



## WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN UNION *PARISHAD* OF BANGLADESH

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**Abstract:** The study was conducted through a survey on 108 women representatives elected in the Union *Parishad* (UP) election of 2003 purposively selected from 36 Unions of Bagerhat District of Bangladesh with an interview schedule. These women representatives mainly came to UP through the provision of reserved seats of Union *Parishad* Act, 1997. They are not given equal access in project distribution, committee memberships and their opinions in the UP decision making were ignored. The adversarial conditions were manifested by the patriarchal social structure that does not put up with women in the leadership position. The surveyed women representatives suggested that significant political and institutional changes will be required for them to be empowered. To ensure good governance and to remove gender discrimination in local government, more supportive policies and laws have to be incorporated and implemented along with the reservation of seats for women.

**Keywords:** Women representatives, decision making, power, local government, equal participation, union parishad.

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### Introduction

Traditionally Bangladesh is a patriarchal society where women are subordinated to men. They are deprived from expressing their opinion spontaneously or taking part in decision making regarding private and public affairs. The 'political' sphere, in particular, is regarded as a male domain that excludes women, despite statutory provisions for their inclusion (Nazneen, 2004). Women are not adequately represented in political decision-making; issues of public policy relating to women's equality (Chowdhury, 1984, Shamim and Nasreen, 2002). Recognizing the political empowerment of women as precondition for changing the fate of women and with a view to securing a minimum representation of women at local level government bodies, the government promulgated the Local Government Ordinance in 1976 and introduced a three-tier local government system where the provision was made to select two women members in the union council (Ahmed, 2001). The Local Government (Union Parishad) Second amendment Act, 1997 is a milestone in the history of women's participation in Bangladesh. In this act, provision was made for three reserved seats for women in each Union *Parishad* to be elected based on universal adult franchise (Sultana, 2000). Accordingly the present Union Council of Bangladesh is made up of thirteen members including the Chairman and three women (Mumtaz, 2005).

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According to the Local Government Ordinance, elected women UP members will act as chairperson in at least three of 13 standing committees. But in reality it is found that in many of the Union *Parishads*, the Standing Committees have not yet been formed. Moreover, where they are formed, the women members have no responsibilities despite their inclusion in the committees (Shamim, 1999). The disaggregated conditions of women representatives are well documented in literatures. According to available literatures, some of the constraints that female representatives faced in the Union *Parishads* were: (i) lack of any job description or clarification of their roles as members, (ii) improper implementation of the local government ordinance related to the allocation of development schemes to the female members, (iii) lack of work assignments to female members, (iv) exclusion of female representatives from the 13 standing committees, (v) lack of notification about the time of meetings, (vi) pressure by the chair to sign the minutes of a meeting even if the female members were not present at that meeting, and (vii) verbal abuse from male chairs and representatives. Moreover, women members have little access to UP funds for development schemes (Khan Foundation, 2004). So there is a need to enable women to be more effective members of local government bodies. Two aspects of effectiveness need to be considered, i. e. effectiveness in participating in overall Union *Parishad* operations and their involvement in the development issues (Shamim and Kumari, 2002). In these circumstances, the main objective of the present study was to portray the plight of women representatives in union parishad.

#### Methods and materials

The study was conducted through survey research design and data were collected from women representatives elected from reserved seats of 36 Union *Parishads* of 9 different Upazillas of Bagerhat district. A sample of 108 women representatives of 36 union parishads was selected purposively. Data were collected by administering an interview-schedule containing of both open and close ended items.

#### Results

##### *Background information of the respondents*

**Age Structure:** To be elected as a representative of Union *Parishad*, the candidate must be aged 25 years. Data in the Table 1 show that about half of the women representatives *i.e.* 45.4 percent were at the age group of 35-39 years following 39.8 percent at the age of 30-34 years. Only 2.8 percent of the female representatives were between the ages of 25-29 years and 45-50 years respectively. On the other hand, the women representatives who were within the age group of 40-44 years constituted only 9.3 percent. So it was found that the middle aged women got preference to be elected as the representative of UP.

Table 1: Age of the respondent

Age ( in Years)	Number of Respondents	Percentage
25-29	3	2.8
30-34	43	39.8
35-39	49	45.4
40-44	10	9.3
45-49	3	2.8
Total	108	100.0
	Mean Age: 35.58 Years	Standard Deviation: 4.07

**Marital status:** Married women are honored and accepted to the people in our society as female representatives. Data in the Table 2 show that more than two-thirds *i.e.* 79.6 percent of the female representatives were married and only 2.8 percent were unmarried. Less than 20 percent were either widowed (9.3%) or divorced (8.3%). Mostly these women representatives were familiar as wife of their husbands.

