WOMEN, PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: BANGLADESH UNION PARISHAD PERSPECTIVE

MD. MOSTAFIZUR RAHMAN KHAN
FARDAUS ARA

Abstract: Mainstreaming women through gender specific policies is an acknowledged precondition for achieving meaningful development in any developing country like Bangladesh. Yet it is only recently that this issue has been recognized as such in the context of policy reforms in both administrative and local government arenas. Recent local government reform in Bangladesh has led to creation of quota for women in grassroots democratic institutions. In the context of local government, women’s concerns had surfaced intermittently and were highlighted in the government reform agenda as evident in the last Local Government Reform of 1997. As a consequential effect Local Government (Union Parishad) Amendment Act 1997 was promulgated. It provides 3 directly elected women members in the Union Parishad from 3 reserved seats. However, there are serious lacunas in gender balancing both in terms of governance policy and reform agenda. Union Parishad is the most popular democratic institution at the grassroots level. Therefore, the state of women’s participation at this level is crucial and deserves special attention to empower them as participation and empowerment are closely related.

Introduction
The overall development of a country depends upon the maximum utilization of her people, both men and women. In Bangladesh women comprise nearly half of the total population. But the status of women is much lower than that of men in every sphere of life. Women are identified with domestic life while politics is viewed as a male-dominated public activity that is typically masculine in nature. With the advancement of time, the fact has now been recognized that without ensuring women development, the national development cannot be achieved.

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 perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved. (FWCW,1995:1)

Systematic integration of women augments the democratic basis, the efficiency and the quality of the activities of local government. If local government is to meet the needs of both women and men, it must build on the experiences of both women and men, through an equal representation at all levels and in all fields of decision-making, covering the wide range of responsibilities of local governments.

Women’s role in decision-making is one of the most important questions for consideration in the movement for their empowerment. Keeping in mind, the importance of women’s participation in decision-making, like the other government in the world, the government of Bangladesh has initiated efforts to widen the scope of women for participation in the development process. The Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act 1997 of Bangladesh is a mile stone towards ensuring women’s equal access and increased participation in political power structures. This amendment provided for direct elections to reserved seats for women in local level elections. As a strategy of affirmative action for providing the structural framework for women’s participation in political decision-making and provided an opportunity to bring women to the center of local development and develop new grass-roots level leadership.

This paper is an attempt to explore the status of women’s participation and how their participation in local government lead
to empowerment in local government in Bangladesh particularly
the Union Parishad and will identify the factors that hinder
women’s participation. At the same time this paper will suggest
some remedial measures to uplift this situation.

Methodology
This study is basically based on the review of information
collected from secondary sources i.e. published books, reports,
research works, journals and newspapers. Some information is
also collected through internet browsing.

Operational Definition

Women
A woman is 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
(Wikimedia, 2005:1).

Women constitute about half of the total population of the
country. Apart from the household activities, they are contributing
substantially to the national economy. Bangladesh is one of the
first developing countries to establish a Ministry of Women’s
Affairs in 1978, three years after the First World Conference on
Women in Mexico. The government has already prepared a
National Policy for Advancement of Women and made some
noteworthy progress in implementing the National Action Plan,
prepared in response to the Beijing Platform For Action.

In spite of these achievements, the majority of women in
Bangladesh have yet to be empowered to participate actively in
the social, cultural, economic and political life of the country.
Gender discrimination is widespread in all spheres and at
all levels albeit, 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.

The policies and programs of the Government, NGOs, and
other institutions do not sufficiently address the need for women’s
empowerment (ADB, 2001:1).

Participation
Participation is a development approach, which recognizes
the need to involve disadvantaged segments of the population in
the design and implementation of policies concerning their well-
being. The strengthening of women’s participation in all spheres
of life has become a major issue in the development discourse.
Socio-economic development cannot be fully achieved without
the active participation of women at the decision making level in
society. Various scholars define ‘Participation’ in various ways.

