Obstacles of Women Representatives Functioning in Union Parishad in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT
The union parishad works closely with the marginalized people in the local area. At an interval of five years, a chairperson is elected as the head of the council, a member is elected from each of the nine wards, and from each of the three wards three women members are selected respectively. The three special positions of the selected women members act as the empowerment of the women. This research aims to identify the obstacles of women representatives while functioning their work in union parishad. This research article also suggests identifying the factors which hinder the performance of women representatives. This paper also provides recommendations of how these obstacles will be removed by taking proper initiatives.

Keywords: Women’s empowerment, Local government, Obstacles, and Women’s representative.

INTRODUCTION:
Bangladesh has a long and traditional history of local government. The existence of local government in the subcontinent can be traced since the ancient time. Local government is an organization made up of local elected representatives to carry out local activities. To maintain law and order in the rural areas of the Indian subcontinent, the union parishad is originated from the village panchayat act in 1870. Still, it is considered as the only and the oldest participatory local government institution. A three-tier local government system in 1976 was promulgated by the government according to the local government ordinance. The Second Amendment Act 1997 of Bangladesh in the local government (union parishad) is considered as a milestone to ensure women’s equal access in politics (Rahman, 2010).

In the election held in 1997, for the first time in our country nearly 14,000 women were directly elected as a member of the union parishad. This was a great moment for the political and social empowerment of women in our country (Rashid, 2008). Equal participation of women in political life plays an important role for the advancement of women. Without the active involvement of women at all levels the goals of equality, decision making and the development and peace cannot be fulfilled (KHAN & Ara, 2006). This research aims to examine whether the women representatives of UP (both women reserved seat & general seat) perform their functions properly or not. If they cannot function properly, what are the obstacles they face while functioning their activities?

Objectives of the study
The objective of this paper is to identify the obstacles of women representatives while functioning their work in Union Parishad. Especially, it seeks to identify the factors which create difficulties to perform the fun-
ction smoothly by the women representatives. This study also attempts to provide how these obstacles will be removed by taking proper initiatives.

**METHODOLOGY:**
The study shows the case study of Mymensingh, Kishorgonj, and Jamalpur districts. Data for this study have been collected from primary and secondary sources. The researcher has collected primary data from Dhanikhola union Parishad, Trishal Upazila, Josodal union Parishad Kishorgonj Sadar and Nayanogor union Parishad, Melandah Upazila. Moreover, to collect secondary data, we use books, Journals, Newspapers, social media, and previous research work.

**Respondent of the profile**
We have taken three members from different unions of Mymensingh, Kishorgonj, and Jamalpur district.

| Union Name | Ward No | Chairman & Members Name    |
|------------|---------|---------------------------|
| Dhanikhola | -       | Asaduzzaman Asad          |
| Dhanikhola | 7,8,9   | Taslima (Member)          |
| Josodal    | 1,2,3   | Nasima Akter (Member)     |
| Josodal    | 1,2,3   | Hannan (Member)           |
| Nayanagor  | 1,2,3   | Amena Begum (Member)      |
| Nayanagor  | -       | Shofiqul Islam            |

**Limitations**
1) Due to lockdown, we could not cover all districts to collect data for conducting this research. For this, we selected Mymensingh, Kishorgonj and Jamalpur districts as a sample area.
2) In addition, some representatives denied participating in the interview section.

**Conceptual Framework**
Local government generally refers to a mass organization that acts as part of a national government based on the territory of a country in a relatively small geographical area. In the local government structure union parishad is considered as an ancient unit of our country. This institution has passed more than 152 years. After the independence of Bangladesh, the second amendment act of the local government (Union Parishad) in 1997 was declared. In this act, three reserved seats for the women in the union parishad was introduced, where the women members from each of the three wards were directly elected. Thus, the status of women equalizes the total progress of nation, because in a political and social structure the women have to play a vital role in building the country (Shamim, 2013). To perform women's representative role and responsibility at UP, they face different obstacles such as male domination, family problems, lack of training, social barriers, etc. As a result, they cannot perform their function correctly, hampers the overall activities.

**RESULTS:**

**Male Domination**
The dominance and discrimination of the president and male members over female representatives can be noticed in the allocation of the social security box and other development work in Union Parishad, such as cards, VGF, social security box program VGD card, etc. Even if three words are selected together, you will not receive the same card number as 1 Word member. In addition, in the case of projects allocated for government development such as ADB, LGSP, Project for Rural Women, Kabikha, etc., women representatives get less allocation than male representatives, and often, women members do not get any news that any government allocation is coming for Union Parishad. During discussion with the women members of Josodal union of Kishorgonj Sadar regarding the obstacles of women members while functioning their works in union parishad she said that “We are the elected women members of the union parishad from three wards. However, we are given less importance to perform village courts. Moreover, the total number of VGF, VGD card, widow allowance card given to a male member is not equally same given to a female representative. In addition, women members also do not gate proper share of development expenditure”.

In our country, at the village level, the Union Parishad seeks to resolve various family problems, marital quarrels, problems with neighbors, and other social problems through village courts through arbitration. In most of the cases in our country, unmarried and married women in the rural areas are abused in various ways. Sometimes in school, college, university, sometimes on the street, sometimes in a family environment. To solve all these problems, the government is making arrangements to have women representatives at the UP level. However, in reality, UP women representatives are neglected. Women representatives are
not often called during village court trials, and even if they call again, their opinion or decision is not accepted. Another problem that does not reflect the views of women representatives of village courts is their illiteracy. Most of the women representatives in our country are less educated and less educated. So, they are right in arbitration and cannot give an opinion or correct decision. That is why women representatives are neglected in the village courts.