Table 2: Marital status of the respondents

Marital Status	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Married	86	79.6
Unmarried	3	2.8
Divorced	9	8.3
Widow	10	9.3
Total	108	100.0

**Education:** Education is instrumental in the development of values and virtues and also helpful to be empowered in the society. Data in the Table 3 represent that the highest number (39.8%) of the female representatives' completed Secondary School Certificate (SSC) following primary (class 1-5) level (29.6%). The female representatives who completed junior secondary level (class 6-8) constituted 20.4 percent and only 10.2 percent completed Higher Secondary Certificate and above. It was an outstanding finding that none of the women representatives was illiterate.

Table 3: Educational qualification of the respondents

Level of Education	No. of Res.	Percentage
Primary	32	29.6
Secondary	22	20.4
SSC	43	39.8
HSC and Graduate	11	10.2
Total	108	100.0

### **Mistreatment of Women Representatives in Union *Parishad***

**Hindrance of taking part in up election:** Women in Bangladesh live in such social system where socialization process plays an important role to push them in an inferior and a subordinate position in society. Patriarchal values and institutions here do not demonstrate positive and supportive views about women leadership. Conventionally, in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, women are always identified with domestic life while politics is viewed as a male-dominated public activity. It was found that half of the women representatives experienced financial problems due to lack of political support as the greatest hindrance to take part in union election. It was very difficult for women candidates to campaign throughout the constituencies under three wards. Just above 33 percent of the women representatives faced familial problems (*i.e.* restriction in campaigning at night, get less time because of spending a major portion of time in maintaining family duties and so on) and only 16.7 percent faced some social and religious constraints (Table 4).

Table 4: Type of hindrance faced in taking part in union *parishad* election

Types of Constraints	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Financial	22	33.3
Familial	33	50.0
Social and Religious	11	16.7
Total	66	100.0

**Participation of women representatives in decision making at UP:** With no clear cut definition of the role and functions of the ‘reserve’ seat in the amendment in 1997, representatives in these seats came to be virtually ‘unwanted’ in the UPs as has been reported in a number of studies of UP women members and their roles (Khan and Fardaus, 2006). The functions and roles of the women in the reserved seats and the general seats are not specified in the Law, nor is it stated that the women members would be responsible for the same duties as the members from the general seats. This resulted on the one hand in confusion on the part of the newly elected women and created scope for the chairmen to exclude women from UP functions on the other. Data in the Table 5 reveal that just about 39.8 percent of the decisions were taken by the chairman and male members, about 31.5 percent decisions were taken by the chairman along with all the members, while only chairman takes 16.7 percent of the decisions in the meetings and 12.0 percent decisions were taken by the male members from general seats. The elected women representatives were neglected in decision making process at UP and they had a very poor voice against it. The elected representatives acted as a decoration of UP.

Table 5: Decision maker of UP meetings

Decision Maker	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Chairman	18	16.7
Chairman and male members	43	39.8
Male members	13	12.0
Chairman along with all the Members	34	31.5
Total	108	100.0

**Influence on decision making by the women representatives:** With regard to partial and non-acceptance of the opinions of women at the meetings, majority of women reported that because they had minority representation in the Union *Parishad*, their voices were not honored. It was true that among the women representatives more than 70 percent had no influence in decision making in the Union *Parishad* (Table 6). On the other hand, just above 11 percent of the respondents who were elected in the reserve seats could influence the decision making moderately because they had moderate acceptance to the chairman. More than 5 percent of the respondents claimed that they had high influence in the decision making process as they had their higher voice and they had the political back up to go against the chairmen.

Table 6: Extent of influence in decision making

Extent of Influence	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Highly	6	5.6
Moderate	12	11.1
Poorly	14	13.0
No influence	76	70.4
Total	108	100.0

**Attitude of the male colleagues:** Patriarchy as a system, an ideology and practice impacts in different ways on the lives of women wherever they are. Although women have equal political rights to participate as voters and representatives, in reality they can be actively discouraged to do so. The patriarchal society enforces rules and laws in such way that affect the self-confidence of women, limit their access to resources and information and thus keep them in a lower status than men. Data in the Table 7 show that more than 39 percent of women representatives perceived their male colleagues attitudes as reactive and 29.6 percent women representatives professed their attitudes as conservative. Another 20.4 percent found their attitudes as vindictive towards them and only 10.2 percent perceived as open minded. So it is clear that socio- cultural norms and patriarchal values are used frequently for challenging and reinterpreting women’s rights.