Norman Uphoff (cited in Khan 1993:111) identified four main
kinds of participation, which are distinct but interrelated. They
are as follows:

a. Participation in decision making in identifying problems,
formulating alternative planning activities, allocating
resources etc;

b. Participation in implementation in carrying out activities,
managing and operating programs;

c. Participation in economic, social, political or other benefits
individually or collectively; and

d. Participation in evaluation of the activity and its outcomes
for feedback purposes.

and continuous efforts by the people themselves in setting goals,
pooling resources together and taking actions which aims at
improving their living conditions”.

S. Rahman (1991:3) has stated that all forms of actions through
which citizens take part in the operation of administration may
be termed as ‘participation’. Here, ‘taking part’ refers to any level
from macro to micro region or it may be of any type e.g. advisory
or in decision-making or in implementation etc.
According to Human Development Report, “participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political process that affects their lives” (1993:1).

Participation has both a narrow and wider connotation. In a narrow sense participation means some specific action by which the citizen participates for a limited purpose. And in a wider sense participation refers to the role of members of the general public as distinguished from that of appointed officials, including civil servants, in influencing the activities of government or in providing directly for community needs (Rahman, 1991:14-15).

**Empowerment**

Empowerment 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, 1993:5).

Empowerment of women is now a global issue. Although this term is usually used for improving women’s condition, in real sense it may be applied to any disadvantaged group of society for bringing them to the same level of advanced section.

The Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit on Social Development (WSSD) called for the recognition that empowering people, particularly women, to strengthen their own capacities is a main objective of development, and that empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and well-being of societies. The Report of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women called its Platform for Action ‘an agenda for women’s empowerment’ meaning that ‘the principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities’ (Oxaal, and Baden, 1997:3).

Vanessa Griffin (1987:117-18) identifies, some components to illustrate what the term empowerment indicates:

a. Having control or gaining further control;
b. Having a say and being listened to;
c. Being able to define and create from women’s perspective;
d. Being able to influence social choices and decision affecting the whole society;
e. Being recognized and respected as equal citizens in human beings with a contribution to make.

So it can be said that empowerment means a process to establish control over resources and also means to acquire ability and opportunity to participate in decision-making process and its implementation.

**Local Government**

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, 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 and Khan, 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).

**Union Parishad**

Union Parishad is the lowest tier of administrative unit in Bangladesh. And Union Parishad is the second tier of rural local government from below. As per the statutes at present Bangladesh contains a four-tier local government structure. But in compliance to the constitutional provision an elected local government body exists only at the union level. According to LG (UP) Ordinance, 1983, ‘union’ means ‘a rural area’ declared to be a union under section 3 (Declaration of union and alteration of limits thereof) [GOB, 1990:2-3]. It is entrusted with forty functions. The main functions include public welfare, maintenance of law and order, revenue collection, development and adjudication. Its source of income includes grants, taxes, rates, fees etc. The Union Parishad consists of a chairman, nine members, and three women members. The voters of the Union Parishad directly elect all.

**Evolution of Local Government in Bangladesh**

It is usually assumed that local government was the basic form of government in the sub-continent till 6th century B.C. Village self-government in the sub-continent is as old as the villages themselves (Siddiqui, 1994:24). Therefore, Local Government of one sort or another has a long history in the geographical area that now constitutes Bangladesh. This country was a colony of the British for about two hundreds years. Most of the local government bodies in Bangladesh owe their origin to the British rule, which ultimately passed through the Pakistan period to independent Bangladesh.

The origin of Union Parishad can be traced back to the Village Panchayets introduced in the 1870s by the British to maintain law and order in the rural areas with the help of local people. More than one hundred and thirty years have passed since the creation of the act and local government at union level over the years have changed its name, area, functions and power from time to time. Still it is the only and oldest democratic institutions in the history of Bengal.

The introduction of local government in British Bengal goes back to the passing of the Bengal Village Chowkidari Act of 1870, which established Chowkidari Panchayet consisted of five persons all nominated by the District Magistrate. 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). During the British and Pakistan period 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 (Ahmed and Nabi, 2001:3). The constitution of independent Bangladesh was adopted in late 1972, where in Article 59 provided for elected local government institutions at all levels (Ali, 1986:2). The P.O. of 1973 changed the name of Union Panchayet to Union Parishad without any significant changes in its character. Since then the Union Parishad is acting as the lowest administrative unit of rural local government in Bangladesh. Recently the Gram Sarkar Act of 2003 has introduced Gram Sarkar as an associate unit of the Union Parishad instead of an independent local government body. It would help to speed up the pace of development in the rural areas under the guidance of Union Parishad (UNESCAP, 2003:6)

There are at present 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 Sarkar, Union Parishad, Upazilla Parishad and Zilla Parishad. On the other hand local government in the urban areas consists of Pourashavas and City Corporations.

