

Barriers and Scope of Political Participation of Women in Local Government of Bangladesh: Union Parishad Perspective

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The present study explores the present scenario of women political empowerment in the lowest tier of a local government institution, Union Parishad in Bangladesh. This research has three objectives: first, to conceptualize the scope of work of the elected members; second, to find out the barriers in women's participation to local politics; and third, to identify the problem faced by the female members in performing their activities. The research employed a qualitative method. Results reveal that women members in Union Parishad are being empowered very slowly. The results also reveal that although quotas have increased the total number of women in political arenas, their representation in the decision-making process has not yet been ensured. Women still face several socio-cultural and religious challenges which hinder their participation and are still largely ignored by their male counterparts. The findings of the study also highlight that because of illiteracy and lack of experience, Union Parishad female members are unable to discharge their duties and exercise their power in an efficient manner. It is promising that women were highly regarded for caring and rearing family and household chores only a few years ago, however, they are currently solving social problems in their locality as well.

Local government, it is hoped, will provide women from the most marginalized communities with the chance to engage politically – to vote, lobby, and run for election (O'Connell, 2010). The political empowerment of women in Bangladesh and elsewhere are still under construction and behind their male counterpart. More specifically, among the south Asian nations women in a political arena are being empowered very slowly. In the 19th century, there are several great women leaders including Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Megawati Sukarnoputri, Chandrika Kumaratunga, Indira Gandhi, Benazir Butto, Aung San Suu Kyi, Khaleda Zia, and Sheikh Hasina who ruled upon their state. In the perspective of local government, Bangladesh was not able to establish expected participation of women. Previous studies found that women did not show their interest to participate in local politics.

Women's participation in the political process of development is of crucial importance from the consideration of both equity and development. Their demands, hopes, and opinions must be reflected in social and national development. It is observed that both in developed and developing countries, women's participation in politics at local and national levels is comparatively lower than that of men. In Bangladesh, women are comparatively in a subordinate state in all spheres of life, however, politically they are placed in a marginal state (Qadir, 1994). In the constitution of Bangladesh, every human being's rights are ensured. It is also ensured that men and women, as citizen, have equal rights in the state and public life. Constitutionally, there is no difference between man and woman in enjoying political rights. Nonetheless, people create discrimination within gender and give priority to men on women in various spheres in practical life.

The participation of women in political decision-making and power roles remains very slim. Currently, very few Bangladeshi women can be found in positions of political leadership in both central and local government structures, and even in the administrative hierarchy. As a result of the lack of opportunities to intervene at the policy and decision making level, women have a minimal impact in the planning, management, and implementation of policies (Mahtab, 2007). 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, 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 milestone towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in political power structures (Khan & Ara, 2006).

In terms of a strong local government with women's effective voice in it, there still remain many shortcomings. The reserved seats for female members virtually have no power in the decision making process compared to the general seat members. They do not obtain sufficient institutional status and support and also are denied access to mainstream activities. As a consequence, the number of female candidates for reserved seats declined from 44,969 in 1997 to 39,419 in 2003, which is about a quarter (12.3%) less within six years. Around half of women members (47%), who were elected in 1997 but did not compete in the 2003 elections (Karmaker, 2006).

The government encourages women to join in politics because it believes that women become empowered if they are able to participate in decision making equally with men. After receiving the rights of participation of women in Union Parishad elections in 1997, 2003, and 2011, the numbers of women who participated in election for the first time and elected most did not receive encouragement to run another term again. Possible reasons could be that roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined and lack of support from colleagues and working environment. Another reason is that educated and conscious women do not show interest in

local politics. In fact, those who were elected in the previous three elections had limited education. Extensive research found that the participation of female members are being discouraged by male members in the development programs. The male members' participation in economic development programs such as poverty reduction, road construction, sanitation education, and disaster management programs are higher than women. On the other hand, the female members' participation is comparatively higher on social safety net programs such as Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) card, aging card, and more. It should be noted that women are finding opportunities to participate in those programs whose economic values are lower. The present study argues that women have representation on Union Parishad, however, they have little power in decision making. The purpose of this study is to explore the present scenario of the participation of women in local government and their empowerment and roles. The specific objectives are as follows: first, to conceptualize the scope of work of the elected members; second, to find out the barriers in women's participation to local politics; and third, to identify the problem faced by the women members in performing their activities.

