

Khwaja Yunus Ali University Journal

Publisher homepage: www.kyau.edu.bd

OPEN ACCESS

ISSN: 2521-3121 (Print)

Journal homepage: www.journal.kyau.edu.bd



Research Article

Power and Functions of Women Members in Union Parishad: A Survey on Ullapara Upazila of Sirajganj District

Rajaul Karim^{1*}, and Md. Rubel Hossain²

¹Department of Library and Information Science, Khwaja Yunus Ali University, Enayetpur, Sirajganj, Bangladesh

*Corresponding author: Email: mdrezaukarim801@gmail.com (Dr. Rajaul Karim, Department of Library and Information Science, Khwaja Yunus Ali University, Enayetpur, Sirajganj, Bangladesh)

Abstract:

The importance of local government in the development and establishment of good governance in a country is immense. Union Parishad is a local government in Bangladesh. The pragmatic policies and management of the Union Parishad continue to play a vital role in the economic and social development of the rural people. With this in view, the government is taking various steps to strengthen the Union Parishads. The Union Parishad has been divided into nine

wards to accelerate rural development and ensure people's participation in the development process. In order to make the development activities sustainable, provision has been made to elect three women members to three reserved seats in each union by direct vote of the people. The present study seeks to assess the extent to which women members of the Union Parishad can play a practical role in mass development activities.

Keywords: Women Member, Union Parishad, Local Government, Participation, Committees.

Introduction:

Women's empowerment has become an important chapter in today's world. Bangladesh is no exception. In the past, there was no specific policy for the development of women, so women were lacking in the theory and application of development. But at present, in the interest of the development of the country and the nation, all obstacles in the way of active participation of women in all spheres of state and individual life have been removed on the basis of full and equal participation in policy-making and decision-making in politics, economy, education, and employment, social and cultural spheres. At the same time, emphasis has been laid on the establishment of the

principle of equality and sharing of responsibilities between men and women at all national and international levels. To this end, various steps have been taken in the Constitution to ensure the participation of women in all spheres of national life in the need to establish equal rights for men and women. Only women's participation in accountable local government ensures women's empowerment. Therefore, in order to ensure the empowerment of women at the grassroots level, three reserved seats for women have been allotted in the Union Parishad and the participation of women members in the adoption, implementation and evaluation of Union Parishad projects for the development of the country and the nation has been supported. Attempts have

been made to assess the following issues in order to achieve the goals of the present study.

Preliminary hypotheses of the survey:

- Women members are not able to play much role in the adoption and implementation of projects in the Union Parishad;
- The concept of women members in project adoption and implementation is not clear;
- Women members are not able to take effective steps to fulfill their election promises;
- Due to the patriarchal attitude of the chairman and male members, the female members are not able to play an effective role in the regular monthly meetings;
- Judgments and opinions of women members are not important in local arbitration;
- Male members cannot easily accept the work of female members;
- Women members sometimes cannot maintain dignity in their own families.

The purpose of the survey:

Bangladesh is a developing country. Ensuring women's participation at the grassroots level is essential for the overall development of the country. To this end, since 1997, the lowest level of local government, women have been directly elected to the reserved seats in the Union Parishad. In order to understand the political and administrative power of these elected women members, it is necessary to explore the issue of long-term development, its recognition and opportunities in society by considering their overall standard of living. The following topics have been explored to achieve the objectives of the present study.

- ❖ To what extent are the women members of the Union Parishad able to fulfill their responsibilities?
- ❖ What is the role of women members in project adoption and implementation?
- ❖ Women members whether they are able to keep their electoral promises;
- ❖ Whether there has been any change in the quality of life of rural women;
- ❖ What is the attitude of male members towards female members?
- ❖ The participation of women members in women's empowerment structures ensures women's Empowerment at the grassroots level;

- ❖ How successful are the women members of the Union Parishad in the practical application of their own constitutional powers?
- ❖ How acceptable is their status in the family and social spheres?

Survey time:

The survey was conducted between January 2019 and December 2020. The data of the ten Union Parishads related to the research for the financial year 2019-2020 has been used as the main component of the research. Moreover, field specific data for the years 2016-2017 and 2018-2019 have also been used as research material.

