

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF BANGLADESH

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### ABSTRACT

**E**mpowerment or participation of women in governing process through gender sensitive particular policies are prerequisite for achieving sustainable development in any developing country such as Bangladesh. Such issue has been recognized in the context of policy reforms in both governmental and local government domain. Notwithstanding Union Parishad (UP) is a unit of rural local government of Bangladesh has a history of 145 years but women's appearance was ensured only 2 decades ago. A questionnaire survey which was conducted over 100 people and the finding is without women participation in grassroots level meaningful development is not possible and it is proved statistically that there is a significant relationship between strengthening local government and empowerment of women analyzed by One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) SPSS v.22. Though, there are tremendous gaps in balancing of gender both in terms of governance policy and reform agenda. At the grassroots level, Union Parishad is the most popular democratic institution. Therefore, the state of women's participation at this level is vital and deserves special attention to empower them as participation and empowerment otherwise sustainable as well as participatory development cannot be ensured. Constitutional provisions of Bangladesh can be seen as milestone towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in political power structure at Union Parishad level to strengthening the local government as well for the sustainable development of Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Local Government, Union Parishad, Participatory Development, ANOVA

## 1. Introduction

A strong and effective local government is one of the most important elements for ensuring quality of 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 (Khan, 2014) that largely depends upon the maximum utilization of her people, both men and women for its overall development. In Bangladesh, though women comprise nearly half of the total population but the status of women is much lower than that of men in every sectors of life (Hossain, 2015). Since 1971, it is a democratic, moderate Muslim state with a parliamentary system. But despite the existence of reserved seats and a vibrant feminist movement (Jahan 1995), the political and administrative structure, culture and norms are gender biased (Nazneen and Sultan, 2009). 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) but women's equal right to participate in governance is the constitutionally entrenched fundamental right and is repeatedly affirmed in a series of legislation in Bangladesh (Ahmed et al. 2001). Without commensurate political empowerment, just social status and a rightful economic standing for women cannot be achieved or sustained (Khan and Salma, 2003). Bangladesh also agreed to undertake positive obligations to respect and ensure this right through ratifying over a dozen international human rights instruments. The introduction of the Dhaka City Corporation Ordinance 1983 and the Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance 1983 has resulted in a substantial increase of women in local politics than ever before (Women for Women, 1999: 25) [Ali and Shawkat, 1986]. In the context of local government, women's concerns had risen irregularly and were emphasized in the government transformation agenda as evident in the last Local Government Reform of 1997 (Khan and Fardaus, 2006). As a momentous effect, Local Government (UP) Amendment Act 1997 was broadcasted. It provides 3 directly elected women members in the Union Parishad from 3 reserved seats (Khan and Fardaus, 2006). Various studies have shown that women elected to these reserved seats face various structural and attitudinal barriers (Hassan 1999; Frankl 2004; Panday, 2008). 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). Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. It is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. 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. 2006:73-74, FWCW, 1995). Local government generally provides services and facilities to the people of a special area and women should be the contributor and beneficiaries of such services (Qadir 1984: 234). Equally important is that local government provides a training ground for political education that can help local politicians for future in national politics of the country. The Five Year Plans of Bangladesh also iterate policies for women development (Akhter et al. 2005). In local government, women participation has far-reaching ramifications for social mobility acting on caste, occupation, sect, kinship and factionalism that are responsible for the process of segregation and exclusiveness. Recognition of male superiority and female subordination due to the patriarchal social system which pose to the threat of disequilibria (Amin and Akhter, 2005). The present research conducted to appraise the extent of women's empowerment in local level in Bangladesh and investigates the reasons for women's low rate of holding elected office. Moreover, a study on the political empowerment of Bangladeshi women from a historical and analytical perspective has been carried out mainly for two reasons. Firstly, one of the most important

resources of Bangladesh is its people and women; Secondly to identify the present condition of Bangladeshi women's participation in local politics and policymaking process.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Study area*

Ramu Upazilla is located in the southern coast of Bangladesh has been selected for this study. The geographical location of Ramu Upazilla is between 21°17' and 21°36' N latitudes and longitude 92° and 92°15' E longitude. It is situated along the northeastern tip of the Bay of Bengal. The study was carried out in four union parishads of this Upazilla.

