

The roles of elected female members of reserved seats in union parishads: a case study on Dhamrai upazila, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Union Parishad (UP) is the lowest tier of the Local Government of Bangladesh which bridges between people and government to ensure people's participation in governance system. Therefore, from the last two decades government has been emphasizing on enhancing political emancipation of women in local government. To promote female leadership in grass-root level, Ministry of Local Government established a provision in the Local Government Act of reserving 3 (three) seats for women in UPs. This reformation enabled the female leaders to be elected in the UPs by a direct vote of the people. This research intends to explore the roles played by these elected female members of the studied UPs. It was conducted following a qualitative method and interview technique. Face to face interview has been taken from 45 female members of 15 UPs in Dhamrai Upazila, Dhaka with semi structured questionnaire. The study found that most of the respondents are contributing to development related project, social safety net program, controlling early marriage and dowry, family planning and female health-related program, awareness building of hygiene and sanitation, adult literacy etc. At the same time, it is found that significant numbers of the elected female members are not conscious about their responsibilities and even though they do not have any idea about UP manual. Finally, it revealed the obstacles in their workplaces, the challenges in their families, local societies, and recommended probable measures to overcome such situations. Besides, securing female leadership and active representations in the UPs can include the backward women in the mainstream of development and decision-making process which will undoubtedly contribute enormously to women empowerment.

Keywords: Local government, union parishad, elected female members, women empowerment, reserved seats.

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INTRODUCTION

Women represent half of the country's population and half of its potentiality. It is recognized that development such as economic growth, poverty alleviation, employment generation, political stability, and good governance cannot be achieved without the contribution and equal participation of women. Women's participation in UPs is an effective means to uphold their rights, status, and ability in the decision-making process. At the same time, it is the fundamental right of the constitution of Bangladesh to ensure women's participation in all spheres of national life. Moreover, Article 9, 10, 19(1), 27, 28(1)(2)(4) of our constitution guaranteed legal recognition of women everywhere to reduce the backwardness of the huge population. Ministry of Local Government introduced the Local Government Ordinance in 1976, where women participated in local government for the first time. Though there was a provision of nominating two female representatives in practice it is hardly seen that the female representatives could play their role actively. Later, the UP Act, 2009 has established women's status to step up in the power structure of the Union Parishads (Begum, 2012). Subsequently, after introducing this provision female member's political involvement increased significantly in rural area (Zaman, 2012). Hence, female members obtained an opportunity to bring some positive changes in remote areas. However, some obstacles are impeding their works. These shortfalls draw a setback to women's participation in politics and restrain the pathway from women empowerment in the decision-making at the grass-root level. Therefore, these also adversely affect the democratization process in local government. 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). Recently, Gender Statistics of Bangladesh 2018 reveals that in 2017, the women participation rate in UPs is gradually increasing as a chairman and member seats from 2012 to 2017. In the same year, women's participation rate as a member of the Union Council is seen increased much higher by 25% (BBS, 2019). Though the existing situation is still not meeting the desired standards, it is changing progressively. Nevertheless, women's inclusion at the direct election in the reserved seats is an outstanding breakthrough innovation for women's participation at the local level.

It is argued that women can contribute to the development of society and nation-building effectively through the process of participation. The equal participation of both men and women in the decision-making process relies on the legitimacy of democratic governance purposively (Sun, 2004). Hence, introducing women's reserve seat provision in Ups brought out varieties of gender equality outcomes from different levels of local government layers. Most significantly, the inclusion of female member's voice in UPs possesses a milestone for women empowerment in the lower level of Local Government Institutes (LGIs). However, multi-phase limitations faced by women members in an existing structure such as their ability of leadership capability, less knowledge about their practicing ground and how they can influence in the

power structures, scarcity of logistic supports, patriarchy attitudes by men, poor participation in decision-making, illiteracy and so on. Many previous studies focused on the broad area of local government but there are very few works have hardly found in female reserve seats in consideration of the rural local government. Moreover, there has no such kind of in-depth study found which focuses on the roles and participation of female members at reserved of the 15 UPs covering one Upazila (*Dhamarai Upazila*) as the present study does. It is still one of the least-researched areas that allow academicians and researchers to comprehend the real empowerment level of women. Meanwhile, there have been some hindrances to carry out the study smoothly due to time constraints, resource limitation, and less awareness of the respondents about their duties and responsibilities.