Limitations of the survey:

There are many limitations in the present survey. At present, the number of Union Parishads in Bangladesh is about 4500. It is very difficult to know the details about the empowerment and functioning of women in the Union Parishads of Bangladesh by collecting data from only 10 Union Parishads. To research such a large issue, it was necessary to collect data from a much larger number of unions. Moreover, there have been various complications regarding the interviews of thirty elected women members of the ten unions. For example, since the respondents' homes are far apart, I have had to spend a lot of time traveling. Many times, the beautiful atmosphere of the interview has been ruined due to the presence of the respondent's husband. In addition, many important answers have been blown away by laughter, which has created complications in data collection.

The rationale for the survey:

Bangladesh is a rural country with a population of about 76 percent. The only representative body of this village is the Union Parishad. It is important to study the power of women members in this union council and the role of its implementation and its nature. Conducting a survey on such a subject would reveal on the one hand the scope and limitations of women's empowerment and its implementation at the local level, on the other hand the extent to which the national government exercised authority over the Union Parishads and the male member attitudes, functions and powers. Therefore, this survey will be considered as a logical, comprehensive and timely survey in an effort to accelerate the empowerment of

women members of the Union Parishad for the benefit of the rural people by making local autonomy more effective.

Data collection:

The survey was conducted on ten union Parishads of Ullapara Upazila of Sirajganj district. Methods of observation, survey, case study etc. have been used for data collection. Moreover, the judgments and decisions of the women members given in various arbitrations held in the village and union councils have been recorded. Attempts have been made to understand in depth the public discussion on various incidents that have taken place in the Union Parishad on the streets and in the shops during the interviews and to gather preliminary information in the midst of general discussions. The study usually collected data from two sources, e.g.

1. Primary source
2. Secondary source

We have collected information through direct participation in the research area as a primary source. And as a secondary source, I have collected information from books, magazines, and related articles published in Journal.

Historical context of the formation of the Union Parishad of Bangladesh:

The local government of Bangladesh has a long history. In ancient India, according to the information available from Kautilya's Arthashastra, an informal organization called Grmsabha used to manage all the affairs of the village. During the Gupta period, the empire was divided into Bhukti, Sihe, Mandal, Bithi and villages. At every level they used the king to buy and sell land and collect rent. During the Mughal period, the smallest level of local government was the mahal, which is similar to today's union parishads. The main function of the palace was to collect revenue. At the local level, gram panchayats used to collect taxes imposed by the government from the common people. Gram panchayats used to collect taxes from the local level for the central government. (Ahmed AJM. 1988). After the British East India Company came to power in India, various changes took place in this local government. Subsequent to independence, on 1 January 1972, the President dissolved the Union Council and the Municipal Council by Order No.7. According to the order, the Union Council was renamed as Union Panchayat and an administrator

was appointed (Rahman M, 1993). The new constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh came into force on 16 December 1972. The constitution emphasized the importance of building strong local government. In 1973, the President changed the name of the Union Panchayat to Union Parishad by order No. 22 (A, 1984).

Power of Union Parishad:

According to the Local Government Ordinance 1983, the Union Parishad may impose taxes on the annual value of the house and on the business venture. However, the approval of the Deputy Commissioner is required before the tax is imposed. In fact, the Union Parishad does not have any income from this source (Kamal S, 1994). The Union Parishad has to depend on the government for money. That is, the union council is not financially well-off. The amount of money given by the government does not take into account the needs of the Union Parishads. Again, the money that is allocated is sometimes not spent by the Union Parishads due to lack of proper planning and manpower. Union councils do not have the power to recruit manpower. There is a secretary appointed by the government over whom the Union Parishad has no control. The Parishad is not independent in adopting development plans (Haque AKS, 2001). The Union Parishad can accept only a small amount of money from the government. It cannot accept any project with its own funds. The Union Parishad does not have the technical manpower to implement the project. The Union Manpower has to rely on the government department for the technical manpower (Powel B, 1907). The Union Parishad has been given the responsibility for 40 types of work. Among them are public welfare, law and order, revenue development, judiciary etc. However, the union council also works outside the rules.⁷For example, citizenship certificate, character certificate, death certificate, etc. In 1983, the Local Government Ordinance was amended. In this order, the Union Parishad has been given the responsibility of 10 compulsory and 38 optional works including municipal revenue, administration, security, developmental execution (The Daily News, 30.10.1983).