Backdrop of Women Participation in Union Parishad

There is a long and traditional history of local government in Bangladesh. Existence of local government may be found for a very long time in the subcontinent (Tawfique & Haque, 2009). Union Parishad is the lowest tier of administrative unit in Bangladesh. As per the statutes at present, Bangladesh contains a four-tier local government structure. In compliance to the constitutional provision, an elected local government body exists only at the union level. The present local government system in Bangladesh had its origin during British colonial period. The Bengal Village Panchayat Act 1870 was considered the first and fundamental legal steps of the local government system of Bangladesh. However, its forms have been changed under different regimes such as British, Pakistan, and Bangladesh period. The Local Self-Government Act (1885), the Village Self-Government Act (1919), Basic Democracy Order (1959), the Local Government Ordinance (1976), the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance (1983), the Local Government (Union Parishad) and Second Amendment Act (1997) are some principal legal instruments that led to the development of the present local government in Bangladesh.

Female representation in local government was invisible both during the British and Pakistan period. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the constitution of Bangladesh was adopted in late 1972, whereas Article 59 provided for elected local government institutions at all levels (Ali, 1986). Under the provision of Local Government Ordinance (1976), the government created a scope for participation of women in formal decision-making processes through nomination of two women members in Union Parishads. The number was increased from two to three through

Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance (1983) and it was continued until 1996 (Hossain, 2010). 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 (Asian Development Bank, 2001).

A recent study Rahman and Roy (2004) shows that in the traditional society of Bangladesh, women have to face some basic socio-cultural problems, which emerge from lack of education, consciousness and lack of cultural awareness. These are creating impediments for natural growth of women leadership at the grassroots level. Patriarchy and male domination are widespread in rural society.

Panday (2008) found that elected female members have not yet reached an equal status with their male colleagues in the Union Parishad. Even worse, they are not allocated equal shares in project distribution or committee memberships. Their opinions in Union Parishad decision making are generally ignored because they are only a minority. Overall, elected women legislators work in adversarial circumstances in which the majority of the people including their peers, families, and constituents appear to be their opponents.

Methodology

The study was conducted through qualitative methods because of its ability to provide rich data about real life people and situations as well as understanding behaviors in a wider context. The total sample of this study was 15 women members who had participated in Union Parishad election and were elected at least one time among last three Union Parishad elections in 1997, 2003, and 2011. The study participants were selected from Fifteen Union Parishad in four districts Kishoreganj, Nethrekona, Comilla, and Gaibandha. The study used purposive sampling method for selecting sample and research area.

Data Collection

The study considered both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary information collected directly from selected respondents in the research area. The research team for data collection was consisted of five post graduate students from University of Dhaka. An informal interview guide was used to conduct interviews. The interview guide (IG) was developed by a phase-by-phase process, in the local language (Bengali). At first, a preliminary IG was developed. Later, the research team reviewed and critiqued the preliminary IG. At the third stage, incorporating the ideas of the research team, IG was tested with three women. Lastly, the final version

integrated feedback from the pilot tests. The finalized IG had two sections: Specifically, the first section included socio demographic issues such as participant's age, education, family income, and more and the second section focused on the objectives of the study. First, in order to find out the answer of question about scope of work in Union Parishad's women were commonly asked, "How can you play a role in conducting various developmental activities in your union?" "How can you play a role in solving different kinds of social problems such as women torturing, dowry and conjugal conflict?" and "How much value do you believe was placed on your opinion in decision making in different activities in Union Parishad?"

Second, to find out the barriers in women's participation to local politics, participants were asked two questions: "Would you please describe the types of hindrance you faced in participating in the election?" and "What types of cooperation did you get from your family, community, society and relatives about your participation in the election as a local representative?"