Therefore, the assessment of the present study is to explore whether the elected women representatives of UPs are involving themselves effectively or not. Simultaneously, it is also a modest attempt to address the research gap of women's political participation in the UPs. This endeavor also finds out the challenges faced by the women representatives in the lowest tier of the local government of Bangladesh. Following the findings, the study will provide some rational, effective, and practical recommendations to remove those constraints to make UPs more capable and vibrant in the studied area.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION AND CONCEPTUAL OUTLINE

Local government

Local government is such a representative governance structure constructed by the elected local representatives to serve local administration and boost up socio-economic development as well. To define it, the local government is an intra-sovereign governmental unit where local affairs are dealing within the sovereign state, regulated by local authorities, and subordinate to the state government (Jahan, 1997:92). A popular definition given by Duane Lockard stated that local government as a public institution is accredited to govern a defined range of public policies within a relatively small territory, which is a sub-division of a regional or national government. In political terms, it is a governance system that constitutes a political subdivision of a nation in a specific local area, state, or other vital political units. In the performance of its functions, it acts as the agent of the state. Other than that, it is considered an integral part of the political mechanism for governance in a country. According to article 59(1) of the Constitution of the People's Republic Bangladesh, "Local Government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected following the law" (GOB, 1993:43). To sum up, local governance can define as the application of various governance criteria (accountability, transparency, decentralization, efficiency, financial integrity, participation, equity, etc.) to all important and relevant development-oriented local organizations/efforts, such as local government bodies, local administration, local NGOs, CBOs, cooperatives, local media, informal community activities, etc (Siddiqui, 2005). In

Bangladesh, three-tiers of local government bodies are constituted by the elected representatives of the concerned area through a democratic process. These organizations follow the constitutional and legal instructions and enjoy autonomy in their jurisdictions. The functions of these institutions include public affairs, support of public order, execution of local planning related to public service, economic development, and so on (Siddiqui, 2005).

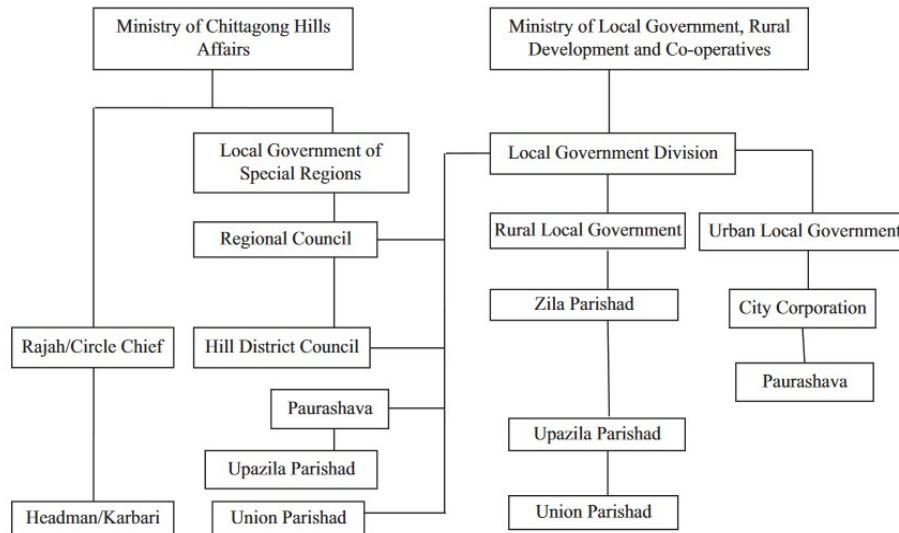


Figure-1: Structure of local government in Bangladesh, (Barkat et al, 2015)