### *2.2 Data collection technique*

This study was based on both primary and secondary data in accordance with the objectives and activity chart as developed with the research proposal. The research was exploratory in nature and the type of information collected was broadly qualitative.

#### *2.2.1 Primary data collection*

Primary data collected from study area using both methods of formal and informal interviews. The study based on primary data and it includes investigation of the field viz. Union - a rural area of many villages and UP- a rural local government body in the Union. A sample of 100 respondents consisting of 80 local dwellers and 20 women members and chairmen has been selected randomly. Both interview and observation techniques are applied to see women participation in local government and the state of social integration in context of women participation in some selected Unions. The study also uses secondary data from books, newspapers, reports, statutes, enactments, project documents, annual reports, social statistics, official regulation documents, grey literature and journal articles. SPSS v.22 software used to analyze data. The research was conducted on four union parishads of Ramu Upazilla under Cox'sbazar district, Bangladesh.

#### *2.2.2 Secondary data collection*

The study also uses secondary data from books, newspapers, reports, statutes, enactments, project documents, annual reports, social statistics, official regulation documents, grey literature and journal articles.

#### *2.2.3 Data Processing and Analysis:*

Raw field data processed into a database using the database software analyzed by the standard software package SPSS (Social Science for Statistical Package/ SPSS v.22 software used to analyze data.).

### **3. The Conceptual Labyrinth:**

#### *3.1. Women*

Woman means an adult female human being, as contrasted to men, an adult male, and a girl, a female child. The term woman (irregular plural: women) is used to indicate biological sex distinctions, cultural gender role distinctions, or both (Wikipedia, 2005:1). Gender discrimination is widespread in every spheres and at all levels, only 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.(Rahman, Md. Mostafizur & Ara, Faridus, 2006).

#### *3.2 Participation*

Gaining special momentum now-a-days, the term participation has a simple meaning – taking part or having share with others. It is the action by which citizens take part in the operation of any process from micro to macro levels (Momtaz and Faisal, 1986: 46). The vehicle which community can assure members the opportunity of contributing to the creation of community's goals and services is participation (Baetz, 1975). Access to decision-making and active involvement in determining the practices and problems are must for it. It is processes by which people, especially the disadvantaged, influence decision that affect them and get a more equitable share of power (World Bank, 1992). Participation is also looked at as enabling to have a voice in designing and shaping development interventions (Ali and Almas, 2003). The all-pervasive nature of participation leads us to define it as taking part and involving to act in any process in politico-economic and socio-cultural arenas of life and the interaction of individuals with others through time in the organizational process is participation (Amin and Akhter, 2005).

#### *3.3 Empowerment*

Empowerment is considered as one of the strong instruments to reach positive development outcomes as well as well-being of life (Tripathi, 2011) associated with the process and outcome which attempts to achieve a relative degree of ability to make an influence in the world (Staples, 1990) as well as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where the ability was previously denied to them (Kabeer, 2001). It is a process, though 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 and Srilata, 1993:5).

### **4. Aspects of Women's empowerment**

According to Hossain (2015) "Gender Equality" and "Women's Empowerment" have been two of the most pervasive themes in development. Unless women are involved in the decision and policymaking process at all levels of the state, changes in women's political and to some extent social and economic status will continue to be marginal. The term refers to the improvement of women conditions in every sphere of life. However, it indicates over all 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).

**Table-1: One-Way Analysis of Variance**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.189	1	.189	4.052	.047
Within Groups	4.561	98	.047		
Total	4.750	99			

There was statistically significant relationship between empowerment of women and strengthening local government as determined by one-way ANOVA because our result is  $p < 0.05$  value which is our alpha level.

## 5. Local government

Local Government system is a century-old practice in Bangladesh (Amin 1989). Local government is basically an organized social entity with a feeling of oneness. By definition, local government means an intra-sovereign governmental unit within the sovereign state dealing mainly with local affairs, administered by local authorities and subordinate to the state government (Jahan and Momtaz, 1997:92). In political terms, it is concerned with the governance of a specific local area, constituting a political sub-division of a nation, state or other major political unit. 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, as body corporate with juristic person, it represents a legal concept (Muttalib et al. 1983:2). 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, 1993:43)."