Third, to know the types of problem faced by the women members in performing their activities, participants were asked: "Would you please describe how much assistance you are getting from your colleagues in work place? and "What types of problem did you face in the work place and how you were you treated?"

The research team physically observed and contacted each participant to conduct face to face interviews. The study strictly maintained informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity of respondent's personal profile for assuring the ethical issues of social research. The interviewers conducted the interview with respondents according to their favorable time, place and willingness on a voluntary basis. Before becoming respondents in the study, each was given a brief description on the purpose and procedures of the research and granted permission for an interview. Each was assured participant's rights to take or not to take part in the study and to withdraw from the interview at any time. While 12 participants consented to audio taped interviews, three declined.

Data Analysis

The information collected through in-depth interviews was compiled for qualitative analysis. After conducting interviews, each was transcribed later verbatim to understand the theme of respondent's information and experiences. To maximize the accuracy of the Bengali narratives in English, data was translated into English with the assistance of a group consisting of the principal investigator and one English graduate student. Afterwards, the raw data were organized for analyzing and the principal supervisor of the study checked and revised. Finally, the researcher conducted data analyses by organizing it into categories on the basis of themes, concepts, or similar features, formulating conceptual definitions, and examined the relationships among concepts. Instead of using real name of the participants, letters were assigned (e.g., participant A, B, and C) to maintain anonymity.

Findings

Husband Encourages Women's Participation in Local Politics

Traditionally, women in Bangladesh are discouraged to join in politics. It should be noted that after receiving higher education many women in Bangladesh are happy to see themselves as an ideal housewife. Their dependence makes as an obstruction to take decisions to do anything. From the beginning time of introducing the reservation seat system for women in Union Parishad, the majority of women did not show interest to participate in Union Parishad election. Those who participated in elections often did so for the fulfillment of their husband's wishes. The major observation of the study found that 10 out of 15 participants mentioned that their husband encouraged them to participate in election. The rest of them were encouraged by their family and self. One participant reported (participant A):

"Local people were requested my husband to manage me to participate in election and he did response as their request and told me that you have to participate on election. I said that they were also requested me at least ten times, but I didn't give response. And they were talked only few minutes and convinced you to compel me to participate on election; how can I do election? I have to look after my kids and livestock. I can't. Ok if you want to me participate on election I will do, because you are my husband."

The same opinion was stated by participant B, another woman member who participated in the last three elections:

"I did participate all of three elections. But when I did election for the first time my husband encourage me to participate. My husband was local wood businessman and he is well-known to people. One day he told me that you have to get nomination for election. I was totally surprised. I told him how I can do election."

On the other hand, the current study also observed that women showed interest to participate in Union Parishad slowly. For example, participant C stated that:

"I was encouraged by my brother and also myself to participate on election because I think that women have also rights. Another thing is if one woman is not benefited from other women, what type of woman is she?"

It is very positive that women are encouraged to participate in politics by her husband. It is not common in our society that a husband encourages his wife to join politics. It was also observed that women participate in Union Parishad election by herself instead of husband's wishes. The family background and good images among the people is an essential indicator for being elected. Women are also being encouraged by family to participate in Union Parishad. However, this is very rare.

Patriarchal Attitudes Discourage Women's Participation in Local Politics

Patriarchy and male domination are widespread in rural society. In a patriarchal society, it is not so easy to accept women leadership by male partners. The first major observation of this study is that given a patriarchal and male dominated societal structure, it is arduous for women to enter the political scene. Participant C reported that:

“My relatives, father-in-law, and brother-in-law said that Barir bow (home bride) did not need to go outside. Home bride’s going outside is a problem. I protested them and said that was no problem. If I sit in the house as a konar (narrow side of the house) bow, who gives courage other girls?”

Participant A also said,

“Some people asked to me who gave me a false hope to do election. They are not your well wisher because they want you to lose your money in election. Because of doing the election the back side people always use slang language. Such as one man said, ‘oh... she is going to join in UP election; the shoes of leg getting on her head now.’”

