

Role of Women in Local Government in Bangladesh A Study of the Union Parishad

Md. Mohiuddin*
Nishat Afroze Ahmed**

Abstract

This paper examines the role of elected women representatives in the Union Parishad (UP), the lowest unit of rural local government in Bangladesh. The number of women representatives in recent years has apparently reached the 'critical mass' stage considered being extremely important for women empowerment. The paper finds that notwithstanding a surge in the number of women members caused mostly by the implementation of the quota reservation policy, 'critical acts' do not receive any serious attention. Women are also often deprived of their due share in decision-making and programme implementation. The paper explores reasons that account for the gap between the law and behavior of the role actors. The paper argues that the quota reservation policy matters as it has brought about some kind of qualitative change in the role perception and behavior of women members. What is needed is to adopt measures to make it work better. To do that, Bangladesh may learn lessons from others, especially India's, experience.

Keywords: Critical mass; Decentralization; Local government; Reserved-seat members; Women empowerment

Introduction

It is now widely recognized that women, who constitute half of the population in most of the countries of the world, have similar, if not exactly the same, potential as men to engage in politics and other professions. Until recently, however, politics was considered to be the preserve of men; women were seen as 'unfit' to play any major role in the political arena. In fact, in most of the democratic countries of the world, women were enfranchised much later than men. Elected bodies at national and local levels were considered to be 'men's clubs'. Any attempt by women to enter into these 'clubs' was looked upon with suspicion; it was considered to be an intrusion. A number of factors limited the active engagement of women in the political sphere

* Lecturer Department of International Relations University of Chittagong, Bangladesh

** Lecturer Department of International Relations University of Chittagong, Bangladesh

(GoI/UNDP, 2018). First, deeply entrenched stereotypical norms relegated women to the domestic space, with severely restricted engagement in public affairs, an area largely dominated by men. Second, caste and class restrictions and the patriarchal system and mindset pervade the political space provided to women. The third factor is the lack of exposure of women themselves to politics and the absence of any experience in exercising their political responsibilities. Low literacy levels, absence of education and limited or no exposure, all lead to a lack of confidence and many women are unable to comprehend the true spirit of decentralization and recognize the opportunities that it provides (GoI/UNDP:3).

The situation, however, has changed over the last few decades. One can find more women in leadership positions in different countries at both local and national levels now than before. Although women still do not hold a significant portion of the total elective positions, absolutely their numbers have increased considerably. In Bangladesh, for example, the number of seats reserved for women in Parliament has been increased from 15 to 50. Provisions for the reservation of seats for women in different units of local government have also been introduced to encourage women to engage in politics. The Local Government (Union Parishad) (Amendment) Act of 1977 provided for the reservation of two women members in each Union Parishad (UP), the lowest unit of rural local government. This number was increased to three during the Ershad rule (1982-90). Initially reserved-seat women members were nominated by the officials. Later, elected members of UP used to elect them. Now the chairman, the head, and all of the members of the Union Parishad, numbering 12 – nine general-seat members (GSMs) and three reserved-seat members (RSMs) – are directly elected by the people. The provision for direct election of reserved-seat women members was introduced by the first Sheikh Hasina government (1996-2001) in 1997. In total, more than 16000 seats are reserved for women in different local councils. More than 44000 women vied for nearly 13000 reserved-seat members in UP in 1997. Women are also eligible to contest for general seats.

Objectives of the paper

The main objective of this paper is to examine the role of women members in the UP. It specifically seeks to identify factors that account for a surge as well decline in women's participation in successive UP elections and explores their implication for the institutionalization of local democracy. The paper also looks into the social background of the women representatives in local government. It attempts to identify challenges women face as UP members and strategies they adopt to cope with uncertainties. Section seven makes an overall assessment of the role of women members, while section eight concludes the paper

Methodology

Data for this study have been collected mainly from secondary sources which include consultation of books, journals, and newspaper reports. Special emphasis has been given on collecting and consulting empirical studies and reports on the working of the Union Parishad, and particularly, the role and behaviour of women members. The research reported here forms part of a larger project entitled ‘Experiences of Women Candidates in Local Government Elections in Bangladesh: A Study of Union Parishad Elections, 2016’ funded by the University of Chittagong