Evolution of women's participation in union Parishad:

After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the economy as well as law and order in Bengal deteriorated. As a result, the British administration enacted the Chowkidari Act in 1870 in the interest of economic development as well as maintaining law and order in the country and empowered the district magistrate to form a panchayat committee consisting of five persons at the village level. The primary function of this panchayat was to appoint a guard named Chowkidar to maintain law and order (Rahman MM, 1983). When there was a famine in Bengal in 1880, there was a need to distribute relief to the needy at the local level. The British administration began to think of establishing a local autonomous body. As a result, the British government in 1885 formed a district board in the district, a local body in the subdivision and a three-tier union committee in the village (Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance, 1997). In 1919, under the local autonomy, the Chowkidari Panchayat and the Union Committee were abolished and the Union Board was formed under a new name. The 1935 Act divided each union into 3 wards and provided for the nomination of 3 members in each ward. After the end of British rule, the Autonomy Act of 1919 was amended to abolish the system of nomination of members of the Union Board and provide for the election of members by adult vote (Mathai J, 1983). In 1959, the Ayub Khan government introduced a four-tiered system of local autonomy (The Daily News, 30.10.1983).

After the introduction of the constitution of independent Bangladesh in 1973, the name of the Union Panchayat was changed to Union Parishad. The Government of Bangladesh ensured the representation of women at the local level by issuing the Local Autonomy Ordinance in 1976 (Karim R, 2011). It provides for the nomination of two women members for each Union Parishad. Later, in the Union Parishad Ordinance issued in 1983, the number of women members was increased from two to three. In 1997, the Union Parishad was divided into 9 wards. One female member from each of the two wards was elected by a ballot, which still exists today (Karim R, 2011).

Women members in decision making:

The grassroots structure of local government is the Union Parishad. According to the Union Parishad Ordinance, only the details of Union Council's

policy, norms, objectives, acquisition and use of local resources, allocations received from the Central Government and responsibility for the acceptance and implementation of projects are recorded (Karim, Dr. Md. Rajaul, 2012). Nothing is said about the responsibilities, duties and rights of the members. However, the responsibilities assigned to the chairman are linked to the responsibilities of the members of the council. But women members of the council have to face problems all the time, because the work of women members is not clearly mentioned in the union council manual, so they are not given importance in any work. The formulation and implementation of the budget, the adoption of the plan, the judicial works rely on the will of the chairman. Moreover, the chairman gives more prominence to the views of the male members as they are traditionally influenced by men in village politics (Kamal S, 1994).

Monthly meetings and participation of women members:

According to the Union Parishad Ordinance, there is a provision for a monthly meeting chaired by the Chairman on the 4th of every month. But in reality, it has been seen that the chairman convenes a meeting with the male members at his discretion and convenience and takes important decisions with the support of the male members of choice. The study found different aspects of female members. Although female members were present at the meeting, their views were not taken into account in decision-making. Sometimes the chairman imposes his decision on the women members. As a result, the women members do not reflect their own views on decision making (Karim R, 2011).

Women members are assigned to committee management and project allocation:

The Union Council Ordinance provides for the formation of subject-based standing committees for all functions. The Department of Local Government wrote a letter to the Deputy Commissioner on 4 May 1998 to give women members the opportunity and power to play their due role. It asked the Union Chairmen to take steps to form 5 more Standing Committees, including 7 Standing Committees as per Section 38 (1) of the Local Government Ordinance 1983 (Rahman MM, 1983). The purpose of forming these committees was to create opportunities for women members to serve as

chairpersons of standing committees. Women members have the opportunity to serve as chairpersons of at least three standing committees. But out of 30 women members in 10 unions in my research area, only 11 are aware of the issue and the remaining 21 know nothing about it (Bishwjit M, 1907). Women members are failing to assert their rights due to their own ignorance. Moreover, local politics has a special effect on the adoption and distribution of projects in the union. As a result, many women members were deprived of access to the project due to different political reasons. Although the project is given to the women members, the chairman does not cooperate in its implementation. As a result, the women members are not able to have promising results for the welfare of the people (Karim R, 2011).

