic and political life of the country yet. Gender discrimination is widespread in all spheres and at all levels, although, the Constitution of Bangladesh (Article 27, 28/1, 28/2, 28/3 and 65/3) guarantees equal rights to all citizens clearly incorporated provisions for equal status of women (Khan and Ara, 2006). According to Article 9, the State shall encourage local government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such

institutions, special representation shall be given, as far as possible, to peasants, workers, and women. Article 10 Steps shall be taken to ensure the participation of women in all spheres of national life. Article 28 (1): The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. (2): Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life.

Participation

Participation means the engagement of citizens in the governance process. It's an effective instrument for people to participate in decisions making process and inclusive governance. Participation is also a development approach, which recognizes the need to involve disadvantaged segments of the population in the design and implementation of policies concerning their wellbeing. At present, the strengthening of women's participation in all spheres of life has become a major issue in the development discourse. Socio-economic development cannot be fully achieved without the active participation of women at the decision making level in society. Various scholars define 'Participation' in various ways.

Norman Uphoff (Khan, 1993) identified four main kinds of participation, which are distinct but interrelated. They are as follows:

- a. Participation in decision making in identifying problems, formulating alternative planning activities, allocating resources etc;
- b. Participation in implementation in carrying out activities, managing and operating programs;
- c. Participation in economic, social, political or other benefits individually or collectively; and
- d. Participation in the evaluation of the activity and its outcomes for feedback purposes.

According to Mishra (1984), "participation means collective and continuous efforts by the people themselves in setting goals, pooling resources together and taking actions which aim at improving their living conditions". Rahman (1991) has stated that all forms of actions through which citizens take part in the operation of administration may be termed as 'participation'. Here, 'taking

part' refers to any level from macro to the micro region or it may be of any type e.g. advisory or in decision-making or in implementation etc.

According to the Human Development Report (1993), "participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political process that affects their lives. Participation has both a narrow and wider connotation. In a narrow sense, participation means some specific action by which the citizen participates for a limited purpose. And in a wider sense participation refers to the role of members of the general public as distinguished from that of appointed officials, including civil servants, in influencing the activities of government or in providing direction for community needs (Rahman, 1991).

Empowerment

The term empowerment refers to actions designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-government in people and in societies in order to enable them to represent their welfares in a responsible and self-determined way, acting on their own authority. It is the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights. Empowerment as process refers to the process of self-empowerment and self-ruled less influence. Empowerment is a process of self-empowerment and self-ruled, less influence through the result of the process may also be termed 'empowerment'. But more specifically, the outcome of empowerment should manifest itself as a redistribution of power between individuals, genders, groups, classes, castes, races, ethnic groups or nations. Empowerment means the transformation of structures of subordination, through radical changes in law, property rights, control over women's labor and bodies, and the institutions that reinforce and perpetuate male domination (Batliwala, 1993).

The Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit on Social Development (WSSD) called for the recognition that empowering people, particularly women, to strengthen their own capacities is a main objective of development, and that empowerment requires the full participation of

people in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and well-being of societies. The Report of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women called its Platform for Action 'an agenda for women's empowerment' meaning that 'the principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities' (Oxaal and Baden, 1997).

Vanessa Griffin (1987) identifies, some components to illustrate what the term empowerment indicates: a. Having control or gaining further control; b. Having a say and being listened to; c. Being able to define and create from women's perspective; d. Being able to influence social choices and decision affecting the whole society; e. Being recognized and respected as equal citizens in human beings with a contribution to make. Finally, empowerment means a process to establish control over resources and also means to obtain ability and opportunity to participate in the decision-making process and its implementation.

Women's empowerment

According to Hossain (2015) "Gender Equality" and "Women's Empowerment" have been two of the most pervasive themes in development. The term refers to the improvement of women conditions in every sphere of life. However, it indicates overall development of drawback classes of society to bring them in an advanced situation, almost at the same level (Khan and Ara, 2006) to make women capable to organize themselves for enhancing their self-reliance, affirming their self-determining right for comprising choices and charging resources and these capabilities will help to take challenge and to break their own subordination position in the society (Keller and Mbwewe, 1991). According to Caroline Moser "The capacity of women to increase their own self-reliance and internal strength. This identified as the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change, through the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material and non-material resources." Sen and Grown said, "Women's empowerment is the

transformation of structures of subordination, including changes in law, civil codes, property, inheritance rights, control over women's bodies and labor and the social legal institutions that endorse male's control."