Union parishad

Some institutions have emerged based on social needs which will fulfill the demands of the rural people; Union Parishad (UP) is such an institution. Being the oldest self-autonomous body of rural governance, UPs are considered the oldest democratic institution in Bangladesh. It is comprised of the elected representatives of the local people which conducts rural administration and socio-economic development accordingly. In Bangladesh, Local Government Union Parishad Ordinance, 1983, section 3, declared that 'union' means 'a rural area' (GOB, 1990:2-3). The Union Parishad consists of a chairman, nine general members, and three women members from reserved seats. The voters of the Union Parishad directly elect all of them. It is entrusted with thirty-nine functions (UP Act, 2009) of which the major functions include public welfare, maintenance of law and order, revenue collection, development, and adjudication. Its source of income includes grants, taxes, fees, etc. In the initial stage, the functions of Union Parishad (or Village Panchayat) were confined to the collection of local revenue and maintenance of village chowkidars (village police) but nowadays, members of Union Parishad have to accomplish plenty of tasks. The ruling government took some initiatives a few years ago to enhance public services and made each UP a Digital Centre in the remote

areas where people are facilitated by some services of e-governance at a nominal cost. At present, total number of Union Parishad is 4571 in Bangladesh (LGD, BD, 2020).

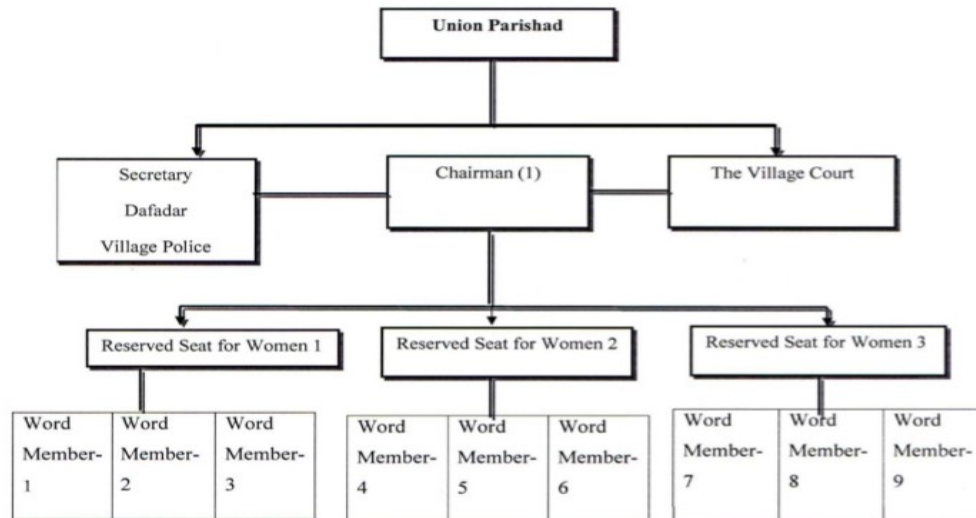


Figure-2:Composition of union parishad in Bangladesh, (Siddiqui and Ahmed, 2016)

Women empowerment

Women's empowerment means accepting and allowing women to the decision-making process who usually remain outside of the process. As a universal issue, women's empowerment alludes to the improvement of the situation of women's status in every sphere of life. According to Caroline Moser, the capacity of women to increase their self-reliance and internal strength is called women empowerment. Women have great sources of multiple capabilities such as organizing themselves for enhancing their self-reliance, affirming their self-determining rights for comprising choices and charging resources, and so on. These capabilities will help them to take a challenge and to break their subordinating position in society (Keller and Mbwewe, 1991). However, women empowerment also indicates the overall development of downside classes of society to bring them in an advanced situation, almost at the same level (Khan and Ara, 2006). At the end of the discussion, it may summarize that woman empowerment is a systematic process where awareness or consciousness, choice, voice, resources, and participation, etc. included as essentials for women's development (Kabeer, 2005). Moreover, taking part in decision-making matters, enhancing economic self-sufficiency, ensuring their legal rights to bring equality, inheritance, and safeguard against all forms of discrimination.