VGD, VGF, old age allowance, tube well management:

Poor women in the villages approach women members to avail the benefits of the VGD program. The women members submitted the list of distressed women to the council on personal initiative and in consultation with the local people. But the chairman and the male members sometimes remove the names from the list of names submitted by the female members and write the names as per their choice. The same is true in the case of old age allowance. Although there are names of women members in the committee formed to select the place for the installation of tube wells, the real authority is in the hands of the chairman. There is no authority in the hands of women members. The empowerment of women in local government is being neglected (Kamal S,1994).

Women members in rural arbitration:

Rural arbitration is a special means of resolving social disputes. It continues to play an important role in our society. It contributes to the establishment of social stability and justice. But it is not problem free. The role of the elite class involved in this arbitration process is not always dominant. Most of the disputes in our society are between the lower class and the less educated people. This class of people is usually not aware of the law. As a result, they fell prey to the persuasions of the village touts and often caused unrest in society by ignoring the arbitration decision. Again, due to the biased and

controversial role of the so-called elites and the evil activities of the selfish quarters, their lives became dubious. As a result, they were forced to join the Union Council in the hope of getting justice. But even here, the judiciary is not without controversy. In this system of justice, male members have more influence than female members. The participation of women members in the judicial proceedings of the council is very limited, mainly due to rural values.

My research has found that chairmen and male members do not want female members to participate in judicial work. The chairman usually forms a committee with male members to conduct the proceedings. Usually, these committees do not have female members (Bangladesh Ministry of Local Government, 1980). As a result, women members are unable to play a role in establishing justice and their views are not reflected. In this regard, Amena Ahmed, a female member of the ward Ahmed, said a few days ago a young man (24) in my ward had an illicit affair with a woman (19) next door. The matter is known to everyone big and small and its arbitration is arranged in the Union Parishad. All the male and female members of the council were present at the arbitration. At the end of the detailed discussion in the arbitration, both men and women were blamed. The arbitrator fined the boy Rs 5,000 and hit the girl with 10 shoes. But the female members present at the arbitration vetoed the verdict. The female members were of the opinion that the boy should also be hit with 10 shoes. The debate started immediately after the opinion of the female members. Eventually the arbitrator's verdict was suspended. Finally, a few days later, the trial ended in a one-sided verdict of the male members without the female members (Khan MM, 1914).

Women members to fulfill election promises:

One of the strategies of the election campaign is to make promises. During the election campaign, women members also promised to build roads for voters, distribute relief to schools, provide water and water, provide financial assistance to mosques, temples, madras as, provide old age allowances and houses to needy women, distribute electricity, provide adult education and prevent child marriage. But after the election, the women members are not able to keep their promises because the chairperson allocates development by ignoring the women members. Due to the biased behavior of the

chairman and the male members, the female members are not able to keep their promises. In general, women members do not participate in the development allocations given to the union council. Basically, the negligence and non-cooperation of the chairman and male members towards the women members discourages them from fulfilling their election promises (Faizullah M, 1982).

Women members improve the living standards of rural women:

Since women members are elected by the people, they have to maintain contact with the people. Moreover, as the people's representative, their election promise was to stand by the side of the people happily and sadly. He got acquainted with the eminent personalities of the area in various public welfare activities of the council. In order to solve the problems of the area, they have to interact with all classes of professionals, men and women in the constituency. After this communication, the people of the constituency become confident in them. Observations in the research area have shown that people only want to discuss women's issues openly with women. Due to patriarchal discipline, they do not like to go to male members (Local Government Structure Review Commission, 1972). On the other hand, the elected female members feel that even if they cannot meet the basic needs of the people in the constituency, there is no obstacle to keeping in touch with them. Women members provide awareness and encouragement to rural women about educating their sons and daughters, health care counseling, risks of child marriage and polygamy, not having more children, and not getting involved in family quarrels. Thus, the study clearly shows that women members are not able to empower rural women economically. That is why the rural poor women's society is not able to benefit very much because the female members get much fewer grants than the male members. As a result, women members are not able to keep their promises, and they lose the trust of the people. However, women members are by the side of women in the constituency with mental strength. (Khann MA, 1994)

Attitudes of male members towards female members:

Attitude is one of the reasons for the difference between men and women in our society. The

patriarchal mentality has bound women. The only way to develop these women's society is to ensure women's political participation. Women's empowerment must be ensured from the local level to the national level. Otherwise, the overall development of women will be hampered. So a positive change in the ongoing attitude towards women's political empowerment is very important (Mallick B, 2004). As the constituency of women members is larger than the constituency of male members, women members have more responsibility towards the people. In this context, the women members demand more allocation. But the chairperson does not allocate more but makes fun of it. The main reason for this is the patriarchal attitude. Due to this patriarchal attitude, female members are always under stress. Male members think that female members are of no use. They cannot finish a project when they start it. They cannot speak in arbitration. They may not attend regular meetings. As a result, his notoriety fell on other members of the council, including the chairman. In general, they do not want to evaluate the work of women. As a result, due to various problems and complications, female members are constantly despised by male members (Rahman MM, 1983).

Family attitude towards female members:

Our social system is based on patriarchal values and these patriarchal values and ideals have subjugated and marginalized the position of women. Moreover, religious values have made women dependent on men and the main reason for this dependence is women's economic worthlessness. Basically, patriarchy has made women dependent on men for lack of recognition of maternity domestic labor. Women's thinking, consciousness, desire and reluctance are all influenced by men. Unable to cooperate in other family matters, including economic development, female members suffer from emotional distress. When a woman wins the council election, other members of the family think that she will get a lot of benefits from it. But in the future, if they do not fulfill that desire, the female member does not get importance to the family. As a result, family members consider it disrespectful for a female member to go to different offices for work or to meet a stranger outside. Due to such behavior in the family, female members are under stress. Studies have shown that they are unable to fulfill their

responsibilities due to stress. On the one hand, the non-cooperation of the male members, on the other hand, the dissatisfaction of the family gives rise to frustration among the female members. As a result, they lose the support of the family. Sometimes there is a conflict with the husband. Mena Ahmed, a female member of the Bangala Union Parishad, said she had to rent a car from her husband to go to the council as she had no income of her own, but had earlier said she would not pay. Earlier, he had said that he would not pay any money. Instead, she asked him to take care of his sons and daughters without any sympathy. She had a quarrel with her husband over the issue. Female members outside the family are constantly hearing many indecent comments.

Recommendations:

Bangladesh is a rural country where about 76% of the people live in villages. Without rural development, the overall development of the country is not possible. Union Parishad is the only means of rural development as it is the only grassroots development body of the government. That is why the government has included male as well as female members in the Union Parishad for the purpose of sustainable development. But in reality, due to various complications, women members are not able to reach the desired development goals. Therefore, in order to reach the desired development goals of women members, the following issues need to be emphasized.

The issues are-

- ✓ To formulate specific policy on responsibilities of Union Parishad for women members;
- ✓ The participation of women members in the regular monthly meetings of the council should be ensured;
- ✓ Women members will have to be aware of their rights;
- ✓ The views of women members should be taken into account in the decision making of various developmental activities of the council;
- ✓ The views of women members should be given importance in the formulation and implementation of the budget of the council;
- ✓ Involvement of women members in arbitration and opportunity to play a role in judgment should be created;
- ✓ Women members should give importance to education and work experience;

- ✓ We have to come out of the conventional values and give the opportunity to work with male members;
- ✓ Women members should be encouraged to work by organizing gender sensitive seminars at the village level;
- ✓ Family attitudes need to change;

Above all, the role of women members in rural development must be taken into account in the empowerment of women.

Conclusion:

The provision of directly electing women members to the reserved seats of the Union Parishad is a landmark step of the government to ensure the empowerment of women in this village head Bangladesh. But on the one hand, the conventional beliefs, values and norms of the patriarchal social system of male members, on the other hand, the lack of knowledge about the important functions of the council of female members, this groundbreaking step of the government is not reaching the desired goal. The women members of the Union Parishad are not aware of the project adoption and implementation process. Neither the chairman nor other individuals associated with the union council feel the need to inform women members. This unawareness of the female members creates opportunities for the sole domination of the chairman and the male members. As a result, women members are not able to play any role in grassroots development. Rather, they are being ignored in all cases. Therefore, it can be said that the patriarchal attitude prevailing in our society is hindering the process of empowerment of women in the Union Parishad. Empowerment of women is essential for sustainable development at the grassroots level. Sustainable development is possible only if we can ensure women's empowerment in the Union Parishad.