Local Government

Local government is an autonomous elected local body at the local level that deal with community issues. By definition, local government means an intra-sovereign governmental until within the sovereign state dealing mainly with local affairs, administered by local authorities and subordinate to the state government (Jahan and Momtaz, 1997). According to the article 59(1) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "Local Government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with law" (GOB, 1993). Regarding local government, it is widely known as local self-government in most South Asian countries (Siddique, 1994; Panday, 2005).

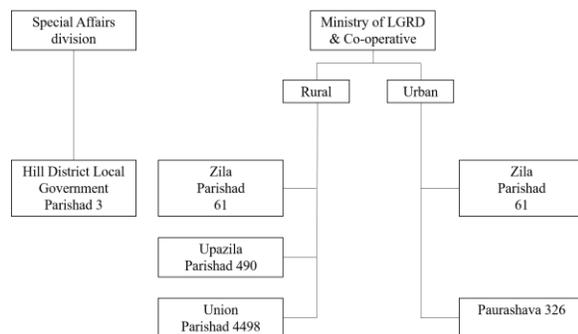


Figure 1
Structure of Local Government. (Siddiqui and Ahmed, 2016)

The UN (1962) defines it as an elected or locally selected political sub-division of a nation or state. It is constituted by law, and it has substantial control over local affairs. It has also the power to impose taxes or to exact labor for prescribed purposes. In political terms, it is concerned with the governance of a specific local area, constituting a political subdivision of a nation,

state or other major political units. In the performance of its functions, it acts as the agent of the state. In other words, the local government is an integral part of the political mechanism for governance in a country. Then, a body corporate with a juristic person, it represents a legal concept (Muttalib and Khan, 1983). Present local government structure of Bangladesh is shown in Figure 1.

Union Parishad

Union Parishad is the oldest and lowest tier of rural local government in Bangladesh. According to Local Governance Ordinance, 1983, 'union' means 'a rural area' declared to be a union under section 3 (GOB, 1990). It has been functioning for more than hundred years in various name and forms. Union Parishads are run by the local representatives where the voters of the Union Parishad directly elect them. Union Parishad is mainly responsible for economic, social and community development at the local level. It is also responsible for the implementation of development structures in the field of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, education, health, irrigation and flood protection, family planning, protection and maintenance of infrastructure, motivating people to use latrines, the registration of births, marriages, deaths and so on.

After the liberation war in 1973, the name of Union Panchayet changed to Union Parishad without any noteworthy changes in its structure and function since then the Union Parishad is acting as the lowest administrative unit of rural local government in Bangladesh without any major changes in every successive regime. According to local government (Union Parishad) act, 2009, a union is divided into nine wards. Each UP consists of a chairman and nine members in the general seats- one from each ward. In addition, three seats have been exclusively reserved for women members who are elected by the voters of the concerns three wards (Siddiqui and Ahmed, 2016). Present Union Parishad Organogram is shown in Figure 2.

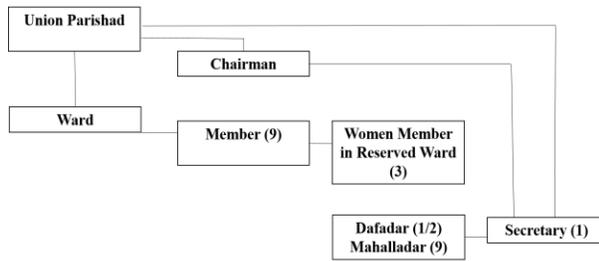


Figure 2
Organogram of a Union Parishad. *Sources:* (Siddiqui and Ahmed, 2016)