The Union Parishad in the framework of rural local government

There exists a three-tier rural local government system in Bangladesh, with a Zilla Parishad (ZP) at the top, and a Union Parishad (UP) at the base. The UZP, the middle tier, did not enjoy any executive power until 1982. It was essentially a coordinating body, while the other two councils – ZP and UP – have enjoyed executive powers since their inception in the 1870s. Of the three, the UP has retained its democratic character since the 1880s, while the ZP, which was democratized in the early 1920s, was brought under bureaucratic control in the early days of the Pakistani rule (1947-71). The ZP, in fact, remained under bureaucratic tutelage until 2016 when elections were held to select its chairman and members. Earlier, the central government retained the responsibility for selecting the chairman of the ZP. The UZP has a chequered history. After its introduction in 1982, the UNO – the senior-most government official in upazila – headed the UZP. Initial attempts to democratize the UZP were frustrated by the mainstream parties opposing the Ershad rule. The government, however, used force to hold the first upazila elections in 1985. The second UZP election was held in 1990. But the first Khaleda Zia government (1991-95) abolished the UZP in 1991. The first Sheikh Hasina government (1996-2001) reintroduced the UZP in 1998. Although several elections have been held to the UZP since then, it has nevertheless remained seriously disadvantaged for various reasons (Ahmed, N., 2009; Ahmed, T., 2016). The ZP, as stated above, has been democratized only recently; it will thus be premature to make any assertion about its role at this stage.

Among the three rural councils, the UP plays a crucial role. Not only has it survived longer than the other councils; it has now become an important political-developmental unit. The UP has also retained its democratic character for a much longer period of time than the other rural councils. All of its members and chairman are popularly elected; while only the chairman and two vice-chairs (one male and the other female) of UZP are directly elected by the people. Most of the members of the UZP are ex-officio members (chairs of UP and mayors of paurashava); women members of UZP are elected indirectly by women members of the UP

and paurashava. The chairman and members (including women members) of the ZP are all indirectly elected by members of lower level councils (UP and UZP).

Local councils face major difficulties in undertaking the functions entrusted with them for several reasons, of which lack of finance and personnel appears to be particularly important. These problems are more acute at the grassroots level than at other layers of local government. The UP remains more disadvantaged than the other two councils in both respects. The UP Act of 2009 prescribes four categories of activities for it (UP) – administration and establishment, maintenance of public order, services related to public welfare activities and preparation and implementation of plans that relate to local economic and social welfare activities. It is now more concerned with providing regulatory, judicial and particularly development services. Infrastructure development now tops the list of functions performed by the UP. In recent years some attempts have been made to strengthen the financial base of the UP. With donor support and patronization of the central government, the UP is now emerging as an important unit of local government. Its capacity to provide services to the local people has improved to a large extent. Overall, the UP is now better capable of doing things as it enjoys greater powers and has better access to resources than in the past. Besides the government, many donors have also expressed interest in providing financial support to the UP to build its capacity and to diversify the provision of services.

Trends in women representation in Union Parishad

There are more women in local government in Bangladesh now than at any time in the past. In fact, the number of women councillors has apparently reached the ‘critical mass’ (Grey, 2002; Childs and Krook, 2008) stage considered to be extremely important for women’s empowerment. Women constituted 24.1% of the total UP members in 1997; this percentage increased to 24.8 in 2003. Although the number of women candidates decreased in subsequent years, it still compares favourably with many countries, even in the developed world. Only a few countries can claim to have such a large number women in local government. Probably the most important reason accounting for a surge in the number of women representatives are a policy of reservation followed for the last few decades. The policy provides for reserving a certain number of seats for women in different local councils. At the UP level, these seats (3) are to be filled in by open competition, i.e. direct elections.