Table 7: Perception about male colleague's attitude

Types of attitudes	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Open Minded	11	10.2
Conservative	32	29.6
Reactive	43	39.8
Vindictive	22	20.4
Total	108	100.0

**Acceptance of public support:** The male-biased environment within political institutions deters equal rights and responsibilities of women representatives. In Bangladesh, women have lower political status as compared to men. Due to socio-political and religious bindings, elected women cannot play their role and thus people’s aspiration and expectation to them were not met up. Near about 60.2 percent of the elected women in the reserve seats of UP asserted that they were accepted with conservatism and 29.6 percent women informed that they were accepted warmly by the general people. Just above 10 percent of the respondents declared that they were not accepted cordially by the general people (Table 8).

Table 8: Acceptance of public support

Options	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Accepted Warmly	32	29.6
Accepted with Conservatism	65	60.2
Did not Accept	11	10.2
Total	108	100.0

**Role of women in development activities:** All successive governments in Bangladesh, since its independence, felt the need to have viable local government for ensuring effective governance. Basically, the UP women representatives are involved in distributing VGD and VGF card among the poor, distributing honorarium of widows, ensuring law and order and local infrastructural development projects within the Union *Parishad*. It was noticed that among the women representatives' 80.6 percent of them did not get equal responsibility of implementing project of UP while only 19.4 percent of the women representatives got equal share in the project implementation. Overwhelmingly large number *i.e.* 80.6 percent could not play their role in infrastructural development activities while 79.6 percent had not their membership in Various Standing Committees (Table 9).

Table 9: Role of women in development activities

Role of Women	Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Getting Equal Share in Projects	Yes	21	19.4
	No	87	80.6
	Total	108	100.0
Role played in Infrastructural Development Activities	Yes	21	19.4
	No	87	80.6
	Total	108	100.0
Membership in Various Standing Committees	Yes	22	20.4
	No	86	79.6
	Total	108	100.0

**Social mobility within the family and community:** Several articles in the Bangladesh Constitution mandate equal rights to women in all spheres of private and public life including right to hold elected and appointed office. **Article 28 (2)** of the constitution guarantees equal rights of women with men in all spheres of the state and public life. **Article 10** ensures participation of women in all spheres of national life. The Constitution also mandates that nothing shall prevent the state from making special provision in favor of women (**Article 28 (4)**). Gender division of labor places the burden of household work on women and limits women's time and ability to participate in formal political activities (Nazneen and Tasneem, 2010). About 69 percent of the women representatives did not move freely in their locality as they had religious and socio-cultural obstacles and only 30.6 percent women moved freely while 71.3 percent women representatives said that they needed permission while only 28.7 percent said that they did not need to seek permission to go outside as they were the household head (Table 10).

Table 10: Social mobility within the family and community

Role of Women	Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Free Movement of Women representatives in Locality	Yes	75	69.4
	No	33	30.6
	Total	108	100.0
Necessities of Seeking Permission of Family Members to go Outside	Yes	77	71.3
	No	31	28.7
	Total	108	100.0

**Educational qualification and extent of influence in decision making:** Education is the strongest factor influencing women’s control of their own fate. In Bangladesh women are handicapped because of lower educational achievements and the prevalence of social norms that severely restrict their freedom of movement in the public place. And so they do not show interest in participating in local government activities. Data illustrated in the Table 11, show a difference between educational qualification of women representatives and extent of their influence in decision making of the affairs of UP, and the difference is statistically significant ( $X^2 = 183.409$ ;  $p < .000$ ). Extent of influence in decision making at meeting increases with the level of education of the women representatives.

Table 11: Relationship between educational qualification of women representatives and extent of their influence in decision making of the affairs of union *parishad*

Educational Qualification	Extent of Influence in Decision making at Meeting				Total
	Highly	Moderate	Poorly	No Influence	
Primary (I-V)	0	0	0	32	32
	.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Secondary ( VI-IX)	0	11	11	0	22
	.0%	50.0%	50.0%	.0%	100.0%
SSC	33	10	0	0	43
	76.7%	23.3%	.0%	.0%	100.0%
HSC and Graduate	11	0	0	0	11
	100.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%
Total	44	21	11	32	108
$\chi^2 = 183.409(9) p > .000 (0.01)$					