EVOLUTION OF WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN UNION PARISHAD IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The path of women's involvement in local governance was not smooth and obvious. It has been a great legacy of the previous dominant colonial government ruled by the British and Pakistan. Local government at the grass-root level was first initiated by the British in 1870 and was known as "Chowkidary Panchayet" under the Village Choukidari Act 1870. It constituted of five members, all of whom were nominated by the district magistrate. The only function of this body was to maintain law and order in the rural area with the support of village chowkidars and to accumulate taxes imposed on local people for maintaining the panchayat (Siddika and Rahman, 2010). Since 1870 the functionaries of local government were always in the hands of males (Chowdhury et al., 1994) and voting rights were dependent on the educational qualification of local bodies, financial solvency, and regular taxpayer, etc. (Smock, 1977). However, women's representation in the political community was allowed through the Government of India Act in 1935 (Forbes, 2002) but based on the universal adult franchise.

In 1956, women for the first time took part in the election of rural local bodies (Rashiduzzaman, 1968; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1987). After the independence of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan took over the power and the Basic Democracies Order (BDO, 1959) was promulgated in 1959 where four tiers of the local government system were introduced in the rural areas: Union Council, Thana Council, District Council, and Divisional Council. In East Pakistan, there were 4036 Union Councils. During the Pakistan regime, only one female candidate was elected in the UP election between 1956 and 1969. Later some changes have occurred in the local government system of Pakistan (Siddiqui, 2005). Instead of the Union council, Union Panchayat was started its journey after the independence of Bangladesh under the President's Order Number 7 of 1972. In 1973, according to President's Order Number 22, the Union Panchayat was renamed Union Parishad (UP). Women were first time elected to local bodies in 1973. Later, the Ministry of Local Government introduced the Local Government Ordinance (LGO) in 1976, where the nomination of two female representatives was integrating with the concerned UP. These new forms of decentralized structure in the local governance system may include women members for the first time but hardly they could play their role effectively.

Local Government Ordinance of 1983 (GOB; 1983) has been taken in the most notable strides by creating reserve seats for women to secure women's political participation in the local government. Here women's reservation was increased from two to three through the Local Government Ordinance of 1983 (Shafi, 2001 and Begum, 2012). Rather than that the union Parishad consisted of nine elected members and headed by one chairman. In this regard, to made women, participation more rational at the root level the ordinance of both 1993 and 1997 added the provision of direct election for women members reserved seats in UP. The Union Parishad Act 1993 had

brought some changes in the compositions of UP. Union Parishad shall be divided into nine Wards and nine members, one from each Ward shall be elected by the voters of the concerned wards, about the female members, instead of nomination they were to be indirectly by the chairman and elected members of the concern Union Parishad.

The deliberated idea of the UP Act of 1997 set a landmark in the history of the political empowerment of women in local government in Bangladesh. It had been constructed women's institutional framework to strengthen their political skills to give them the power to generate better opportunity in the political power structure (Begum, 2012). They can promote their decision-making power through direct election to a one-third reserved seat in all local bodies as well. The unique difference is observed with the previous amendment that the local people elect their women candidates through votes (Sultana, 2000).

Over the times, it was amended twice in 2007 and 2009 where three seats were reserved for women in each UP. These attempted a lot to accelerate women's emancipation at the local level from marginalized status to mainstream democratic power exercise. At present, UP's system of local government in Bangladesh runs by the UP Act, 2009. Where a UP is consisting of 1 elected chairman, 9 elected members, and 3 elected female members. The UP chairman and members are elected for 5 years. As per section 10(3) of the UP Act, 3 seats will be reserved for women. The UP Act, 2009 acquainted some provisions for ensuring accountability, transparency, participation, effective service delivery, and women's empowerment by introducing the provision of citizen charter, open Ward Shava, and open budget to address some of the challenges in the existing governance system (Aminuzzaman 2013).

METHODOLOGY

The study followed by the qualitative approach to analyze the roles, working environment, their experience, social realities, and most importantly, challenges faced by the elected female members in the selected Union Parishads. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. For primary sources data were collected from 45 elected female members from 15 UPs (3 reserve seat members from each union) using an interview technique in *Dhamrai Upazila* under Dhaka district. They were asked 23 selective questions in the open ended structure questionnaire manner. Secondary data were collected from different sources like published articles, newspapers, related books, and websites. The study was conducted from March to May 2019.