**Maximum Women Representatives remain uneducated**

In our country, the educational qualifications for Chairman, Male Member, and Female Representative of the Union Parishad are yet to be determined. Therefore, many less educated, less educated candidates are elected as chairmen, male members, and female representatives in the UP elections. Less-educated UP women members cannot show their skills in different types of work of the council. During discussion with the chairman of Dhanikhola union of Trishal upazila regarding the obstacles of women representatives while functioning their works in union level he said that:

“At present women representatives are elected directly through election to the reserved women seat to the in union parishad. It denotes a good sign for a democratic country. However, there are no specific rules in our country regarding the work of women representatives according to the constitution. Hence, they have to face much difficulty to function their work smoothly.”

**Social background of women representatives in UP**

| Background                     | GSMs     | Reserved Seat Members |
|-------------------------------|----------|-----------------------|
| **RSMs**                      | N=175    | N= 191                |
| **Level of Education**        |          |                       |
| Illiterate                    | 2.624.18 | -                     |
| Primary                       | 27.33    | 59.22                 |
| Secondary                     | 20.42    | 24.08                 |
| Higher Secondary              | 8.33     | -                     |
| Graduate                      | -        | -                     |
| Not Available                 |          |                       |
| **Occupation**                |          |                       |
| Housewife                     | 58.86    | 76.44                 |
| Teaching                      | 10.85    | 2.62                  |
| NGO Workers                   | 10.29    | -                     |
| Business women                | 6.83     | 1.05                  |
| Others                        | 13.17    | 19.89                 |
| **Monthly Family Income**     |          |                       |
| Up to TK. 5000                | 73.7     | 92.49                 |
| Above TK. 5000                | 26.3     | 3.13                  |
| Not Available                 | -        | 4.38                  |
| **Marital Status**            |          |                       |
| Married                       | 74.86    | 83.77                 |
| Unmarried                     | 5.14     | 1.57                  |
| Divorced                      | 2.86     | 1.05                  |
| Widowed                       | 12.00    | 8.38                  |
| Others                        | 5.14     | 5.23                  |
| Not Available                 |          |                       |
| **Political Affiliation**     |          |                       |
| Bangladesh Awami League       | 70.86    | Not Available         |
| Bangladesh Nationalist Party  | 22.85    | Not Available         |
and duties entrusted to her on the other. Many times, in the world, parents-in-law, mother-in-law may have small children, but UP can hardly fulfill its responsibilities in taking care of them. Again, many times, the husband of the female UP representative does not like all his wife's activities. Therefore, women UP representatives from such families cannot properly exercise their responsibilities and powers. Women representatives from families who do not get enough support from their families think that it would be better if they could somehow pass their five-year term. They try to be satisfied with what they get in their salary allowance development allocation. Women cannot correctly use the responsibilities, duties, and powers for all these difficulties. During discussion with the women representatives of Nayanagar union of Melandah upazila regarding the obstacles of women representatives while functioning their works in union parishad she said that;

“In our patriarchal society, women are not allowed to go into politics outside the family. Even though a few of the family permit but the opinion of the mass people is that women members are not able to play an important role for the development of the society and solving various social problems.”

Social views regarding women representatives at UP
In Bangladesh, 78.6% of the population lives in villages. The view of most people in villages is that women will do the housework; that is, they will cook, look after the children and take care of other household chores. Where women will do politics, work outside and mix with different types of people, it is still not acceptable to the people of our country. As a result, the representation of women in UP is not clearly perceived by most people in rural society. The people of rural society still do not want to believe that women can do any significant work of society, any big problem. So, people go to male members and chairpersons to solve their problems. Besides, those families are pious and a little conservative; they do not want to leave their female members amid politics. In addition, the elected female members also go to work and are subjected to various types of sexual harassment by men inside and outside UP. In this situation, women are afraid to come to the polls in all

| Party                        | Percentage | Party      | Percentage |
|------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Jatiya Party                 | 2.29       | Jamaat-i-Islam Bangladesh | 4.00       |
|                             |            | Not Available | Not Available |

Source: Qadir and Islam, (1987)
types of local government, including UP, and do not feel comfortable working even if they win the election.

**Lack of constitutional clarification**

On the role of reserved seats for women representatives in local government bodies, there is no specific clarity in the constitution of our country. Eventually, there is no specification in the law regarding their roles and responsibilities.

**Lack of good link with upper-level administrator**

Only a few women members in both reserved and general seats have good links with actors outside of the locality, such as MP, UNO, or senior administrators. Most of the women members from both reserved and general seats remain disadvantaged via is the chairman and UNO, and they thus often have to accept many unfavorable conditions or work under adverse circumstances.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The initiation of women's reserved seat of union Parishad in our country is an excellent initiative to empower women, to ensure women's participation, and ensuring equal rights. However, reserved seat and general seat women representatives in union Parishad in our country face various types of obstacles in functioning their activities like Male Domination, Lack of constitutional clarification, social views regarding women representatives at UP, Family barriers of women representatives, Lack of adequate training, Lack of good link with upper-level administrator. However, some initiatives should be taken to reduce these obstacles such as the perception regarding participation of women in politics should be encouraged by everyone in our society, The guardian of female representatives should cooperate to perform their functions properly, they should be properly trained, male domination should be minimized, the government should publish gazette to clarify the role & responsibilities of UP members. If our government, NGOs, Civil society, Media, Politicians, and other important key stakeholders in our country perform positive functions to empower women, then our desire will be fulfilled.

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**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST:**

There is no conflict of interest from the authors’ end.

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