### Discussion

As a measure towards strengthening Local Government and empowering grassroots women by ensuring their participation in Union *Parishads*, an amendment to the Union *Parishad* Ordinance (1983) in 1997 introduced the division of the UPs into nine wards and reservation of three seats for women<sup>1</sup>. It was a milestone for empowering the grass root level women in the patriarchal society like Bangladesh. But it seems to be just like a pinch of salt in a huge basin of water as no rule or policy has come out yet to ensure the smooth functioning and participation of women representatives within the UP, rather they are looked like dancing on the lion’s den becoming the victim of the circumstances. Patriarchal domination thwarts the noble aim of reservation of seats for empowering women in political spheres because institutions of governance like all other institutions have developed in patriarchal societies and have been shaped by the assumptions of unequal gender relations (Ginwala, 1998). Patriarchal values and ideologies are deeply embedded within the society that eventually impedes women’s independence and restricts them within the web of gender stereotypic roles, mostly expressive (Parsons and Bales, 1955). Therefore, they hardly have any control over the household resources; barely allowed to move alone outside their households without any company, especially of males; often discouraged to participate in income generating activities as well as social and political events like voting behavior. Women’s such subjugation is further pushed forward because of their unwillingness and lack of opportunities to learn about their legal, social, political and cultural rights (Varghese, 2011). This is true for the

<sup>1</sup> The revised Local Government Act (Union *Parishad*) 2009 also has the nine wards and similar arrangement of three reserved seats for women to be elected directly.

inferior positions of women representatives within all public organizations as these are rooted from the patriarchal social structure that provides unequal power relations between male and female. Politics and decision making in Bangladesh still remain a male domain in spite of tremendous efforts of women activists. Male dominance is starkly visible in representative institutions as the Union *Parishad*. The Constitution of the country provides, under *Article 10 and 28 (2)*, for gender equality in all spheres of the state and public life. But the male hegemonic patriarchal control of resources and values of society 'shape and limit the nature of women's political engagements, constitutional provisions notwithstanding' (Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994). This patriarchal domination tend the women representatives to have less participation in decision making, lower representation in standing committees, no or fewer shares in project distribution and low voice in all injustices against them as they were socialized in this culture since their childhood.

The aim of the reservation of seats was to empower women in local government as well as to empower them but it was found that the elected women representatives did not attain much autonomy in spite of being the member of union *parishad* like the male members. More than two-thirds (71.3%) of the women informed that they needed the permission from their family to go outside and about one-third of them could not enjoy free movement in the locality as well as 60.2 percent women felt that they are accepted with conservatism by the public. About 90 percent women representatives were also the victim of conservative, reactive and vindictive attitudes by their male colleagues. In this age of modernization still 80 percent household head in Bangladesh is husband. So this study bears the testimony of unchanged mindset of the people in the society as well as male members in the *parishad* towards women representatives in particular and the women folk as a whole.

The study also found that lack of education and cooperation from family and society is responsible for the hurdle of women representatives. The women who got family inspiration and cooperation from the neighbors took part in the election. The support from the political parties also played a pivotal role regarding this matter. The women having higher level of education had greater participation in decision making process of union *parishad* compared to the women having minimal level of education. The women representatives had lack of knowledge about internet use and did not read the newspaper daily that could enhance their knowledge and make conscious about the happenings in home and abroad.

Another cause of the disaggregated picture of women representatives in the union *parishad* of Bangladesh is their under representation. Women constitute a minute portion that is only one-third which is negligible in decision making process. In any decision making process more than half of the representatives are granted. Hence women representatives lag behind than their male counterparts as out of 13 members' male constitute nine in number. To eradicate such inferior positions of women numerous efforts have been taken by both the Government of Bangladesh. The Constitution of Bangladesh grants equal rights to women and men in all spheres of public life (*Article 27, 28(1), 28(2), 28(3), 28(4), 29(1), 29(2) and 29(3)*). At the international level, Bangladesh has ratified the CEDAW<sup>2</sup> agreeing to the Optional Protocol in 2000 but expected outcome has not come. So to ensure gender equality in the union *parishad* of Bangladesh more women have to be elected, specific laws and rules with strict functional specificity and equal participation should be enacted without any delay.

### **Conclusion**

The study has analyzed the status of women's participation as representatives and their functional environment in union *parishad*. Though, some legal measures have been taken to increase the participation of women in local government but still their participation is meager than the male

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<sup>2</sup> UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

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members. Women representatives face serious problems in participating in UP functions mostly because of resistance by the chairman and male members. Such resistance resulted due to the non-specificity of the role of the members for reserved seats. Not only women representatives face problem within the UP but also within the family and in greater society. The women representatives have low voice in UP affairs because they constitute less than one-third of the union *parishad's* members. So to change this situation of the women representatives, change must be done in the laws, in the family as well as in the society.

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