As stated earlier, the first Sheikh Hasina government introduced the provision for direct election of reserved-seat members in the UP in 1997. Earlier the government nominated members to the reserved-seats. This policy of nomination had many drawbacks. It was biased towards the rural

rich and those who had traditionally controlled local politics. Nominated members also lacked independence in exercising their voting rights. The first Khaleda Zia government sought to rectify the drawbacks of the nomination system by introducing the provision for indirect election of reserved-seat women members by members elected on popular votes. Thus, the directly elected chairman and members, numbering ten, elected the (three) women members to each UP; while elected commissioners and chairmen of *pourashavas* elected the reserved-seat women commissioners. This was seen as a step forward.

The first direct elections to select the reserved-seat women members (RSWMs) were to held in 1997, which marked the beginning of a new trend in women's participation in local electoral politics. More than 44000 women took part in the UP elections. The number of contestants for both general and reserved seats decreased in 2003. Widespread enthusiasm, which could be noticed in 1997 when direct elections were first held to elect reserved-seat members, was absent in 2003. The seat-candidate ratio for reserved seats decreased from 1:3.4 in 1997 to 1:3.1 in 2003 (Khan & Ara, 2006). One of the important reasons for a decrease in the number of contestants was the inability of many women members to do anything meaningful [for the locality] not for their own follies but for the structural constraints that encourage male bias in decision-making in the rural council. Many of those who contested the 1997 elections decided to quit politics or remained inactive in 2003. Many female members felt that they had not been able to deliver on their commitments and promises made at the time of elections which is why their voters had lost faith in them (they had not been able to carry out development work or distribute safety net allocations as demanded by their constituency (Sultan et al., 2016). Family level responsibilities and pressures were also reasons, especially if the family felt that the female member had not gained as much benefit as they had hoped for (either financially or otherwise).

In a few cases, the reason was not having a good relationship with the UP Chair and feeling that they had no influence in the UP (Sultan, et al. 2016).). One study, however, has attributed corruption in political parties as one of the main reasons for women not running for office as it very often works against the selection of women candidates (Guhathakurta, p. 26). Women contesting for general seats encounter serious difficulties in getting elected. For example, they lack three Ms – money, *mastans* (terrorists) and muscle power – that are necessary to get elected to local council (also to national parliament). Besides, social norms and customs discourage interaction of women with men in public. Thus, although the Constitutions does not discriminate between men and women in any sphere of public life, only a few women have the courage to contest against the locally influential candidates who are mostly male. Women willing to contest for a general seat face a number of barriers (Sultan et al., 2016, p. 255).

Social profile of women UP members

It has long been recognised that nowhere in the modern world do public representatives mirror the communities that elect them. Everywhere they are disproportionately drawn from those segments that rarely resemble the society as a whole. The women councillors in Bangladesh thus cannot be an exception. They differ in several respects from the surrounding populace. They generally lead a special social life which involves, to a greater or lesser extent, a separation from the wider society. Many of them may be considered as elites. But they are not Paretonian elite as they are not situated at the top of their occupational hierarchies; they are elite in comparison to their environment.

In general, women councillors are middle-aged; most of them are married; only a few are unmarried. There are only a few councillors who have never been to school. However, some changes in the social background of councillors are noticeable. In particular, those who are elected to the UP on popular votes – the General-Seat Members (GSMs) – often differ sharply with those who were nominated by administrative authorities or indirectly elected (RSMs). The (GSMs) are better educated than those who owed their elevation to local councils to nomination. GSMs represented different occupational groups; in contrast, their predecessors were mostly housewives. According to one estimate, about two-fifths of the GSMs were housewives, while more than three-quarters of the RSMs were housewives. NGO workers and teachers together constituted 21% of the GSMs; on the other hand, only 2.67% of the RSMs were teachers.

Table 1: Social background of women members of UP

Background (RSMs)	GSMs N= 175	Reserved Seat Members N=
Level of Education		
Illiterate	2.62	4.18
Primary	27.33	59.22
Secondary	20.42	24.08
Higher Secondary	8.33	
Graduate		
Not Available		
Occupation		
Housewife	58.86	76.44

		Society & Change
Teaching	10.85	2.62
NGO Workers	10.29	-
Businesswoman	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
Jatiya Party	2.29	Not Available
Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh	4.00	Not Available

Source: Qadir and Islam (1987).