On the other hand, prejudices and religious barriers encourage women to keep far away from politics. Sometimes religious men discourage and mislead women to participate in politics. In the study, female members alleged that they were afraid of religious men in their village when they made decision to participate in election. Participant J said, “One religious man in my village told me that you should not join this type of work; you should do prayer at your home. You people are women you don’t need this type of work.”

Women who are able to minimize obstacles and participate as a female member in Union Parishad are being empowered and more aware of their rights. They are struggling with patriarchal attitudes of men and try to show their working ability alongside with male in their working place. The Union Parishad reserve seat system is making it possible for woman to do this.

Education Discourages Women’s Participation in Local Politics

From the beginning of the reserve seat system in Union Parishad, educated and conscious women were not expected to participate. From the experiences of last three Union Parishad elections in 1997, 2003, and 2011, it should be noted that the participation of educated women in Union Parishad election was very low. In terms of low participation of educated women in local politics, the study observes that several reasons may be responsible for this. One respondent stated her opinion in this matter (participant D):

“Conscious and educated women didn’t wish to come in local leadership because of the chairman of UPs never show good behavior and cooperate with female members. They are treated like as a dole at up and have not any power to do work. Another thing is society doesn’t see through good eye.”

Educated women did not show interest because they did not think that participation of women in politics is essential to establish rights and promoting empowerment. They believe to participate in Union Parishad is a low level work and society and culture does not accept their participation. In our observation of the study, however, those who are successful were able to raise a voice for the marginalized people in rural areas. One respondent stated in her word (participant I): “The most of the people think that women participation in Union Parishad election is not a good thing. However those who are elected in Union Parishad election and did a good job their honor and respect everywhere.”

Education is not a requirement to receive nomination for election. Most of the time, therefore, illiterate women participate in elections and they do not have a single idea about politics and hence their opinion is not given proper value in the social arena. Participant J said that:

“However, the government declared that education capacity is not necessary to participate of women in UP election. So any women can participate in election. Moreover uneducated women have higher stress-tolerated capability than educated women. If anybody uses any slang language to educated women they can not take it easily..”

Because of low levels of participation in Union Parishad activities, female members also show their frustration and feel that this type of work is not suitable for them. One of participant of the study showed her frustration in following (participant L):

“I never encourage any of my relatives to do this work. I think that it is very low level work. I would never come this type of work if I understood before. When I distribute Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) card and rice among the poor people, I understand how bad behaviors people show to me. They are using slang language to me and gave lot of blame. But they didn't want to understand that card is limited and I can't give everyone.”

Working Environment Discourages Women's Participation in Local Politics

The last three local government elections in 1997, 2003, and 2011 created opportunities for a large number of women towards achieving equal rights and opportunities in local politics and development processes. The challenges that these elected women faced are due to a long tradition of patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, seclusion, and the social control that male exert on female activities. The working environment of Union Parishad has been changing slowly. Over the years, some changes among the female Union Parishad members' motivations towards involvement in social activities, participation in decision making process and raising a voice in the places required have been observed. Participant B said,

“The way male members think about female members in Union Parishad is that female members are nothing, male members are thinking that they are everything of the ward. But I protest against this type of attitude. I think that we female members are

more important than male member. Because we female members are elected from three wards and male members only elected from one ward.”

Female members who participated in election for the first time found that there is an adjustment period for the new working environment. They believe that the new working place is not congenial to them. This study observed that working environment of Union Parishad is not easily adaptable for female members. The challenges that female members face are lack of cooperation from male colleagues, which makes it difficult to focus on their work. Participant K said,

“As a female I feel very simple when I doing the work in Union Parishad. Male colleagues didn’t want to cooperate with us. Because we are female and they are male. They wish to keep far from us. Because they are being afraid that if they talk and show good behavior with us, their wife will be angry with them.”

