

PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: A STUDY ON THE ELECTED WOMEN MEMBERS' EXPERIENCE IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to unfold the status of the reserved seats women representatives elected to the lowest tier of rural local government in Bangladesh, the Union Parishad. More specifically, this research article tries to identify the prospects and problems after the introduction of new law in 1997. It is seen that because of the new law, many women are now coming forward to join Union Parishad. At the same time the socio-economic condition create obstacles to their involvement in Union Parishad activities.

Keywords: The union parishad, Local government, Elected women member's, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has undergone profound social changes since it appeared as an independent nation in the world history. It is the shining example in South Asia of a poor country achieving impressive gains in gender equality. Behind this headline lies a complex social picture (DFID, 2008). The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights to all citizens; several strategies have been initiated by the government of Bangladesh to ensure advancement of women in all sectors including politics. However, gender discrimination is widespread in all spheres of life including politics. The status of women has been ranked the lowest in the world on the basis of twenty indicators related to health, marriage, children, education, employment and social equality (NCBP, 2000). About 80 percent of the total population lives in the rural areas.

For administrative purpose the country is divided into eight Divisions, the Divisions are sub-divided into 64 Districts (Zila-an indigenous word to mean District). The Districts are further divided into 491 Upazilas (sub-districts). Next to it is the 4554 Union Parishad (UP), the lowest administrative tier (Government of Bangladesh [GOB], 2017). Bangladesh has a long tradition of local government, and the Union Parishad (UP) is its oldest component and over the years this tier has earned a wide acceptability to the rural community. As a representative body of an

aggregate of 10 to 15 villages (or roughly 15-20 thousand people), it has had recognizable form for more than a hundred years (Khan Foundation, 2004).

The constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh very clearly mentions the importance of local government. Accordingly, legal provisions for making these bodies have also been promulgated time to time. The Government of Bangladesh has promulgated a new law in 1997 which introduced a system of direct election in one-third reserved seats for women in Union Parishad. Election took place at Union Parishad (UP) several times after the introduction of the new law. In each occasion 14000-15000 women stepped into the Union Parishad as elected representative, which is a new experience. However, entry to Union Parishad is affected due to lack of appropriate support mechanisms as Young (1999) notes:

Initiation and entry of women into political and legal structures are expected to transform the process and institutions of governance. However, women's entry and productive role in governance are constrained by a number of factors like lack of gender sensitivity of those concerned, poor access to basic social services like education, unfriendly legal structures and absence of mechanisms which can ensure women's active participation in developmental and political process for advancement and which can facilitate community support to assurance of the rights of women and children (as cited in, Radha & Choudhury, 2002, p. 9).

This study employs a qualitative case study method to examine the experiences of the elected women members (EWMs). Participants of the research study are all EWMs, chairmen, secretaries and male members of three UPs. Primary data is collected through observation and semi-structured interviews with the participants. In specific terms, the study is designed to

- Examine the socio-economic status of the EWMs;
- Analyze whether the provision for direct election for women members in the reserved seats enhance their participation to influence decision-making process of UP;
- Assess the nature and extent of participation of the EWMs;
- Explore the changed status of EWMs as elected representatives, if any;
- Identify the institutional, social and personal hindrances those are creating obstacles to women's empowerment; and
- Examine how patriarchy, kinship network, mobility, education, traditional cultural norms and values influence the level of participation of the EWMs.

EVOLUTION OF UNION PARISHAD IN BANGLADESH: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

It is usually assumed that local government was the basic form of government in the sub-continent till the 6th century B.C. Village councils seem to have existed since early times; however, their functions, power and their place in the system of self-government varied considerably (Siddiqui, 2005). The introduction of local government in British Bengal can be traced back to the promulgation of Bengal Village Chowkidari Act of 1870 that introduced the Chowkidari Panchayet system consisted of five persons nominated by the District Magistrate. However, the Local Self-government Act 1885 and the Village Self-government Act 1919 led to the development of the present local government in Bangladesh. In the Pakistan period under the Basic Democracies Order (BDO) of 1959 a four-tier rural local government system was introduced that established Union Councils as the lowest tier of rural local government. By an amendment in 1962 the Union Council became a fully elective body.