Evolution of local government in Bangladesh

The local Government system is a century-old practice in Bangladesh (Amin, 1989). Local government was the basic form of government in the sub-continent till 6th century B.C. and management of local affairs by the locally elected persons (Kudrat-E-ElahiPanir vs. Bangladesh 44DLR: AD: 1992). In the sub-continent village, self-government is as old as the villages themselves (Siddiqui, 1994). Bangladesh was a colony of the British for about two hundred years and this long history gave the form of local government named Local self-governing Panchayet's (a body serving in an administrative capacity) at village level was set up in 1870 to establish their administrative control at the lowest levels (Khan et al., 2003). Chowkidari Panchayet consisted of five persons all nominated by the District Magistrate through Chowkidari Act of 1870, which established subsequently the Local Self-government Act, 1885 and the Village Self-government Act, 1919 are some principal instruments that led to the development of the present local government in Bangladesh.

In the Pakistan period, the Act of 1959 introduced a new local government system called the 'Basic Democracy' System in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) which was a four-tier system that was the clear resemblance of two layers, the union councils and municipal committees of the British days (Khan and Rahman, 1997). The local government at the union level not only had changed its name several times but also its functional jurisdiction and financial powers were widened during the British and Pakistan period (Ahmed et al., 2001). In late 1972, the constitution

of independent Bangladesh was adopted, wherein Article 59 provided for elected local government institutions at all levels (Ali, 1986).

At present, there are two types of local government institutions in Bangladesh: one for rural areas and the other for urban areas. The local government in rural areas comprises three tiers, i.e., Union Parishad, Upazila (Thana) Parishad, and Zilla (District) Parishad. On the other hand, local government in the urban areas comprises of two tiers, i. e, Pourashava (for smaller Municipalities) and City Corporation (for the largest cities). Unfortunately, we have seen only Union Parishad are active whatever its form since Bangladesh was created. The second tier Upazila started second time with an interval of 18 years as late as 2009. The Zila Parishad (ZP) has recently revitalized in its democratic form after liberation.

Legal policy for women's participation in local government

Related articles of the constitution regarding women's participation may be seen in the following sentences. In a democracy, the Constitution ensures legal recognition of local government through Parliament Acts incorporating relevant provisions (Khan, 1997). In this respect, the legal basis and responsibilities of local government in Bangladesh are incorporated in the first Constitution of Bangladesh. Irrespective of gender, creed, caste, religion, and race the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh recognizes basic and fundamental rights of the citizens that makes provision for promoting causes of the backward sections of the population (Ahmed et al., 2003).

Women related articles in the constitution

Article 9: The State shall encourage local government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions, special representation shall be given, as far as possible, to peasants, workers, and women.

Article 10: Steps shall be taken to ensure the participation of women in all spheres of national life.

Article 19 (1): The State shall endeavor to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens.

Article 27: All citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of the law.

Article 28 (1): The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

(2): Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life.

(4): Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favor of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens (GOB, 1993).

In order to convert the Constitutional guarantee into reality, the government enacted a law introducing a direct election of women for three reserved ward member seats to each Union Parishad. Apart from the exclusive reserved seats, women can also contest for any of the general seats. Even one-third of the membership in the standing committees has been reserved for women (Clause 45 of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, 2009). The quota system gives them the opportunity to contest in the reserved seat and effective participation at the local level. For example, in 1997 UP elections 43,969 female candidates contested for 12,723 wards that was exclusively reserved for women.

Women's representation in local government

Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's standpoint at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development, and peace cannot be achieved (Khan et al., 2006; FWCW, 1995). Local government institutions cover a large scale livelihood, health, and development programs closely related to the life of women. But in Bangladesh, Presently women's participation in local government institutions is not satisfactory. In the 1973 local government elections, for the first time, only one woman was elected as chairman. In 1988 Ups election, the number of women candidates for chairman was 79 and women member was 863. Among them, only one UP chairman was elected. In 2001 Union Parishad elections, 102 women candidates contested in UP chairmanship positions countrywide where only 20 of them were elected. However, in the 1997 and 2003 Union Parishad elections, the number of women candidates who contested for the position of UP chairmanships is 232 and 102 respectively. But, finally elected only 23 and 22 chairmen whereas the number of elected women member in general seat is 109 and 79 only. The following table provides data of the elected female chairman and member to the Union Parishad of Bangladesh during 1973- 2011 (Table 1).