Autocratic Attitudes of Male Members in Union Parishad

Historically males have dominated on women in family, society economic political, and all spheres of life. In terms of political empowerment of women, they have not shown a cooperative attitude. Women are now more aware of their rights and responsibilities. The challenge they have to face, however, is autocratic behavior from their male colleagues in the working place. In the lowest tier of local government Union Parishad, male members have not only minimum education but to a great extent are not aware of women’s rights. This study found that male members in Union Parishad often show autocratic attitudes to female members. Participant J said,

“Male colleagues didn’t want to give importance of us even though we did training about empowerment. In terms of distributing Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) cards, rice, and wheel among the people we always get less allocation. Another thing is if we are giving opinion on any matters they didn’t want to give concern of our opinion. They are avoiding our opinion giving the blame of valueless taking.”

Female members who are active and well informed about their responsibilities did fight with autocratic attitude of male colleagues. Participant C said,

“I did a lot of development work myself. But as female member to do more work and to reach upper position the others members didn’t wish. However I think myself the backside people what they thinking, saying, and doing I have no need to give concern.”

The study observed that male Union Parishad members did not consider female members as colleagues yet. They try to control the power and want to keep far the participation of female member in Union Parishad activities.

The Opinion of Women Members getting Valueless in Union Parishad

The study found that elected female members have not yet reached an equal status with their male colleagues in the Union Parishad. They are not allocated equal shares in project distribution or committee memberships. Their opinions in Union Parishad decision-making are generally ignored since they are a minority. Overall, elected female legislators work in adversarial circumstances in which the majority of the people, including their peers, families, and constituents, appear to be their opponents. Participant B and C in a similar manner echoed the above notion:

“Female members’ opinion has no value in Union Parishad. Their opinion is hearing one ear and giving exit other ear. A male member’s opinion is getting more importance. Male members sometimes said that what is female member? They are nothing and their opinion no need (participant B).”

“When I was giving the opinion in different meetings in Union Parishad, most of the time they stopped me during my speech. Sometimes they are joking about my opinion. But I always try to avoid their misbehaving and giving concern on my work (participant C).”

While the direct election of female members in the Union Parishad is a significant development, the post-election experience of these women has not been entirely encouraging. In many cases, the women elected in reserved seats found themselves in a disadvantageous position. Male members tend to dominate the proceedings of committee meetings and decisions are made without active involvement of the women. Participation of women in routine local government affairs has been limited. Participant E said,

“My opinion and decision was not get important primarily. Male members including chairman neglected us by stated that ‘oh... women... What opinion they can give on our decision!’ I raised my voice against chairman and few days later I able to give influence on decision making.”

Ignorant About the Role and Responsibility

Female members have very limited knowledge about procedures and functions of Union Parishad. Some of them do not have any prior involvement in social activities or other experiences in the public arena. It is a common knowledge that many of the female representatives are relatives of men who are local power brokers. Participant A said, “I don’t know anything about my responsibility. Chairman didn’t clear anything to me only says give the signature.” In contrast, other respondents who had experiences in Union Parishad are well informed about their role and responsibility. Participant B said,

“I know about my responsibility. I did election three times and two times elected. But others two female member who also won they didn’t know anything about their work. How can they know? They did not have any previous experience of politics and minimum education. One woman member she was a domestic worker in Dhaka and another

one is a house wife and her husband is working at tea stall. So am I clear to you that how could I work with them and how I raise my voice regarding our rights against chairman?”

Those who are well informed about their scope of work are able to raise a voice against their counterpart for their rights. One respondent mentioned that (participant B):

“I already told the chairman that I have no need to learn about my work from you. I know my rights accurately and you are bound to give my right. Otherwise I will be informed Upazilla Nirbahi Officer (UNO) [in English, Sub-district Executive Officer] and DC (District Commissioner) office. I don't fear anybody.”

As a result of ignorance of female members, they have not reached their rights. The study found that majority of respondents are ignorant about their role and responsibility. However, the study also found that female members who are elected for second time are well informed because they received different trainings from government and non-government organizations. The study found that many of women did not have any idea about new local government (Union Parishads) law 2009.