The local government function was halted in the newly independent country for a limited period as President's Order Number 7 of 1972 dissolved all the local government bodies and their functions were handed over to the administrators. In 1973 by President's Order Number 22, the name of the lowest tier of local government was changed to Union Parishad. The first Local Government Ordinance in the history of independent Bangladesh was promulgated in 1976. Under this ordinance a three-tier rural local government (Union Parishad, Thana Parishad and Zila Parishad at the district level) was created.

Union Parishads in Bangladesh are governed by the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance 1983. In 1988, 1993, and 1997 major changes took place with respect to the structure and composition of Union Parishads. According to the amendment of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance 1983 a Union is divided into nine wards. Each Union Parishad consists of a chairman and nine members in the general seats; one from each ward. In addition, three seats are reserved for female members, who are directly elected by the voters of the concerned wards. The voters of the entire union directly elect its chairman and the voters of the concerned ward elect the nine members in the general seats. Chairman is also a member of the Union Parishad (Siddiqui, 2005). Thus a Union Parishad is composed of 13 members who have equal voting rights.

According to the law, Union Parishads are entrusted with 10 compulsory functions and 38 optional functions. Besides, Union Parishad has limited range of judicial function – both civil and criminal. The chairman is the key figure for all the functions of the Union Parishad. All the functions of the Union Parishad are executed and undertaken through 13 standing committees. One-third of the 13 committees are to be headed by female members while a woman member heads the committee on women and children welfare, culture and sports (Sultana, 2004).

CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF WOMEN AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH

The Constitution of Bangladesh is based on the principles of equality and guarantees equality before law and equal protection to all its citizens. It not only guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms, but also prohibits all sorts of discrimination. It further made provisions for promoting causes of the backward sections of the population. The relevant articles for women and local government are:

- 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 28: women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of state and public life. And nothing shall prevent the state from making special provision in favor of women or for the advancement of any backward section of the population. The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (GOB, 1993).

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN UNION PARISHAD AS ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

In Bangladesh from the very outset man and women had equal opportunity to vie at any election whether local or national. The law did not make any discrimination between them. But history shows that despite the existence of open legal provisions, women did not get entry to the system; the whole terrain of local government is predominately a male domain (Ahmed, Chowdhury & Mashuda, 2003).

Women got the opportunity to participate in UP activities for the first time in 1976 when the Local Government Ordinance 1976 made the provision of two nominated women members in Union Parishad. Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance 1983 increased the number of nominated women members from two to three at the Union Parishad. The Local Government (Union Parishad) (Amendment) Act 1993 changed the system of nomination and an indirect election system was introduced for women in the reserved seats. No major changes took place in other tiers (Siddiqui, 2005).

In 1997 the then ruling government put another milestone by creating the provision of one-third reserve seats for women in the local government bodies and a system of direct election for them.

Under the new law each Union Parishad is divided into nine wards. The chairman would be elected by all the voters of the Union Parishad. From each ward one general member would be elected by the concerned voters of the ward; women can also participate here. Besides, three women members are to be elected from reserved seats from every three general wards by all the voters of the concerned locality. In effect, the elected women representatives of the Union Parishad have an electoral constituency that is more challenging and more geographically dispersed than her male counterparts (ADB, 2004; Siddiqui, 2005). Since 1997 women's participation have started to increase in UP than before. However, their number remains marginal compared to male members and chairs of UP.

Table -1: Women's Participation in Union Parishad Elections

Election Year	No of Union Parishads	Women Candidates		Elected Chairman and Members	
		Chairman	Member	Chairman	Member
1973	4352	N/A	N/A	1	N/A
1977	4352	19	19	4	7
1983	4400	79	863	6	N/A
1988	4401	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1992	4450	115	1135	13	N/A
1997	4276	102	43969/456*	20	12882/110*
2003	4495	232	43764/617*	22	12684/79*

* Women contested and elected to the general seats.