Acknowledgement:

We would like to express our gratitude to Mr. Md. Shaon Akter, Senior Lecturer of English at Khawaja Yunus Ali University, for his valuable comments, suggestions and assistance with data analysis.

Conflict of interest:

The researcher declared that there is no conflict of interest in the study, with the data collection along

with analysis of the data as well as authorship and publication of his present article.

Author contribution:

Both Karim MR and Hossain MR prepared questionnaires for survey data collection and analyzed them to find the expected results.

Funding: None.

References:

- Ahmed AJM. (1988). *Local Government in Action, A Case Study of Mirazpur Union Parishad*, Vol. 19, No. RDA Bogra, pp. 7-11.
- Rahman MM. (1993). *Local Self Government in Bangladesh*, Rajshahi: Rajshahi University, p. 150.
- Ann-Lisbet Arn. (1984). "The Journal of Local Government", *Bi-Annual of National Institute of Local Government*, Vol. 13, No. 2, July-December, Dhaka, p. 101.
- Kamal S et al. (1994). *Local Government in Bangladesh*, Dhaka: University Press, Ltd., pp. 25-26, 31.
- Haque AKS. (2001). "Training for Local Government Functionaries in Bangladesh", *The Journal of Local Government*, Vol. 30, No. 1, NILG, Dhaka: pp. 1-11.
- Powel B. (1907). "The Local Government (Gram Parishads) Act, 1997, (Act. No. 21 of 1997)", *Land Revenue and Tenure in British India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 98.
- Rahman MM. (1983). "Problems and Possibilities of Autonomy of Bangladesh", *Union Parishad Context 1971-1983*, Dhaka: Somaj Nerikan centre, pp. 10-13, 17.
- Mathai, John. (1983). *Village Government in British India*, Delhi: Neerway Publishing House, p. ix.
- Karim R. (2011). "Development of Local and Judicial System in Bangladesh: A Historical Review", *The Journal of Local Government*, Vol. 30, No. 1, NILG, Dhaka, pp. 1-11, 13.
- Karim R. (2011). "Role of Elite Class in Local Judiciary, A Survey on Bangala Union of Ullapara Upazila of Sirajganj District", *Lok Proshason Samoeeky*, Vol. 51, No. 51, Savar, Dhaka, pp. 34-41.
- Karim R. (2012). "Union Parishad Project Preparation and Implementation Process, A Survey on Two Unions of Ullapara Upazila of Sirajganj District", *Lok Proshason Samoeeky*, Vol. 52, No. 52, Savar, Dhaka, p. 90.
- Bishwjit M. (1907). *Land Revenue and Tenure in British India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 98.
- Khan MM. (1914). *Bangladesh: Trends and Issues*, Dhaka: Center for Administration, pp. 153-158.
- Faizullah M. (1982). "Perspective of Local Leel Planning in Bangladesh", *The Journal of Local Government*, 11:2 30-51, NILG, Dhaka, pp. 7-13.
- Khan MA et al. (1994). *Local Government in Bangladesh*, NILG, Dhaka, pp. 13-16.
- Khan MA. (1994). "Function of Union Parishad", *The Journal of Local Government No. 231*, NILG, Dhaka, pp. 7-10.
- Mallick B. (2004). *Local Government, Local People's Institution*, Kolkata: Paragon Enterprise, p. 150.

Government Documents

- The Local Government Ordinance, NILG, Dhaka: 1976.
- The Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance, NILG, 1983.
- Government of the people Republic of Bangladesh Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives, The Swanirvar Gram Sarkar, (Constitution and Administration) Rules, 1980.
- Government of the people Republic of Bangladesh Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Union Porishid, (Constitution and Administration) Rules, 1980.
- Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Report of the Local Government Structure Review Commission, 1972.
- New Paper
 - The Daily News
 - The Dhaka Prokis
 - The Holyday

Citation: Karim MR, Hossain MR. (2021). Power and Functions of Women Members in Union Parishad: A Survey on Ullapara Upazila of Sirajganj District. *KYAU Journal*. 4(1), 52-59