**State of Women Participation in the Union Parishad**

**Constitutional Provision:**

The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh recognizes basic and fundamental rights of the citizens
irrespective of gender, creed, cast, religion and race. It also makes provision for promoting causes of the backward sections of the population (Ahmed et al, 2003:14).

Related articles of the constitution regarding women’s participation may be seen in the following sentences.

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

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

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

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

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

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

(4): Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favor of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens (GOB, 1993:9,13,19).

By incorporating the above articles, the constitution gives special attention to women in democracy and local government. The nation puts no legislative barrier in the way of promoting gender equity in the sphere of social, political, and economic activities. The constitution gives guarantee of equal rights to women and also makes special provision for providing all necessary protections to backward sections of the society.

**Institutional Arrangement for Women’s Participation:**

During the British regime, local government in the union remained an almost exclusive domain of males. Only male could vote in election for rural local bodies till 1956 when for the first time election was held on the basis of universal adult franchise (Alam, 1995:40). Voting power of women was established lawfully. Women never thought of participating in this system. In 1976, the government promulgated the Local Government Ordinance for a three-tier local government system. It was the ever first ordinance regarding the local government system in the history of independent Bangladesh. In this ordinance the structure of the local government system underwent changes and the provision was made to select two women members in the Union Parishad. For the first time women were considered to be included in the local govt. In 1983, the changes were brought in structure and composition of Union Parishad by promulgating the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance. This ordinance increased the number of nominated women members to three and each of them represented one ward. In 1993, Local Government (Union Parishad) (Amendment) Act was passed in the Parliament to secure the minimum representation of women in local government. The new order omitted the system of nomination and provision for indirect election was created by the Parishad. But the number of the women member was fixed three as was earlier (Ahmed et al., 2003: 18). The Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act, 1997 is a milestone in the history of political empowerment of women in Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh enacted this law for direct elections to reserve seats for women in local level elections. In this act the government reserved three seats for women in the Union Parishad where women members were directly elected from each of the three wards. Apart from the reserved seats women can also contest for any of the general seats (ADB, 2001:15).

**Scope of Elected Women’s Participation**

**Laws and Rules:** The Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance 1983, provides the legal basis for the formation of the
Union Parishad. But it did not contain any clause for the role, power and responsibility of the women members.

After the new law enacted in 1997, the government increased the number of standing committees set up by the Union Parishad from seven to twelve. At the same time the government instructed that women members should be president of at least twenty five percent of these standing committees. However, the terms of reference of these committees and their modus operandi were not clearly specified. Therefore, a sort of ambiguity persists with regard to the participation of women members in the Union Parishad activities. Moreover, government by another notification directed each Union Parishad to form Social Development Committees in each of the three female wards to be headed by the female member concerned.

**Male-Female Ratio:** Though the ordinance did not restrict women from contesting for the seats of general members as well as the chairman, the number of elected women members from the general seat can not be taken into consideration. Therefore, the ratio of male-female members virtually remains almost 3:1.

Relevant laws/rules provide that decision-making in the Union Parishad will stem from what the majority supports. Therefore, it leaves no doubt that in terms of numerical strength women members are three times weaker than the other (male) members that clearly shows that the women members can do a little to influence the decision taken in the Union Parishad.

**Evidence of Women Participation in Local Government**

However, women’s participation in local government system remained very minimal. The number of women in elective positions of chairperson and members in the Union Parishad was abysmally low and practically infinitesimal. Women’s representation in all the elections held before and after 1997 may be observed in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elections</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Women Candidates</th>
<th>Elected Chairmen and Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairman</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>1135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>43969/456*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>43764/617*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Women contested and elected to the general seats.