GSMs also appeared to be wealthier than the women members nominated in the past. The monthly family income of 23% of the GSMs ranged between TK. 5000 and TK. 25000; in contrast, only 3% of the nominated women members belonged to this income group. A large number of GSMs belonged to middle-income group. The GSMs also appeared to have more party-political orientation than their predecessors. However, none of the GSMs claimed to have received any support from political parties in their election campaign. This appears to be paradoxical. In general, however, it can be observed that those elected on popular votes could be considered as more risk takers than those who were nominated to different councils.

Women members of UP: Roles and responsibilities

As stated earlier, the UP is composed of two categories of elected members – ‘general’-seat members and reserved-seat women members. There is no restriction on a woman contesting a general seat. But for various reasons, only a few can actually run for a general seat. In general, the scope of work of the UP appears to be limited; as a consequence, both categories of

members remain handicapped, up to a certain extent. The central government has historically remained reluctant to decentralize power and authority to local councils; the latter mostly have worked as extended arms of the government than as autonomous agencies. However, as the scope of activity of the government has increased manifold over the decades, it has some implications for activating local councils. The central government now delegates some responsibility to local councils for undertaking functions that legitimately belong to it; often it wants to work in partnership with local councils in undertaking different activities.

Initially, the law did not prescribe anything for the reserved-seat members. They thus had to depend upon their colleagues, who were mostly men, particularly the chairman, for their share of work. Subsequently, the governed revised the rules and prescribed some specific responsibilities for reserved-seat women members. Provisions have thus been made for the reservation of a certain percentage of committee chairs (one-third) for women members. Women members can now also plan projects for a certain amount of money – 30% of the allocation earmarked for projects – and theoretically they enjoy the authority to spend the way they think the best. They have involvement in the preparation of list of safety net beneficiaries. Women members have been given responsibility for works that have implications for women. In other words, they are asked to do more women-focused activities than to deal with issues which have policy implications. The usual assumption is that the presence of women will make a difference. In practice, women members face serious obstacles while carrying out their responsibilities properly.

As the discussion subsequent sections shows, women and men do not differ much in terms of explicit behavior, especially while trying to get things done. Like men, some women councillors may also get involved in activities that laws do not permit. In general, however, they have a better record of doing things properly. As Sultan et al. (2016, p. 33) observe:

Not much difference was found between male members or female members regarding their rent seeking tendency. It was quite clear that members regardless of their gender take money from the people in exchange of putting their name on the list of beneficiaries for different cards and allowances. [However] Female members are more sensitive about audits, inspections and damage to their reputation, and they try covering things up so that they don't get into any trouble.

Women representatives in action

It is now generally recognized that much of what a woman member can do depends on many factors, of which her relations with the chair of the UP is vitally important. Under the existing system, everything is centralized in the office of the chairman. The chairman appears to be all in all in the union.

Those who have close links with the chairman are likely to fare better than those who lack it. Additionally, those who have good relations with the UNO, the head of upazila administration, can overcome hurdles created at the local level by their opponents. However, there are only a few women members who can claim having good links with actors outside the locality such as MP, UNO or senior administrators. Most of the reserved women members remain disadvantaged vis-a-vis the chairman and/or UNO. They thus often have to accept many unfavorable conditions or work under adverse circumstances.

Evidence from the field shows that there remains a major gap between what the law prescribes and the actual behaviour of the role actors. Many UP chairmen often do not allow women members assume responsibility for important works, arguing that they are not able to arrange many things needed to implement projects. Experience shows that the male members of the UP do not have a positive opinion about the role and performance of their female colleagues. Most of them hold a negative view about women members, observing that they lack proper knowledge to implement the activities of the UP and many do not feel confident to speak in front of other members (Panday, 2013, p.169). Women members also do not attend the meetings and *salish* of UP regularly since they have to finish all household activities first before leaving home (Panday, p.169). Rahman, however, argues that the women members have immensely contributed to social justice through using the rural *salish* system. In contrast to Panday's findings, several researchers have argued that women members seriously take part in the *salish* system (Siddique, 2008; Amin & Akhter, 2005).