Source: Bangladesh Election Commission Report (1997, 2003); UNDP (1994)

It is seen from Table – 1 that in the 1973 election, only one woman was elected as Union Parishad chair (Alam & Begum, 1974). In the 1977 election, four females were elected as chair while in 1984 only six women candidates won in the elections as chair (Alam, 1984). In 1988 the total number of candidates for the position of chair in 4401 Union Parishads was 18,566 and the number of members was 114,699. Out of them the number of female candidates for the chair was 79 and the number of candidates for members was 863. In the Union Parishad election of 1992, the number of candidates as chair was 17,444 and for member were 169,683. Out of them, 115 women contested for the position of chair and only 13 got elected (Siddiqui, 2005; Qadir, 1995). It has to be noted that the number of female candidates for the chair and member is increasing.

In 1997, for the first time in the history of Bangladesh, direct election for women representatives were introduced at the lowest tier of local government institutions, the Union Parishad. Much enthusiasm has been observed among the women centering Union Parishad election. The number of voters was 50 million and the most striking feature of the election was the overwhelming

participation of women voters. About 210,334 candidates including 45,000 female candidates contested in the Union Parishad election. A total of 13,000 women candidates were elected in the election to represent women's reserved seats. The whole process was a major breakthrough for the rural women in Bangladesh (Islam, 2000; Shamim & Kumari, 2002). In this election, 456 women vied in general seats as ward members and 110 were elected by defeating their male counterparts. Total female candidates were 102 for the chair and out of them 20 were elected. Moreover, the female voters' turnout was 80 percent. These facts clearly demonstrated the enthusiasm of women folk of the population in the rural areas. In the year 2003 a total of 232 women contested as chair and 22 were elected (Ahmed, Chowdhury & Mashuda, 2003).

EXPERIENCE OF THE ELECTED WOMEN MEMBERS IN UNION PARISHAD

In Bangladesh, the provision for the reservation of seats for women in the local government bodies included no educational entry-point barriers. The educational achievements of the new female entrants to local government do tend to be significantly lower than that of their male colleagues and indeed a significant number of women members are not even literate. Table – 2 indicates that 22 percent women are illiterate while 11 percent claim to be literate; however, none of them have completed primary education. The only visible reflection of their literacy is that some can only sketch their name. Thus, they sign the papers while directed to do so. Table – 2 depicts the educational status of EWMs in the study area.

Table - 2: Educational Qualification of the Elected Women Members

Educational Status	% Respondents
Illiterate	12
Can read and write only	10
Up to Class – V	22
Class VI to Class IX	34
SSC Passed	12
HSC Passed	10
Bachelor Degree Passed	0

Lack of education makes women more vulnerable. Longer years of schooling may provide women with an opportunity to gain knowledge and information which they often lack and as a result become more vulnerable (Naripokkho & Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, 2002). Education has a highly significant and positive relationship with their developmental role performance. Moreover, "Education is an especially powerful predictor of political participation" (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995, p. 286). The study have found that in most of the cases women are home makers, first time entrants into politics and most of them are illiterate or educated up to

primary level. In respect of educational background 44 percent elected women have education from nil up to class five, 34 percent have up to class nine, 12 percent have passed Secondary School Certificate (class X), and only 10 percent has passed Higher Secondary School (class XII). With this educational background 50 percent of the EWMs have difficulties to understand the functions of UPs and to translate the circulars, guidelines or office orders issued to perform the tasks of UP. Therefore, EWMs become dependent on the chair and other experienced male members for proper guidance where they are very often either misguided or kept out of scene. In general, women members having at least secondary level education and above have shown better performance in regard to participation in the UP meetings. Education is considered as a material resource required in order to achieve empowerment and thus participation.

Participation in politics and decision-making bodies is important as it is through such endeavor women can either influence or be a part of policy formulation and decisions which have direct bearing on their lives. Involvement in politics help a disadvantaged group acquire power which can be used in bringing about necessary social changes (Roushan, Qadir, Begum, & Huq, 1995). Thus, it is essential to examine the experience of the elected women councilors while participating in the UP activities.

All decisions regarding the Union Parishad activities are taken in the UP meetings. Almost all the EWMs participate in the monthly meeting on a regular basis. Most of the women representatives described the meeting environment unfriendly. It is rare to start the meeting in time. The researcher had to wait three hours in one UP to start the meeting, in another case the researcher had to wait two hours. In both the cases it was observed that the women members were present in due time but the male members and the chair were found late. 78 percent participants confirmed that once the meeting starts it continues three-four hours. Late start and long continuation of the meeting make women members not to speak much as they need to go home for organizing domestic household activities. Almost all the EWMs confessed that the chair and other male members very often take this opportunity and invite the EWMs to sign in advance and allow them to go home. This is how EWMs are systematically deprived from participation.