### 5.1 Historical background of local government in Bangladesh

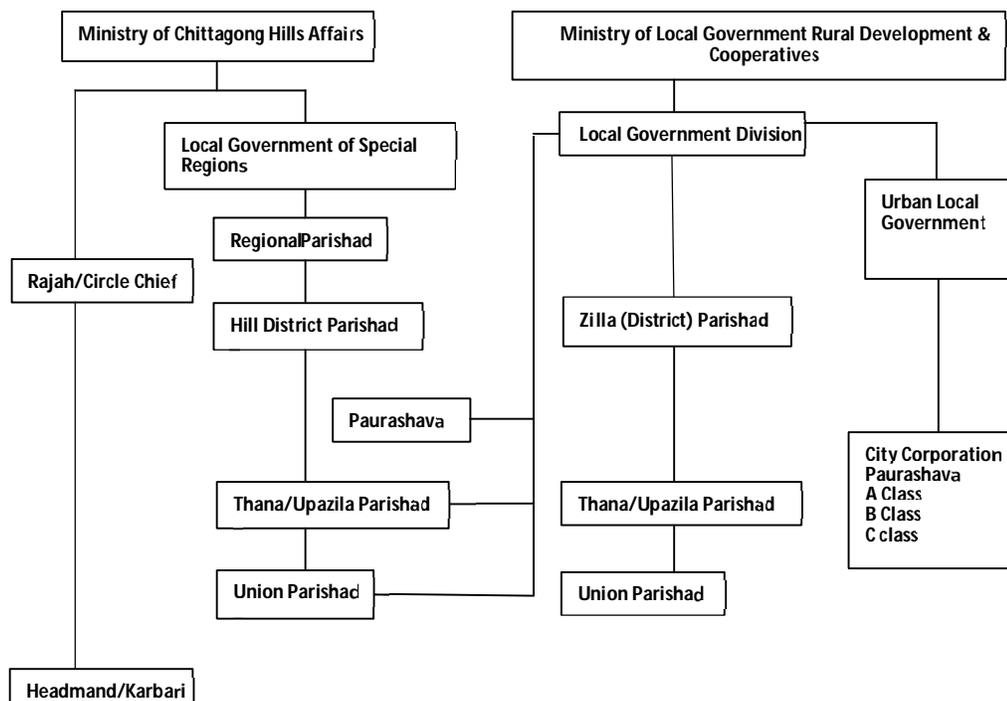
Local government was the basic form of government in the sub-continent till 6th century B.C. and management of local affairs by the locally elected persons (Kudrat-E-Elahi Panir vs. Bangladesh 44DLR: AD: 1992). In the sub-continent village self-government is as old as the villages themselves (Siddiqui and Kamal, 1994:24). 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 were setup in 1870 to establish their administrative control at the lowest levels (Khan et al. 2003). In Bangladesh most of the local government bodies owe their origin to the British rule that ultimately passed through the Pakistan period to independent Bangladesh.

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 the East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) which was four-tier system that was 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. 2001:3). In late 1972, the constitution of independent Bangladesh was adopted, where in Article 59 provided for elected local government institutions at all levels (Ali, 1986:2). In 1973, the name of Union Panchayet changed to Union Parishad without any significant changes in its character as a consequence since then the Union Parishad is acting as the lowest administrative unit of rural local government in Bangladesh.

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 four tiers, i.e., Gram/Palli (Village) Parishad, Union Parishad, Thana/Upazila Parishad and Zilla (District) Parishad. On the other hand, local government in the urban areas consists of Pourashava (for smaller Municipalities) and City Corporation (for the largest cities).

**Figure 1: Local Government System in Bangladesh**



Source: <http://www.unescap.org/huset/lgstudy/newcountrypaper/Bangladesh/Bangladesh.pdf>

## **6. Constitutional provision**

Irrespective of gender, creed, cast, 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, 2003:14).

Women related articles of the constitution:

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

Article 10: participation of women in all spheres of national life must be ensured.

Article 28: (1) discrimination against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth by the State.

(2) Women should have equal rights with men in every spheres of the State and of public life The constitution gives special attention to women in democracy and local government by incorporating the above articles and gives guarantee of equal rights to women and also makes special provision for providing all necessary protections to backward sections of the society.