Source: compiled by the authors from various sources

In 1973 election only one woman was elected as the chairperson of Union Parishad among 4352 unions. In the election of 1977 only four women were elected as chairperson whereas this number was only 6 in the election of 1984. In the Union Parishad election of 1988, 18566 contestants fight for the position of chairperson of 4401 Union Parishads. There were only 79 women contestants constituting only 0.4 percent for the post of chairperson and 863 for membership. Only one female chairperson was elected in 1988. Again in 1992, available data indicates that for the position of chairperson of 3899 unions out of 4398 Union Parishads, 115 women contested for chairpersonship and 1135 for members. Only 20 members were elected (Qadir, 1995:34). For elective position of members, the figures for the respective elections in 1988 and 1992 were 863 women out of 114,699 (constituting 0.7 percent) and 1135 women among 169,643 (comprising again some 0.7 percent) contestants (Ahmed and Nabi, 2001:3).
The Union Parishad election in 1997 encourages women participation in decision-making and empowerment process in Bangladesh. Government has made a law of direct election in reserved seats for the women at local level. This was a major initiative by the government for ensuring women’s participation in politics. In the election of 1997, 102 women contested directly for the post of chairperson and 20 of them elected. In general seats for members 456 women also contested against male, of them 110 were elected. Moreover, 44134 women contested for reserved seats, of them 592 were elected unopposed and some 13,437 women were elected for reserved seats. Later on another three women also elected as chairperson through bye-election. In that election women voters participated in an overwhelming number, 80 percent women voters cast their valuable votes (Islam, 2000:113).

Union Parishad Election 2003 was 7th and the largest local government election in this country’s history. The election started on January 25 and ends on March 16, 2003 consecutively in 4234 unions out of 4492 unions. In this election 232 women candidates contested for the post of chairperson and 617 women contested for the general seats. 22 women were elected as chairperson and 79 won in the general seats. For 12,684 reserved seats for women, a number of 39,419 women candidates contested. Total number of female voters was 3,01,71,698 (Ahmed et. al., 2003:20).

From the table-1, it is apparently clear that women’s participation is increasing in number but qualitative change is not visible substantially. Problems lie in every sphere of the society.

The decision to allocate reserve seat for the women had been taken to promote women’s participation in decision-making process as a part of women empowerment and development. In the Union Parishad election held in 1997, women for the first time were elected as Parishad members in the reserved seats. But an elected women member has to represent a constituency, which is three times larger than that of the general seat. After the Union Parishad election of 1997, it had been widely noticed that the women councilors had been facing enormous problems to perform their roles in the Parishad. Even, in the hands of male counterparts they have severely criticized and dishonored, and physically harassed as being of women. It is a clear reflection of the women situation and position in the society that manifests inequality and gender disparity. For a number of reasons including socio-political and religious hindrances the women cannot exercise their roles and rights properly.

Obstacles to Women’s Participation in Union Parishad in Bangladesh

The elected women member’s participation in local government bodies remains generally insignificant, as they are not given any specific duties. The absence of operational guidelines and terms of reference for female elected representatives, the limited capacity of the female elected representatives to operate in public institutions of this nature, the lack of awareness over their roles and responsibilities, the systematic discrimination and biases by male elected colleagues—all these are seen as factors impeding women’s meaningful participation in local government (ADB, 2001:14).

Some of the major problems to women’s participation in local government include the following:

1. Albeit the constitution guaranteed the equal rights for women, the reality is that they are not seen as equal, their roles are closely tied to their reproductive and household activities only. At the same time women are considered as unfit to perform political and community affairs. This is due to lack of clarity in the constitution on the role of women in local government. A common complaint regarding women’s reserved seats is that the law does not specify what their roles and responsibilities are to be.

2. Patriarchy as a system, an ideology and practice impacts in different ways on the lives of women wherever they
are. Patriarchal attitudes become so embedded that they are taken as natural. Even where there is supposed equality, these attitudes tend to prevail. Socio-cultural norms and religious misinterpretations are used frequently for challenging and reinterpreting women’s rights and create insecurity for women. And 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 a way that affect the self-confidence of women, limit their access on resources and information and thus keep them in a lower status than men.

3. Education is the strongest factor influencing women’s control of their own fate. In Bangladesh women are furthermore 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.