It has been seen that male members, in general, always pointed their fingers towards the inability of EWMs. As a result, out of sheer negligence EWMs are kept aside from the main discussions. Their voices are hardly echoed in the meeting. With regard to verbal participation in UP meetings 55 percent EWMs feel that they can participate equally with men but they cannot prove it as the chair and other male members always dominate them and ignore their opinions. Even they mentioned that sometimes they were harassed by abusive words if they intend to talk much

in the meeting. The rest 45 percent EWMs lack confidence in expressing their opinions during the meeting.

All the EWMs confirmed that men dominate in formal leadership roles and in organizing events in UP activities. Basically it is the chair and some of his close male members who dominate all the decisions in the meetings. Carli (1999) asserts that women are considered less competent than men; men are given more opportunities to speak; men agree more often with men's contributions and defer frequently to women's opinions rather than men's.

Most of the EWMs perceive participation as a mere attendance in the meetings. Accordingly, they claim that they sign all the meeting proceedings. 66 percent mentioned that they do not have any option to fight to establish their rights in the UP activities. They are compelled to do whatever the chair wants them to do. However, 30 percent have different opinions. Interestingly, these 30 percent have powerful family connections and have close personal contacts with the chair.

The development programs of UP are being implemented by project implementation committee comprising one chair and one-three members. In the project implementation committees the representation of EWMs is marginal. An enquiry was made by the researcher to see the involvement of EWMs in different development projects by analyzing the Annual Budget for a financial year of all the three UPs. It has been found that 85 percent projects are headed by male members. Therefore, the participation of EWMs in the decision-making and its implementation in the development projects are very low. In assessing the quality of participation it is observed that all female members gave the project to their husband or other male member of the family for implementation. Some of them gave it as a sub-contract to others and in return used to get an amount as profit. By getting the benefit they signed the evaluation report.

It has been found that EWMs are yet to show their competence in handling development projects of UP. The reasons are first, women members are not capable and competent enough to manage it; second, they are not yet ready to take it as a challenge and finally, the male members do not co-operate them as they consider these their own tasks and for the presence of women members they are losing their share.

Every family in rural Bangladesh is more or less involved in cultivation and agricultural production. Availability of fertilizer in time is a major issue. The Government of Bangladesh has introduced a system of issuing allotment card to every cultivator to have fertilizer. To have an allotment card one needs the recommendation of the elected members of the concerned area. With this activity virtually for the first time UP members came in direct close contact with every family of the area and the existence of the local government institution becomes more visible to the local people. Unfortunately EWMs have no role to play here as the ward members are doing

this and women members are not allowed to do it. It has been observed that the overlapping of the constituency of the ward members and that of the women members from the reserved seats severely affect the scope of participation of the EWMs from reserved seats. There are as many as three elected ward members from the same constituency of an elected woman member from reserved seats. This is a case of systematic institutional discrimination against EWMs.

Every UP has a number of regular poverty alleviation programs which has direct bearing on the lives of the rural poor and destitute women. Some of the programs are VGD (vulnerable group development), VGF (vulnerable group feeding) card distribution, Allowance for widows, old age allowance, test relief, expectant mother allowance. According to the rule or directives issued by the local government division 50 percent of the widow allowances is to be distributed by women members. It has been observed that EWMs are not getting sufficient space in selecting the beneficiaries under these programs and thereby losing their respect to the poor and destitute women. Table – 3 demonstrates the involvement of male and female members in the poverty alleviation programs of UPs under study.

Table – 3: Involvement of EWMs in Distributing Services under the Poverty Alleviation Programs

Programs	Male member's share %	Women member's share %
Widow Allowance	67%	33%
Old Age Allowance	84%	16%
VGD/VGF Card	81%	19%
Expectant Mother Allowance	80%	20%

Although the constituencies of women members are three times bigger than that of the male members, they are not getting their right share to serve the poor and destitute women of their locality. These are the kind of programs through which women members can establish a social network and can play a positive role as a representative of the locality. It has been observed that in this regard government orders have not been complied by UP to involve women. For example, in selecting the widows under the widow allowance program, women are supposed to get two-third share but in practice they are getting half of the male's share.