## **7. Women and their role in local government politics**

A well-built and successful local government is one of the elemental preconditions for ensuring good governance at recent times and it can be achieved by strengthening local government by ensuring women participation. Union Parishad is the lowest level of local government in Bangladesh where women's representation is still insignificant, but is gradually growing. Only one woman was elected as chairperson in the 1973 local government elections for the first time and four women won as chairpersons in the 1977 and 1984 local government elections but In the 2001 Union Parishad (UP) elections more than 102 women candidates contested for 4,443 UP chairmanship positions though only 20 women were elected. The clear indication of increase in case of women participation to 232 from 102 in the 2003 Union Parishad elections for the position of UP chairmanships. But this is not the result of encouraging women leaders by major parties and the media. At present, there is not a single woman city mayor in Bangladesh. In 1994, as many as 19 women ward commissioners were elected to the reserved seats of the Dhaka City Corporations for the first time and it is obvious that no local government can be strong enough without women participation.

## **8. Role of parties in advancement of women in politics**

Political parties play an important role in shaping women's representation in politics and giving strong position in national or local level politics. But in Bangladesh women still primarily hold weak and non-influential decision-making positions in the central executive committee of the different political parties due to a lot of prejudice among male leaders of most political parties against women candidates though there is women's branches or committees by the parties in recent years.

## 9. The National Policy for the Advancement of Women in Bangladesh

The national Policy for the Advancement of Women in Bangladesh are establishment of equality between men and women in all spheres and elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls. Establishment of women human right develop as human resource. Recognition of women's contribution in social and economic sector and eradication of poverty. Establishment of equality between men and women in administration, politics, education, games, sports and all other socio- economic sector and ensure empowerment of women in the fields of politics, administration and the economy. Provide housing, health, shelter and appropriate technology for women to create positive image to media in any adverse situation (BBS, 1998).

## 10. Constraints in local government to empower women

- 10.1 The lack of clarity in the constitution on the role of women in local government.
- 10.2 The patriarchal society enforces rules and laws in women which affect the self-confidence of women, limit their access on resources and information and thus keep them in a lower status than men.
- 10.3 Lack of cooperation by men in the local government is a significant drawback to women's effectiveness in decision-making.
- 10.4 Lower educational achievements and the prevalence of social norms that severely restrict their freedom of movement in the public place handicapped women in Bangladesh.
- 10.5 Direct election to the reserved seats in Bangladesh is undoubtedly a breakthrough for women that limit the scope to influence decisions.

## 11. Recommendations

- a. Ensuring equal allocation of fund for female & male representatives.
- b. In the manuals and orders of local government, roles and responsibilities of the women members should be clearly defined.
- c. Discrimination in budget allocation and paying honorarium should be removed.
- d. Paying heed to women representatives.
- e. At least 35% allocation of budget has to ensure for women representatives of reserve seats.
- f. Expanding opportunities of education, health care and employment in order to eliminate different social problems like child marriage, family conflicts etc. and to create awareness among women about their low status in society.
- g. In the grass roots levels political participation would give women an access to the political decision making process relating to the allocation of resources.
- h. Electronic media should be used to educate and mobilize public opinion in such a way that the realization about the benefits of women's full participation in the national development efforts is created among people.
- i. More priority must be given to monitoring the status, conditions and rights of women.
- j. Various opportunities for leadership training, training regarding the activities of local level and education should be given to women in order to encourage them to take up political and leadership position.
- k. Finally, research on women's participation in politics, their voting behavior, consciousness and participation in the political parties must be undertaken.

## **12. Conclusion**

Women's participation has positive effects on the quality of local government. A legitimate space in rural political institutions have been acquired though they have low political status as compared to men which raise their marginalized position, even though they are still a minority. Without taking women's needs and interests into account and opportunity for them to participate in and influence decision-making, development interventions and planning, sustainable as well as meaningful results will not come and to attain strong local government empowerment of women is inevitable. At the end, it can be said that provision of inclusion of directly elected women members have created a new avenue at the grass-roots level to participate in the decision-making process in the healthy democratic institution.