Perhaps more importantly, male members of the UP initially were not very much hospitable to the legitimate claims of the reserved-seat women members for sharing of power. As Sultan (2018, p. 257) argues:

They were denied a role in project planning, implementation, budget-making, financial management, preparing list and distribution of VGD and VGF cards under the food security schemes... Women were also denied the right to provide citizenship, character and other certificates usually issued by male representatives. The women were also reported to be excluded from meetings and important decisions of the UP.

Women members, as experience shows, very often adopt a conciliatory approach, seeking to settle disputes in an amicable manner. For example, they may use emotions and appeal to the men by showing that they are weaker and need help. Sometimes female members cry in front of the chairman and secretary to get their favor ... Some women show their anger in front of chairman and others sometime walk out from the meeting ... As a result, the chairman may call them back and tries to solve the problems' (Sultan et al.p. 42). Nazneen and Tasneem (2010), however, observe that many women members may adopt 'hard' strategies such as turning to and

seeking help from different CSOs/NGOs to raise their voice against decisions or practices about which they have strong objections. They argue:

In some cases, women UP members approached other actors to strengthen their voice. They have sought help from the women's organizations for legal, human rights and administrative training to increase their knowledge and skills. They urged the women's organizations to raise these issues in different forums on behalf of women members ... Women's entry into these spaces and their experiences in negotiating with other actors have led to changes in their aspirations and increased their voice and legitimacy within their communities (Nazneen and Tasneem, p. 36).

The extent to which women members will adopt one or the other strategy will depend upon a number of factors. Often they cannot agree on the adoption of a particular strategy for personal disagreement. Politics also plays an important role, keeping women members apart. Even when they belong to the same party, factional politics may also keep them separate. The dependence of women members upon the chairman for resources also weakens their bargaining power. Several studies (for example, Khan & Ara, 2006; Islam & Islam, 2012; Khan & Mohsin, 2008) have identified barriers that discourage women to play a proactive role in the UP including adoption of hard strategies.

For example, Khan & Ara (2006) have identified several obstacles to women's participation in the UP. These are: male-biased environment within political institutions, lower educational achievement of women, social norms restricting women's free movement in public, entrenched patriarchy, and lack of clarity on the role of women in local government in the Constitution. They have recommended several measures to ensure a meaningful participation of women. Important recommendations include: roles and responsibilities of women UP members be defined clearly, they should have better opportunities to undergo training, mass media should highlight women's role, and more research be undertaken to examine on women's participation in politics, their voting behavior, and participation in the political parties.

Islam & Islam (2012) observe, based on an empirical study of reserved-seat women members, that they face several constraints while performing their duties. Some of the important ones are: patriarchy, hostile working environment, lack or low level of education, and ignorance about roles and responsibilities. Support from husbands has been cited by many respondents as one of their main sources of strength. The respondents, however, reported that the situation was improving, although at a slow pace. The female members are very often outnumbered by their male counterparts and they face stiff competition for resource allocation and responsibility sharing. In some cases, they

become victims of conspiracy. Sometimes the term 'reserved' is used against them and makes the female members marginalized in decision making processes (Guhathakurta, et al. 2014).

Assessing the role of women members of Union Parishad

This paper has tried to explore the role of reserved-seat women members of the UP. The two categories of members – general seat and reserved-seat – share some characteristics; they also differ in several respects. What is noticeable is that although reserved-seat members are elected from a larger constituency and have to establish and retain contact with more people than the general-seat members, they remain disadvantaged in several ways. Their work is less recognized; they also are not given as much recognition as they deserve. On the other hand, general-seat members exercise greater power and enjoy better privileges. They are recognized as members, while reserved seat representatives are often called 'women' members.