Disaster management, relief and rehabilitation is one of the important function that the UP implements by itself. 67 percent EWMs mentioned that they are involved in this program mostly as a member of the relief distribution team. The rest never participated in any such program. But majority of them who participated in the program mentioned with frustration that they only accompany the relief distribution team. The selection of beneficiaries was done before by the

male members and the chair or by their agents. The historical male domination of this particular institution still prevails which inhibits the active involvement of EWMs.

Interestingly all the EWMs mention that they participate in various health activities. When asked about the type of activities they are involved they categorically mentioned the awareness building programs organized by the Ministry of Health and Family Planning regarding child nutrition and growth, pre and post natal health of women and family planning issues (use of contraceptives / birth control pills), Extended Program of Immunization (EPI) and so on as delegated by the government from time to time. EWMs have been seen as a good activist in the areas of health and environmental issues. The researcher's observation in this regard is that the chair always prefers to involve them in these programs. The reasons behind it are threefold; first, it confirms the engagement of EWMs in the development activities of UPs; second, the UPs normally do not have budget allocation in these programs. Thereby male members are less interested in those; and third, nutrition, health and family planning programs are mostly implemented by women and targeted as women's programs.

In compliance with the existing laws, the UPs made some headway in preparing a budget. There is a provision for conducting ward meeting and participatory budget making. The researcher has found the budget of all the UPs is printed and available for all. But a disappointing account has been found as about 90 percent EWMs expressed their discontent for no meaningful participation in the budget making process. They confirm their presence in the meeting without any viable scope for participation. The reason behind such proxy attendance is due to the unavailability of information regarding the budgetary resources prior to the budget making. The study has found the overlapping of constituency of the reserved seat and that of the general seat a crucial barrier for EWMs participation in budget making process. Women are facing a glaring discrimination in exercising their legislative powers and are unjustifiably excluded from economically valued assignments such as the financial and developmental aspects of UP, while these are exclusively reserved for male members (Begum, 2007).

The most visible area of participation for women member is the standing committees of the UP. The provision made it clear that one-third of the standing committees are to be headed by women members and again committee on 'women and children welfare', 'culture and sports' must be formed under the leadership of a EWM. Unfortunately during the study it has been observed that a set of paper books are maintaining for the standing committees. The concerned female member failed to spell out the name of the committee she is leading. They simply sign the resolution book maintained in the UP office. No evidence has been found for financial allocation and program carried out by these committees.

One of the common activities of UP is dispute resolution and the most popular form of it is the shalish (Arbitration), a bigger and open public forum. This forum is considered as the male domain. The shalish team is always headed by locally respected and powerful men who do not like the participation of women in this area. In response to a question majority identify social and religious custom that prohibit women from participating in such public forum. Moreover, UP chair and other elderly respectable male members do not include women members in the arbitration team thereby keep the EWMs out of the whole process. Another study shows that those who have real or perceived economic, social or religious power are generally able to manipulate the mediation in their favor, and often at the expense of the poor, women, or other vulnerable classes of persons. The shalish members tend to be male elders who make decisions and judgments on the basis of their own personal opinions, values, and positions of power to resolve local disputes with punishments and judgments falling harshly on women and the poor (Casper & Kamal, 1995). An ADB funded survey of 451 women members found that once elected, many do not automatically find themselves as equal decision-makers. More than 70 percent of the interviewees were unaware about their role in the UP. Additionally, more than 80 percent lack adequate skills to conduct meetings or shalish and mostly dependent on male members to make decisions (ADB, 2004).

Considering their educational background most of the EWMs are not involved in any full time formal occupation other than the functions of housekeeping. Every EWM feels proud to mention the name of their husband and some family members to introduce themselves in front of the researcher. Only 33 percent EWMs had some experience in the semi-professional sphere. The rest did not have any experience in the professional sphere. Most of them did not have any social involvement. It is interesting that except one all other participants confirmed that they never participated in any socio-cultural and political activities before elected. Moreover, none could demonstrate any skills which can contribute to enhance their social recognition and gave them credibility in their constituencies. The EWMs were found ignorant if not least aware of local issues, due to their noninvolvement with the problems of their localities.