4. The male-biased environment within political institutions can deter women. The fact that there are few women on decision-making bodies means that these women have to work within styles and modes acceptable to men. As a result women cannot give attention to their issues. Sometime they are treated by their colleagues and society harshly. Many-if not all-male elected members harbor negative attitude towards elected women members. They believe women should not run for general seats. They denigrate the value of the reserved seats. Lack of cooperation by men in the local government is a significant barrier to women’s effectiveness in decision-making.

5. The introduction of direct election to the reserved seats is undoubtedly a breakthrough for women in Bangladesh. In no other way could these women have moved in to these institutions and participated in them. Still there is a gender imbalance in the ration of men and women in the Union Parishad. As a result the elected women members have very limited scope to influence decisions.

Policy Recommendations

In Bangladesh, women have low political status as compared to men. The participation of women results from their low socio-economic status stemming from social norms of a male dominated society confining women to the household. Their unequal status in society gives them unequal access to the educational, economic and other opportunities offered by the state and society. All these factors reinforce each other to keep women’s political participation low. But women’s adequate political participation is a precondition for bringing women in the mainstream of development process and thus empowers them.

No doubt, as a step of women empowerment, the elected reserve seats for women helps to promote participation and women access to the decision-making process numerically, though not practically much ensured. 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. And without women’s access and meaningful participation in decision-making process that is the ability to influence decisions in favor of the women community. To ensure a meaningful participation of the elected women members as an essential step to empower them, the following policy prescriptions may be taken into consideration:

1. Roles and responsibilities of the women members should be clearly defined in the manuals and orders of local government. Work should be fairly distributed among the male and female members in such a way so that women member can meaningfully participate in all type of functions.

2. To create greater awareness among women about their low status in society and the need to improve it, motivational programs along with programs for expanding opportunities for education, health care and employment should be launched.

3. Specific programs should be undertaken by the government and non-government organizations in order
to create an awareness among the women in the grass roots levels that political participation would give them an access to the political decision making process relating to the allocation of resources.

4. Mass 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.

5. Priority must be given to monitoring the status, conditions and rights of women. There must be a sustained campaign for women mobilization, regular reporting of monitoring, public information and advocacy in this realm.

6. Women should be given various opportunities for leadership training, training regarding the activities of Union Parishad and education in order to encourage them to take up political and leadership position. Supportive services should be provided to allow women participate in these training courses.

7. There is urgent need to undertake research on women’s participation in politics, their voting behavior, consciousness and participation in the political parties.

8. Finally, in increasing the number of women in decision-making positions does not in itself translate in to greater empowerment for women. Measures to increase the quantity of women representatives need to be accompanied by measures to improve the quality of participation.

Conclusion

Women have acquired a legitimate space in rural political institutions that can raise their marginalized position, though they are still a minority. Merely having women on councils does not automatically mean that the interests of women in the community are represented. Without women’s needs and interests being taken into account, without opportunity for them to participate in and influence decision-making, development interventions and planning sustainable results will not come. Yet, having women in these leadership positions is an important step in changing the male-dominated political agenda. At least they have the opportunity to attend the meetings, interact with officials and take part in important discussions. It also ensures their mobility across the social hierarchy.

The 33% quota for women is indeed an important impetus to women’s empowerment in rural Bangladesh. It becomes obvious that the process will take a long time and goal of women’s empowerment will not be secured by the quota alone. In order to support and accelerate the process one has to employ additional strategies, which promote the self-reliance of women (economically as well as socially), build women’s capacities and remove structural obstacles.

Empowerment is a useful concept because it emphasizes the idea of women as active agents in, rather than passively recipients of development strategies. Therefore, participation is considered as an essentially first step in order to empower women.

Finally it can be said that provision of inclusion of directly elected women members have created a new avenue to participate in the decision-making process in the only democratic institution at the grass-roots level.
References


Ahmed, Tofail et. al. (2003), Gender Dimensions in Local Government Institutions, Dhaka: Nari Uddug Kendra.


Asian Development Bank (ADB)[2001], Country Briefing Paper on Women in Bangladesh. Program Department (West), Division 2, ADB.