Female Members Play Important Role on Solving Different Social Problems

Female members are actively involved in social problem solving of Union Parishad and are visible in the public domain. Female members are playing an important role on solving different social problems. Our study observed that female members who are elected for the second time in Union Parishad and those who are new both are playing important roles to solve different social problems in their locality. The promising thing is that women who were considered as caring and rearing family as well as household duties only few years ago, however, they are now contributing to solve social problems. The respondents interviewed show a significant number of successful stories of solving social problems.

“I was conscious about violence against women before I elected. In my village whether I heard news that women are getting abused from her husband I immediately went to help her. I was able to help many women to solve their problem and continue her relationship with husband (participant A).”

“I solve many social problems especially women-related problems like as husband beaten wife for dowry, Eve-teasing and others violence against women. If I heard any news that a husband torture his wife and any kind of problem woman facing I immediately go to help her. Chairman and members who work are not able to do as I did this (participant B).”

“I tried to stop early marriage in my area. If I heard any news about girls are sit for early marriage I immediately go to stop this. I try to make sense about demerit of early marriage of parents. I told them the world population becoming sort size and underweight only for getting marriage at early time. Your daughter will face malnourished and high risk of death in her delivery time. But when I try to stop early marriage some

people raise their voice to me and giving treat. I also raised my voice to them. So they didn't able to do anything against me (participant K)."

The study found hopeful that women are also able to contribute in politics locally or nationally. All of the participants showed that if they get a chance to do anything they are capable to do so successfully. In terms of Union Parishads female members system, they have a wide variety to do work for solving different social problems such as stop dowry, early marriage, violence against women, female education, and more. The study found that a major portion of respondents stated that they have several success stories in solving social problems. For this reason, people of their locality now understand their capacity and respect them for their work which is considered the successfulness of reserve seats system in Union Parishads because it is made possible for women to show their capability.

Women Are Being Empowered Slowly

The quota system of Union Parishad makes the opportunity of women's participation in political life. Their role in family decision making has slightly improved since they are already participants in meetings where family decisions are made. Nevertheless, this participation has remained restricted to such functions as serving as an information provider only. With regard to the state of women being empowered slowly, an interesting outcome is that elected female members have been accepted by a section of the population despite strong conservatism among its majority. Moreover, freedom of movement of the women members outside their home has increased. Participant D said,

"I was a very simple woman like other women in my village. People didn't give concern on my opinion in decision making. It was unimagined to them and me too that I also able to participate in politics and social development. But when I did election and elected, people's thinking are being changed now."

The promising thing is that women who enter in politics find the expectations have been increasing. They seek to participate in upper level politics. Our study found that a female member who has been participating in last three Union Parishad elections was interested in contesting for chairman position in the next election. In her word,

"In the upcoming election I am planning to contest for chairman because of my experience as a female member from reserved seat. If women want to work with full power in UP they need to be elected as chairman in general seat."

Discussion

Historically, women's participation in formal representative politics in Bangladesh has been low (Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010). Women's participation in politics is considered a pivotal fact in women empowerment. In this regard, the government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh made

a landmark decision in 1997 regarding the participation of women in Union Parishad reserved seat. It is encouraging that many female members want to build their career in politics, which is a positive trend for women leadership in rural Bangladesh. Most of them express their willingness to participate in the next election, and prepare themselves for contesting in general seats and for chairmanship to overcome their marginalized positions. But there are also challenges and problems for female Union Parishad members.

The study explored the barrier and scopes of the participation of women in local government and their empowerment and role. Thus far, it is found and addressed broadly some of the important issues. It is observed that husbands encouraged wives to participate in Union Parishad elections. In addition, the study also found that female members have to face socio-cultural and institutional challenges. Despite the increased number of women in leadership roles within the formal rural political structure, they are facing socio-cultural and structural problems in establishing their rights. Unequal mode of representation, lack of proper power and resources, absence of proper guiding rules and regulations hinder women's effective participation in Union Parishad bodies.