SAMPLE AREA

Dhamrai Upazila is bounded by Mirzapur and Kaliakair Upazilas on the north, Singair Upazila on the south, Savar Upazila on the east, and Manikganj Sadar, Saturia and Nagarpur Upazilas on the west. The total number of

populations is 3, 50,168 in where 1,78,128 and 1, 72,040 are male and female respectively.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The field data analysis of this study revealed that women representatives are trying to contribute enormously to improve community services at their assigned UPs. Evidence shows that most of the female members of UP played very few roles and responsibilities in their constituency and made little influence in any decision-making process. Simultaneously it was observed that due to discriminatory power allocation of the government, male members have greater access to power in the decision-making process, whereas women members enjoy only a little power in UP activities (Begum, 2012). Moreover, they have not enough knowledge about their roles and functions in UPs. According to clause no. 47 (1) of Local Government (Union Parishad) Amendment Act, 2009, there is a series (39 types) of functions described in the Schedule (Tafsil) two; a few are enunciated for female representatives. Therefore, it can be assumed that most of the regular functions of the Union Parishad are accomplished by both male and female members accordingly. But *Are these duties and responsibilities rhetoric or reality?* Here, in the following discussion the roles and responsibilities of the female reserve seat members of the 15 UPs of Dhamrai Upazilla are narrated elaborately.

Development related works

The Local Government (Union Parishad) Amendment Act, 2009 ensured female representatives in the reserve seats are entitled to one-third of development projects in their jurisdiction. However, in reality, very limited responsibility was given to three women members in each UP. Therefore, when we asked the question to respondents that "*Are you being involved in development projects/activities?*" It explored that most of the respondents are involved in various food-assisted development projects i.e. Rural Development, Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Rural Maintenance Program, Food for Works, etc. They also added that several development-related projects implemented by them over the last few years such as; Local Governance Support Program (LGSP), building culverts, bridges, giving numerous test relief (TR) to the poor, development of physical infrastructure, the lighting of public ways, public streets, and public place and so on. It impacts immensely to accelerate development activities in UPs from the last few years. More surprisingly, compare to the male colleagues female members perform their duties with more sincerity and accuracy. Financial honesty is the most significant integral part of female members observed in the concerned UPs whereas most of the male members do not have. Three of the female members Ms. Jahanara, age-35, ward no.1, 2, 3, and Ms. Asma, age-38, ward no.4, 5, 6, and Ms. Julekha Begum, age 49, ward no.7, 8, 9 of *DhamraiSadar* Union Parishads stated that:

"As per government rules both male and female members should be involved in each development project. More especially female representative will be the chairmen of one-third of the total project implementation committees. In reality we were involved in at least one development-related project to carry out the work in our constituency. Initially, the male members did not allow the female members and frowned at us saying that the women members were elected in the reserved seats, so they had nothing to do with UP activities except supporting everything with them. Sometimes few socio-cultural village elites are involved in different committees keeping female members outside. We think, more institutional cooperation is needed at the grass-roots level for the emancipation of women. Hence we want more specific development tasks to be assigned for us by the chairman of the UP."

Participation in the monthly meeting

Female member's mobility has been dramatically increased after being elected into the UP. Being an elected member of UP, they have to attend various meetings and cultural activities. Thus, their freedom of movement has been increased in comparison to their previous status (Panday, 2010). The study found more than seventy percent of female members attended monthly meetings regularly. The mass people have easy access to the female member to their constituency whenever they want. Female members of reserve seats always show enthusiastic attitude to offer service to the community for long run betterment. However, one of the frustrated women members (respondent of this study) named Ms. Hamida from Bhararia UP expressed her opinion negatively. According to her,

"It has been six months I have been elected UP member but still I have nothing important to do which is assigned by the UP chairman. This discriminatory disbursement of work is the main barrier to fulfill my election promises which could be losing my credibility and popularity. I usually attend the monthly meeting, but I have no participation in the policy or decision-making process."