Reserved-seat members, as Rahman (2015) observes, are promoting integrity in the UP and providing better community services. Their presence thus matters. The quality and processes of women's engagement in local level bodies have changed, their knowledge about political and community affairs as well as about their rights and entitlements has increased and they are increasingly independent actors. While the extent of their influence is limited by the context and the framework of the local government structure and laws, they are voicing their opinions and raising various demands, on their own behalf and on behalf of their voters. The women representatives acquired skills and knowledge on how to do politics by negotiating the gender biased culture, attitude, and norms (Nazneen and Tasneem, 2010).

Khan and Mohsin (2008) observe that many (of their sample) women members have argued that women come to them because they are approachable and women feel more comfortable with them. In conflict resolution, women members are more active on women's issues. Women members are involved in preparing VGD, VGF, old age pension and widow lists. They claim that issues of the marginalized are better understood by women. Khondekar et.al. (2014) carried out a survey to check the opinion of the people on women's role and participation in local politics. They found that 80% of the respondents felt that it was necessary to ensure women's political participation for institutionalization of democracy and empowerment of women. The respondents also observed that women should participate at greater rates in all elections; some found that women were not yet politically and economically/financially powerful to contest. Four out of five respondents felt that more women should contest from general seats. Chowdhury (2002) noted that direct election 'has brought about qualitative change in their role perception. On the whole they have claimed a space within the local bodies and have raised spirited calls to

have their terms of reference and spheres of activity defined'. Khan & Mohsin report that 78% of their (600 sample) respondents said that they had been involved in budget discussions and 58% had made suggestions to reverse UP decisions and felt able to do this as a result of their constituency backing.

The reservation system thus matters. What is needed is to make provisions for making it work better. The Bangladesh case confirms that it is not the provisions for reserved seats for women but how these provisions are implemented and the support systems created that influence the space available to women to transform the political sphere. Some major changes, especially in the mode of elections and relations between the local government and the central government, will be needed to make the reservation system work better. Lessons from others' experiences, especially India, may be instructive. India has also introduced a provision for the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The system of reservation works much better in India than in Bangladesh. As one argues:

Women's experience of being involved with the PRI has transformed many of them. They have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials and most of all, by challenging men. They have become articulate and conscious of their power. Despite their low- literacy level, they have been able to tackle the political and bureaucratic system successfully. They have reported regular attendance at Panchayats meetings. They have used their elected authority to address, critical issues such as education, drinking water facilities, family planning facilities, hygiene and health, quality of healthcare and village development. They have also brought alcohol abuse and domestic violence onto the agendas of political campaigns. In these and other ways, the issues that women have chosen differ from conventional political platforms, which are usually caste/ethnic/religion based (WEDO, 2006, p. 6).

This is not intended to overstress the importance of the Indian system. The PRIs also witness various problems. But the benefits of the system outweigh its disadvantages. What is thus needed is to assess why the system works better in India and to learn lessons from the Indian experiences.

Conclusion

It has long been recognized that one of the important ways of empowering women is to allow them to take part in the making of decisions that affect them. Those framing the legislation providing for the representation of women in the Union Parishad (and in other councils) also probably thought that an increase in the number of women would enable them to make their presence felt by others, especially by

their (male) colleagues. Provisions have also been made in legislation (amended from time to time), specifying the roles and responsibilities of the reserved-seat members who now constitute about a quarter of members in each UP. They have been given responsibilities for performing various activities related to women's development and social welfare. They also have a share in the planning and implementation of projects/schemes for local development. Discussion in this paper shows that women members do more than they did in the past. But they face difficulties, especially from their male counterparts, in carrying out their responsibilities; they latter do not appear to be hospitable to the notion of 'sharing of power'. Women members face more difficulties than their male colleagues. They usually adopt a conciliatory approach to resolve problems; 'hard' strategies are not usually adopted as these may turn out to be counterproductive. The overall conclusion is that (increase in) number matters; however, to make the women's voice heard better (than now), several reforms are necessary, especially in the reservation system. There is scope for learning from the Indian experience which, like Bangladesh, has also followed a quota reservation policy for several decades.

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