Table 1
Women participation in Union Parishad Election (1973-2011).

Election year	Total Union Parishad	Women Chairman		Women member		
		Candidate	Elected	Candidate	elected	
1 st	1973	4352	1			
2 nd	1977	4352	19	4	19	7
3 rd	1984	4440		6		
4 th	1988	4440	79	1	863	
5 th	1992	4443	115	8	1135	20
6 th	1997	4443	102	23	43969/456*	12882/110*
7 th	2003	4443	232	22	43764/617*	12684/85*
8 th	2006	4493				13479
9 th	2011	4498				13494

Table: Compiled by Author. Source: www.ec.gov.bd.org

*Women contested and elected to the general seats.

According to the above-mentioned table, it is crystal clear that women are not represented in even the lower local government bodies like Union Parishad in Bangladesh. The trend to contest in the general seats or chairmanship position is still very low in number. In 1997, the Bangladesh government introduced a new system at UP level to ensure women's participation in elected bodies at the local level. The government also enacted a law introducing direct election of women for three reserved ward member seats to each Union Parishad. Apart from the exclusive reserved seats, women can also contest for any of the general seats.

But the real scenario is quite different, the reservation system only ensures women's quantitative participation in reserved seats not qualitative or effective participation. Without the women's reserved seats a very few women candidates are contested for general member seats or chairmanship. This does not mean that the major parties and the society are encouraging women leaders who enter into politics at the local level. At present, there is only a single woman city mayor (Narayanganj) in Bangladesh. In many cases, male-dominated political parties are not willing to involve women in their local branches. Even, No women received a positive signal from the major political parties to contest for the chairmanship position, as this position is considered important and strategic for the party, to the local level elections except very few. Since 2015 present AL government started holding all local government elections on the party basis that will be a great barrier for women's effective participation in the local level. Because local women's are not politically active at all level due to male domination and corrupt political culture.

The elected women member's participation in UPs routine works is also very hopeless. Only 37% of the women members were given membership in special committees of Ups which dealt with food for work, vulnerable group feeding, roads, culverts, bridges, family planning and social welfare, destitute relief etc. A large majority (63%) had no membership in any committee. Even those women, who were in special committees, played a limited role (Siddiqui and Ahmed, 2016).

In communities where women's roles as politicians and decision-makers are not well accepted, women face strong social and cultural barriers entering local governments. According to the UN-Habitat, most local governments are inherently patriarchal institutions. Their structures and procedures are designed for and by men and they do not take into account women's multiple responsibilities in their homes and communities or differences of communications and decision-making styles existing between men and women. (Khosla and Barth, 2008).

Ironically, the rules are also ambiguous or in some cases biased against women. In the manual of Union Parishad, there are no provisions on specific duties for the elected women representatives. On the other hand male counterparts of the local level, politicians think that there is no need for women's involvement in local governance. Women elected members are frustrated by their negligence (Choudhury and Hasanuzzaman, 1997). A research (Panday, 2009) delineates the real scenario of what's going on in the UPs. The male chairmen and members cannot bypass women representatives in the committees that have been particularly created for women, but they do not offer them equal membership in other committees. There is always the tendency to keep them away from everything. They want women members to gossip and spend time conversing with one another. Another important thing is that they believe if women members participate in the activities that were previously carried out by them, their supremacy in the society would be reduced. In addition, there are even allegations of harassments from elected members in UPs. It is alleged that many women members elected through reserved seats were subjected to sexual harassment by their male counterparts and were considered as second category members. For this reasons, true or effective participation in local government is a fairy tale in today's Bangladesh.