The oppositions and problems posed by the male dominated society to female members have been addressed. It has been reported by several studies that the patriarchic social order hinders women's effective work as Union Parishad leaders. The first major observation of this study is that given a patriarchal and male dominated societal structure, it is arduous for women to enter the political scene.

Pandy (2008) found that elected female members have not yet reached an equal status with their male colleagues in the Union Parishad. Even worse, they are not allocated equal shares in project distribution or committee memberships, and their opinions in Union Parishad decision making are generally ignored since they are only a minority. These findings are also supported by Siddiqui (2005). The present study observed that female members' opinion in decision making does not carry equal value and most of the time it is ignored by the chairman and male colleagues. In terms of distribution of projects or work male members get priority compared to female members of choosing the work. The female members basically deal with non-economic functions and engage them to take care of insignificant or small projects while male member and chairman in Union Parishads deal with all economical valuable work. The present study indicates that female members in Union Parishads do not get equal rights and opportunity of work with their male counterparts.

The study also found that because of illiteracy and lack of experience female members are unable to discharge their duties and exercise their power in an efficient manner. On the other hand, the present study observed that most of the members from reserved constituencies are illiterate and inexperienced and are controlled either by the relatives or the vested interests. Therefore, the very of purpose of reservation introduced is defeated. It is also observed that female members are considered by the male

members that their positions in Union Parishad as ornamental in nature so they feel that maintaining family pride and culture is of paramount importance to them.

The major observation of the study is that female members do not get expected support or cooperation from their male counterparts while performing their duties. They are being harassed by their male colleagues in working place. This finding can be also related to the previous studies of Panday (2008) and Rahman and Roy (2004). The present research claimed that only slight changes happened which promised that women members made rural society accept women in a leadership positions. Although the majority of women are marginalized in the political realm, it is also true that many of them have carved out their places. The most important thing is that female members are being accepted at a greater extent by the women of the society. The village women feel that they are getting reliable persons to express their problems and they do not hesitate to tell their problems with Union Parishad female members.

It is also observed that female members play a significant role in solving various social problems in their locality. Their acceptance and popularity among the rural people has been increasing. Another thing is that training sessions for female members make easier to understand their work and responsibility in Union Parishad. Most of the respondents claimed that they did not know anything about their role and responsibility in Union Parishad before getting the training. The NGOs are playing an important role in giving training to female members.

The summary of the study is that female members in Union Parishad have been empowered slowly through the reserve seat system. Their scope of work in Union Parishad is very limited and they are facing various challenges in their working place. However, the promising thing is that they are now playing roles in decision making in political arenas and family matters also.

Conclusion

Women empowerment cannot be completed without achieving political empowerment. Participation of women in local government bodies is a crucial factor for women's development, particularly at a grassroots level. The study examined that the reserve seat system for women in Union Parishad provides for political empowerment of women. It attains social justice and promoting equality to these sections of the society. It also has raised the status of rural women. However, the study also noted that there are many remaining challenges, which have become obstacles for the women's active political participation in Union Parishad. Hence, to overcome these challenges, there is need for more education and orientation of women Union Parishad members. To ensure a meaningful participation of the elected female members as an essential step to empower them, the study suggests the following policy prescriptions and recommendation be taken into consideration. First, in order to understand the activities of local gov-

ernment and ensuring the equal participation of women in decision making, education is the supreme power which is already proved in developed countries. The study suggests encouraging educated women to participate in Union Parishad. Second, for assuring a congenial working environment in Union Parishad and ensuring the meaningful participation of women in Union Parishad, it should be given first priority to assure women friendly working environment. Third, the study suggests that specific programs should be undertaken by the government and non-government organizations in order to create awareness among the people in the grass roots levels that political participation would give women access to the political decision making process relating to the allocation of resources. Fourth, 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 members can meaningfully participate in all type of functions. Fifth, the government should be given priority to monitoring the status, arrange training for women members in Union Parishad.

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