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**Annexure**

Questionnaire: Women's Participation in Local Government

**13. QID:**

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Date:

Recorder:

Union Parishad:

Upazilla:

District:

1. Name of the respondent:

2. Age:

3. Marital status:

4. Religion:

4. Education:

- a. Primary
- b. Below secondary
- c. SSC
- d. HSC
- e. Bachelor
- f. Masters
- g. Others

5. What is your main occupation?

- a. Farmer
- b. Service holder
- c. Self employed
- d. Teacher
- e. Business
- f. Others

6. Participated in local level election:

- a. First time participated in Local Government politics
- b. Previously participated in Local Government politics

7. Spending huge amount of money in the election would be the barrier to participate in politics for women, what is your opinion regarding this issue?

- a. Spending money is essential
- b. Spending money is not essential

8. Way of overcoming the above problem:

- a. Remove quota system
- b. Specific duties to be given to Women members
- c. Free from political influence
- d. Active participation as an elected representative
- e. Equal distribution of work

- 
9. What are the responsibilities of a women member in Union Parishad?
- Attending meeting
  - Decision making
  - Participation in development of own area
  - Others
10. Are you the Unit head/Chairperson of a committee? If yes, please specify.
- Yes
  - No
11. Which type of problems actually faces the people of your union?
- Family oriented issue
  - Health
  - Salish
  - Dowry
  - Divorce
12. What type of problems women are facing in your union parishad ?
- Family oriented issue
  - Health
  - Salish
  - Dowry
  - Divorce
12. Do you think that you are privileged to get extra benefits as a woman from government for women development?
- Yes
  - No
13. If government gives extra priority to you, what initiative you will take for the women?
- To raise political empowerment
  - To aware on women right
  - To increase women education
  - To safe womanhood
  - To generate decision making policy
14. What is the difference between general seats and reserved seats?
15. What is your opinion about the Quota system for women in local government politics?
- Quota is essential for women political empowerment
  - Increase number of participation
  - Develop women situation
  - Step towards the mainstream of politics
16. Have you got any government place to carry out your jobs?
- Yes
  - No
17. Did you fulfill your electoral manifesto given to the people?
- Yes
  - No
  - A few
  - Most of all

18. Women will be aware more for participating in the union Parishad election, what is your opinion?

- a. Yes
- b. No

19. What are the main barriers for non participation of women representatives in local government?

- a. Lack of education
- b. Patriarchy
- c. Lack of awareness about women's right

20. Did you face any problems or difficulties by the male counterparts before or after getting nomination?

- a. In some case
- b. A lot
- c. Never
- d. Frequently

21. In decision making, do your male counterparts estimate you like a human being or only as women?  
Or underestimate as women?

- a. Yes
- b. No

22. For the development of your locality can you take initiative whether it is necessary?

- a. Not very much
- b. Sometimes
- c. Not really

23. Can you signify any of these jobs that make you satisfied as well as your community?

- a. Violence against women
- b. Distribution of relief
- c. Development of women,
- d. Road construction
- e. Educational activities
- f. Child and women health care
- g. Dowry
- h. Acid victim
- i. Child marriage
- j. Girl's education

24. Before your participation was there any female members standing in the position of any Union Parishad

- a. Yes
- b. No

25. Would you please brief about your experience as a woman member in Local Government?

26. After getting nomination is there any help have you got during your election period from your family?

- a. Fully
- b. Partially

27. To be educated as a politician did you receive any multi chance from your family? What is your opinion?

28. What was your inspiration to become a people's representative?

- a. Family members
- b. Childhood dream
- c Not specific

30. As a women candidate have you faced any difficulties before election?

- a. Yes
- b. Sometime
- c. Partially
- d. Not at all.

30. At present what is the situation of a women in politics?

- a. Good
- b. Better than before
- c. Improving

31. What general acceptance are you getting as women representatives?

- a. Sometimes are getting
- b. Sometimes are ignored.

32. Is there any difference between male or female representatives?

- a. Yes
- b. No

33. As a woman have you felt that male counterpart is non cooperative?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Sometimes

34. Are women representatives ignored by their male counterparts in decision making? If 'yes', why?

- a. All the time
- b. Sometimes

35. Are women potential/ skilled like men?

- a. Yes
- b. Not all the time

36. Did your family members help you when you participate in the election?

- a. Sometimes
- b. Sometimes helpful

37. Women participation are upgrading nowadays, what is your opinion?

38. What is your role for the development of your locality?

39. What is your advice for the women who will be participating in the next election?

40. Do you want to add anything to this interview?

Thanking you.

*Signature:*