Awareness building

The women members focus on the various awareness-building activities in their jurisdictions. UP is the strongest media to aware people of government policy from the center to the periphery by informing people regarding different social issues. Therefore, the female members of UPs gave a tremendous effort into building consensus among the vulnerable people. They also make people aware of family planning, improving the environment, forestry and disaster mitigations, plantation and preservation of trees, natural calamities such as fires, floods, droughts, tornados, earthquakes, tidal bores, and so on. They spread programs like women's health, education, and sanitation, programs against social barriers, superstitions, early marriage, social inequality, social militants, female leadership as well as

entrepreneurship, eradication of illiteracy, promoting family planning, public health, and primary health care and so on.

Controlling early marriage

It is reported by UNICEF that in Bangladesh about 22% of girls being married before the age of 15 and 59% of girls are getting into married life before their 18th birthday (UNICEF-UNFPA 2018). Local people suffered from illiteracy, displacement, proper knowledge about the adolescence period, natural disaster, so-called family honor, social values, backwardness, and narrow reproduction sense. Sometimes, lack of legal support hinders the protection of the girl's rights and control of early and forced marriage. In this regard, the local body of government took several initiatives to get rid of the situation. They try to aware of every one of their community about girl's rights hence they reduce one-third of early child marriage in their locality. They used to go to each residence and consult with the family members, sometimes arrange a meeting to portray pros and cons of early marriage. As a result early marriage rate was reduced dramatically in the year 2018. However, early marriage resemblance as a violation of children's human rights therefore, elected female members at reserved seats want adequate law enforcement authority to execute government policy properly at the root level. Some achievements of female members in this ground are shown as below:

- Ms. Suraiya, a female member in Baishakanda UP protected 20 early marriage cases in her respective wards from 2016 to 2018.
- Ms. Rozina, Kulla UP, and Ms. Golapi Rani, Suapur UP both made a remarkable contribution by reducing forced and early marriage in the year 2017 and 2018.

Controlling dowry

In Bangladesh, dowry is an openly settled marriage payments system that is discreetly done mostly before or sometimes after the wedding. This kind of practice has been developed in society during the early 1970s. In course of time, this social evil has become endemic which is seriously affecting the lives of married women (Taher, 2015). Recently one publication of UNDP found that fifty percent of total violence against women done in both urban and rural community regarding dowry issues. To eliminate the dowry system from society, elected female members play an active role against it. They stand against such hated practice by disseminating the message to people about this punishable offense. Due to their active engagement, it is controlled and reduced day by day in their respective areas. Ms. Nusrat Jahan of Bhararia UP expressed,

“Dowry system stood as a curse in our society. Lower and lower-middle income people suffered a lot by this dowry. They by force handed over such dowry to ensure the so-called happiness of their daughters. In my village this dowry system has been reduced remarkably due to our strong campaign against the immoral practice

last three years. Besides, local administration is also vibrant against it.”

Adult literacy

Female members have immense contribution to increasing adult education in society. They are working under some literacy schemes. They visit door to door to search illiterate people and bring them into the adult educational scheme. They have succeeded in this context at satisfactory level from very poor standard and the rate of adult literacy has also increased over the time. The study found that in most of the cases women members in the UP hardly possess sufficient academic knowledge. Additionally, among 45 female representatives only two were graduates, and most of them are availing certificates up to SSC to HSC examination. And the rest of them went to elementary school or illiterate. Ms. Shima Akter of Suapur UP said,

“Nowadays, people are more aware about adult literacy and the number of adult literacy rate is increasing enormously. About half of the village people were illiterate ten years ago but because of continuous effort of the female members most of the people in our locality have become literate which is continual till today.”

Social safety program

The socio-economic condition of the rural people identified as undistinguished. Hence unemployment and poverty rate magnitude is higher in the rural area. The poverty rate in Bangladesh is 21.8% and the rate of hardcore poverty is 11.3% (Economic Review 2019). Therefore, elected female representatives contribute a lot to social safety programs taken by the different ministries in the rural areas. They search under privilege people in their respective wards and find out eligible people for the different schemes i.e. Food for Works, Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Test Relief, allowance for Old people, allowance for the Autistic, and allowance for the widow, and so on. It aimed to eradicate poverty by rehabilitating them in society. In this context, they prepare a list of vulnerable people and forward it to the higher authority for approval.