It has been observed that in all the three UPs all the ward members have independent office room in the UP complex. But no such office has been seen for EWMs. When they come to the UP office to attend the meeting they sit in the common conference room which is not suitable to hold office when there is no meeting or conference. This imbalance has been triggered again as male members are elected from only one ward, whereas women members are elected from three. As one member rightly pointed out, "A single woman member represents three wards but we still do not have any permanent offices where we can sit and discharge our responsibilities."

From their experiences most of the EWMs expressed their feelings that men do not like them to play an active role in the UP activities. Men members and chair, in general, consider it as their own domain. Majority of the EWMs said their views are not given any importance, their male colleagues ignored them with great negligence and do not want to share anything about the UP activities as they are women. They further elaborate that this attitude of their male colleagues demoralized them and very often they chose to remain silent in the meeting. Only one elected female member has been found who has created her position as elected representative and became the panel chair of the UP. But her position does not necessarily reflect her capability to perform and participate. In fact she is the wife of a powerful and rich man in the locality. Due to this status she is getting importance to all.

Union Parishad normally takes all decisions on the basis of majority support where women still are a minority. In such cases differences of opinion made the EWMs victimized by their male colleagues. Therefore, they mostly stay silent in the meetings (Sultana, 2004). The overlapping of the constituency of the ward members and that of the women members from the reserved seats severely affect the scope of participation of the elected women members from reserved seats. Therefore, we can say that the legal and institutional framework is not sufficient enough for ensuring meaningful women's participation. Though, the system of reservation and direct election has at least a success in bringing the womenfolk into the public forum.

Their stepping in the public activities as elected representatives is not the reflection of their voluntary intention rather in most of the cases as they said they were pushed to the public spheres. Being an elected representative they are not getting enough support from their family. Thus women's representation in Bangladesh local government bodies has become a symbolic tokenism and not for meaningful participation. Further, it has been found that reservation has merely made EWMs more visible in a quantitative parameter in the gender participation rather than ushering a qualitative developmental effort.

MAJOR HINDRANCES TO THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

The social context of rural women and their real life experiences as elected representatives revealed that the EWMs seriously lacked material, human, and social resources required to be able or empowered enough to influence decisions at the Union Parishad. The lack of education is a serious obstacle that has marred the participation of women despite their numerical strength in the Union Parishad. Therefore, women more than any other subordinate social group require state intervention and institutional provisions to free up agency, and the mere possibility of being able to participate in the public sphere (Mukhopadhyay, 2005).

Many of the women members lack knowledge and information about procedures and functions of Union Parishad. Some of them do not have any prior involvement in social welfare activities or other experiences in the public arena. It is a common knowledge that many of the women representatives are relatives of men who are local power brokers. Another critical issue is that of constituency, i.e. the lack of clear ward representation of women. Since each of the wards is also a constituency of another ward member, who is typically a man, each of the three women in Union Parishad usually has three male counterparts. This creates a situation where male members do not recognize women as legitimate representatives of the parishad. At the same time, a women member has a larger constituency of three wards of the union. This means that they have to face more demands which may be beyond their capacity to fulfill.

Majority of the women members said that they do not face any major resistance from their family. Basically the family members pushed them to enter in to this function. But by giving priority to the Union Parishad job they need to go outside now and then. This creates problems to manage home activities. Sometimes the guardians of the family show their annoyance as they cannot bring any direct benefit to the family specially, in terms of earnings. They are often humiliated by the villagers as they have very little contribution in the community development. Identification of problems and development issues are considered as a man's job in the rural setting of Bangladesh. It is difficult for the women to make space in the public sphere activities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Because of the provision of reserved seats a good number of rural women have the opportunity to join political office. However, the women members seriously lack authority and resources to discharge their responsibilities. The social, political, cultural and economic context is detrimental to the active participation of women in Union Parishad. It can be said that the provision of one-third reserved seats and direct election for women in the Union Parishad is mere eyewash unless the government seriously amend the relevant laws and ordinances to specify the roles and responsibilities of the EWMs in the reserved seats.

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