Constraints to the empowerment of women in local government

Despite several governmental and non-governmental initiatives, legal provisions, women are still left behind in almost every sector. In this regard, involvement in the decision-making

process is a far cry from the existing status. Specifically, participation and empowerment of women in the political arena seems to be in no one's interest except some advocates. The elected women member's participation in local government bodies remains generally insufficient and insignificant, as they are not given any specific duties. The absence of operational guidelines and terms of reference for female elected representatives, the limited capacity of the female elected representatives to operate in public institutions of this nature, the lack of awareness over their roles and responsibilities, the systematic discrimination and biases by male elected colleagues all these are seen as factors impeding women's meaningful participation in local government (ADB, 2001). Some of the major problems to women's participation in local government include the following:

- The lack of specific clarity in the law on the role of women in local government.
- Lack of cooperation by men (within family and outside) is a significant drawback to women's effective participation in local government. At the same time, women are considered as unfit to perform political and community affairs.
- The pervasiveness of social norms that strictly restrict their freedom of movement in the public place also a barrier for women in Bangladesh.
- Patriarchy, Sociocultural norms, religious misinterpretations, lack of awareness and negative attitude towards women by the male and society.
- Low and ineffective participation of women in national level governance also affects the local level women's participation for example participation in political party, parliament, and bureaucracy.
- Women's excessive financial dependency on men affects all aspects of their lives.
- Traditional attitude of the society and rural women, rural women have psychologically accepted the reproductive and household activities as their first priority, therefore, politics is usually a low priority for most of the women in Bangladesh.

The political culture of Bangladesh also a big hindrance to the path of effective women's participation as our overall politics is too much partisan, money dominating, male dominating, and power politics oriented so political parties are highly male-biased on the other hand women are less interested in such a political culture.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In Bangladesh, the existing situation refers to less political participation and low status for women as compared to their male counterparts in the society. The introduction of direct election to the reserved seats is definitely an outstanding and breakthrough innovation for women. In no other way could these women have moved into these institutions and participated in them. Now, the question is whether the reservation of quotas has ensured meaningful participation of women in the decision-making process of the UPs. As a matter of fact, the state of women's participation in politics is not so encouraging despite the reserved seats. Apart from the elected women members in reserved seats, general seats and contesting for UP chairman post is rare. Since 1997, the number of elected women chairman is not more than 50, while the number of elected member in general seats is also less than 3% in every UP elections. Though approximately 25% of women were elected as members of the UPs, their role in UPs is nominal and they have not been able to influence the decision-making process because of male domination. Not only in the political process, but patriarchy and male-dominated social structure also create barriers in the process of their effective participation in all aspects of the society. All these factors reinforce each other to keep women's political participation low. But women's sufficient political participation is a precondition for ensuring women empowerment, inclusive governance, and sustainable development. To ensure a meaningful participation of the elected women members, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration:

- Roles and responsibilities of the women members should be clearly defined in the manuals and orders of local government. Responsibilities should be fairly distributed among the male and female members in such a way so that women member can meaningfully participate in all type of activities.
- Specific programs should be started by the government and non-government organizations (NGOs) in order to create a mass awareness of the grass root level.
- Increase opportunities for education, capacity development, leadership, health care, and employment in order to eradicate different social

problems to create awareness among women about their low participation and status in society.

- Media should be used to aware and mobilize public opinion so that people realize the benefits of women's full participation in national development.
- A specialized monitoring cell/watchdog should be introduced to the continuous monitoring of UPs activities to check women's participation, status, conditions and rights.
- The joint venture of government, political parties, NGOs and women organizations can contribute on their own way in making the social and attitudinal change that will pave the way of women's participation.
- Capacity development of women, so that they can cop up with the changing and challenging environment. In this regard, various training should be given such as leadership training, training regarding community development and communication skill development in order to inspire them to take up the leadership position and political participation.
- National level strong political commitment, Political will can reduce the obstacles and create space for women at governance whatever it is central or local. Any substantial increase in the quantity and quality of women's participation in the local level depends mainly on the strong political commitment of the major political parties.
- In-depth research on women's must be undertaken to identify their true participation in politics, voting behavior, consciousness and barriers of participation in politics.
- Increase the effective participation of women in national level governance process that will be laid the foundation of women's participation in the local level.

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