Family planning

Over the last few decades government popularized family planning to control the birthrate all over the country. To implement government policy in rural areas female members have arranged different kinds of programs such as awareness building for female health, hygiene, and sanitation, health-related bits of advice among the teen-age girls, the necessity of family planning in this regard. They also announce a campaign for immunization programs and implement some schemes taken by the UPs. Some health indicators including the death rate during maternity have been reduced to a satisfactory level. Ms. Sanowara Begum of Nannar UP stated,

“Family planning is inevitable to make the population stable in the country. In the past, village women were less aware about family planning and the birth rate in our village was high. Due to constant effort of women members along with the family planning field workers most of the local women are under family planning and the birth rate has been reduced tremendously during last five years in our society which corresponds to country’s expected level.”

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE FEMALE MEMBERS AT 15 UNION PARISHADS OF DHAMRAI UPAZILLA

The socio-economic condition, inadequate financial supports, illiteracy, poor revenue budget, entrenched patriarchy, ignorance about responsibility, consciousness about politics, proper training, superstitions, hostile working environment, and some other factors made barrier functioning in local bodies. In this regards, the following challenges observed rigorously in the studied area;

- Inadequate financial supports, low budget, and insecure revenue are the major constraints of UP’s development. Therefore, every UP has the highest dependency on central government grants. It also impacts UP’s finance disbursement among the reserve seat members. Almost everyone (respondents) experienced difficulties in getting a monthly honorarium. They received approximately 4,400/-taka from their resource (which varied union to union according to their resources and income) and 3,600/ taka- (fixed) from revenue budget every month. Sometimes UPs have not enough local resources that they could even provide a monthly honorarium. Also, some of the respondents informed us very sadly that sometimes they have to bear every day’s conveyance and other related expenditures from their own pocket.
- Educational backwardness and illiteracy rate of female representatives, as well as mass people, causes impediment of development at a local level. The study found that in most of the cases women members in the UPs hardly possess sufficient academic knowledge. Lack of sufficient knowledge about their jurisdiction, authority, and power delegated by local government division through several acts, rules, and circulars which made a hurdle for their proper functioning in the UP’s activities.
- Limited knowledge about their key functions is the basic limitation for their effective participation in the local bodies. Additionally, women's participation in UP remains insufficient and insignificant as they are not assigned with any specific duties in various committees in UPs. Most of the members did not know about their rights properly. They are partially aware of formally prescribed tasks. One of the surprising drawbacks found by the study is that more than seventy percent of members have no idea about UP manuals; even they did not see either in their consecutive

tenure. Absenteeism in operational guidelines and terms of reference made them more vulnerable to execute their duty proactively.

- In terms of taking decisions regarding UP's issues, female members are not treated equally. They have very limited scope to influence in giving decisions. Our assessment in this study underlines that female members are generally excluded from the major decision-making. Unawareness about their rights and privileges, male domination and lack of education negatively cause to express their opinion in the decision-making process. Merely they can attend in villages Salish to raise their opinion. Most of the time UP chairman took all decisions with a small circle of his preferable associates where female members are particularly excluded.
- Unequal distribution of duties among female members made them unpopular to the voters. It subsequently hampering their position to fulfill election promises. As a result, they are bound to consider themselves only social workers in their constituency not empowered elected members.
- Female members do not receive any proper training from UPs. The general ignorance towards female members and lack of training provisions put them into difficulties in making a significant contribution.
- Non-generous cooperation and entrenched patriarchal attitude by men (within the family and outside) is a significant barrier to women's effective participation in local government. They are systematically passed over by men in the family, state, and power structure. At the same time, female members are considered incompatible for performing jobs.
- It was observed that elected female members received inadequate cards to distribute among vulnerable peoples in their three consecutive wards conducting social safety programs, such as; distribution VGD cards, VGF cards, widows allowance cards, old-age pensions, allowance for pregnant mothers, disabled people's allowances, test relief and so on.
- Very few female members are assigned to development-related works or projects by UP chairmen assuming that they are not eligible to implement the development projects rather better in domestic chores. In addition, absence of monitoring in RMP (Rural Maintenance program) works deprived female members to perform their duties.
- A large number of respondents claimed that they do not have proper logistic supports such as specific office place where they could sit, transports, and other facilities. The absence of well logistic supports may suffer female members to perform their substantial services.
- According to the UP law 2009, Ward Shava's in every UPs consisting of all the voters headed by the ward member, advised by a woman member and could establish sub-committees. At least two annual meetings were specified, to focus on the public presentation of the UP budget and review of audit reports but Ward Shava (ward meeting) is not rightly placed into the UPs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The government of Bangladesh aimed to empower women at the grass-roots level. By reducing inequality among men and women within the UPs, inclusive societies may be established. Therefore, the following recommendations should be taken into considerations:

- The existing honorarium is not sufficient for designated positions of chairman and other members. It should be increased to at least Tk. 18,000 per month for the chairman and Tk.12,000 for the members. Additionally, the honorarium for the female members should be higher than other general members as one female member represents three wards accordingly.
- The roles and responsibilities of the female reserve seat members should be clearly defined in the manuals and orders of local government. It should be distributed fairly among all reserve seat members by the respective UP's chairman.
- Compulsory involvement of female members in one-third of development-related projects should be ensured and their activities for effective participation should be monitored.
- Specific policy and the program should be taken by the government for the female representative to boost up their political knowledge and rights of the citizen
- A specialized monitoring unit should be introduced to observe their activities, participation, status, and rights.
- Minimum educational qualification prerequisites should be made for the female reserve seat representatives to participate in local bodies' elections as well as to join political parties.
- Being elected as women members in the UP, they immediately should be well-groomed by acknowledging them about their jurisdictional rights and privileges, rules, regulations, office order, gazette notifications, circulars, ordinances, and other legal provisions of UP, etc. The government should provide skill development training for the elected representatives, especially for female members.
- Transportation facilities should be provided through outstanding services to their local area.
- Ups have to arrange regular meetings of the standing committees to ensure the people's participation of local leadership.
- Professionalism and other managerial knowledge should be developed for boosting up women member's working skill.
- Lastly, undue domination and patriarchal attitudes towards female members by the male counterpart in family and workplace should be changed for the active participation of women in UPs.

CONCLUSION

Union Parishad (UP) is the frontline local government institution close to rural people regarded as a great development hub of service circulation. Its democratization process is a symbol of a universal franchise. More than the hundred year's history of local government, it has been functioning for the rural development of the country. Over time, it has changed its structure to set a new avenue and functions for ensuring participatory governance at the root level. At present 4571 UPs are running by direct election where female representatives contribute enormously. This study revealed that acquiring legitimate space in local politics enhanced women's status in UPs with a lot of achievements. However, unequal distribution of projects, inadequate financial supports, less influence in decision making, educational backwardness, lack of proper training, absence of monitoring in RMP, ineffective Ward Shava (ward meeting), socio-cultural and religious superstition are the major challenges to mainstreaming the active participation in the particular studied area. Despite having these barriers, women have become powerful compared to their previous status. Their present leadership position brought them a step ahead in changing the male-dominated mentality. Female members provided culturally suitable social justice through Salish, tried to mitigate dowry rate upon their community, built awareness of family planning and public health, enhanced adult educational rate, controlled early marriage, etc. They were also playing roles in undertaking various development projects and helping the distribution of pro-poor safety net benefits in rural society. Therefore, positive attitude of male counterpart, increasing honorarium, equal disbursement of tasks, ensuring proper training, increasing female literacy rate can elevate the empowerment of female members in local government. Finally, promoting effective participation of women members and lessening constraints in UPs can strengthen local government bodies immensely. This will also expedite to achieving sustainable development goals by 2030 and graduating as developed country by 2041.

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