

Understanding the Experiences of Female Members in *Zila Parishad*, Sylhet, Bangladesh

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Abstract

To encourage women to engage in Bangladesh politics, the local government unit introduced the requirements for reserving seats for women. For this, a district council was formed with a chairperson, and fifteen members, including five reserved seats for women. As a result, in the last four decades, it is evident that there has been an increase in women's participation in politics and governance. This study explores the female members' experiences of performing their roles as a member and promoting specific agendas and implementing them. Qualitative methodology was used in this research to assemble data by conducting an in-depth interview with female members looking at their experiences in four *Zila Parishads* in Sylhet Division, Bangladesh. The findings suggest that the Local Government of Bangladesh should not look at the existing provisions under the Constitution to increase the number of women in the public arena as an end goal but instead as a means to help accomplish gender equity. To achieve this, organisations and instruments of government must recognise a Bangladeshi woman's identity beyond the vision of gender.

Keywords: Women in Politics; Political Leadership; Female Roles; Reserved Seats; Intersectionality; *Zila Parishad*; Bangladesh

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Introduction

The number of seats reserved for women in the Parliament of Bangladesh has increased from 15 to 50. However, the percentage of seats held by women in National Parliaments in Bangladesh was approximately 21 % in 2020 (Von Kameke, 2021), an increase of about six percentage points from 2014 (Paasilina, 2016; see also Table 1). Nevertheless, to encourage women to engage in politics, a unit of local government introduced the requirements for the reservation of seats for women. The Local Government (Union Parishad) (Amendment) Act of 1977 confirmed the reservation of seats for two women members in each Union Parishad (UP), the lowest unit of rural local government. During Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad’s leadership (1982-90), the number of reserved seats for women increased from two to three.

Initially, the officials were responsible for nominating the reserved seats for women; later, it was delegated to Union Parishad’s elected members, who used to elect them.

Following the first Sheikh Hasina government (1996-2001), in 1997, new legislation came into force which enabled people to directly elect the chairperson, the head, and all 12 members of the UP, comprising nine General Seat Members (GSM) and three Reserved Seat Members (RSM) for women. In total, more than 16000 seats are reserved for women in different local councils. In 1997, more than 44000 women participated for nearly 13000 reserved-seat members in UP. In addition, women are eligible to contest for general seats also. In reality, it appears that the proportion of female councillors has achieved the “critical mass” level, which is seen as crucial for women’s empowerment (Grey, 2002; Childs and Krook, 2008).

Table 1: Percentage of women elected to Bangladesh Parliament

Year	Percentage (%) of women in General seats	Percentage (%) of women in Reserved seats
1973	0.00%	4.80%
1979	0.60%	9.10%
1986	0.90%	9.10%
1988	1.30%	0.00%
1991	1.50%	9.10%
1996	0.90%	9.10%
1996	2.40%	9.10%
2001	2.00%	13.00%
2008	6.00%	14.30%
2014	5.40%	14.30%

Source: Paasilina, 2016

During the British rule since 1895, although there were district councils in different ways, in 1959, under the Basic Democracy Order, the District Board was renamed the District Council. Under the above system, the first *Zila Parishad* election was held in 1973 in independent Bangladesh. The modern system of the District Council emerged in the nineteenth century under the British regime (Aminuzzaman, 2013). Bangladesh was the eastern part of Bengal, which was an Indian province at that time (Das et al., 2020). The administrative

system of Bengal and the other parts of British India was focused around a district-level administrative system, where the district was the critical administrative unit. There were several subdivisions under the districts, consisting of a number of police stations that were locally known as ‘Thana’. The Bengal Local Self Government Act formed a three-tier rural government system in 1885 that consisted of districts, sub-divisions and unions (Siddiqui, 2005). The villages had been segmented under unions for the first time, with one union covering

15 villages under the Act of 1885. The local government council at the Union level was the Union Board which is now Union Parishad. Sub-divisional Boards had been established, too; however, they only existed for a short period of time. On the other hand, District Councils, which were later called District Boards, and Unions, were led by elected representatives. Therefore, both District and sub-divisional boards were partly democratic, despite always being subject to British administrators.

Later, in the Pakistani period, which lasted from 1947 to 1971, a new form of local government emerged, named the Thana Council, under the direct administration of the sub-divisional officers (SDOs). After seizing power, General Mohammed Ayub Khan connected this with the local government system established for Pakistan in order to keep democracy limited at the local level. However, the Thana Councils did not hold any power of taxation that the district and union boards exercised.

In addition, the election was held through the vote of the local government's lower-level people's representatives. This election was held for the last time in 1976, and the post-independence council was dissolved in 1972; thus, as an interim measure, the deputy commissioner was given the power to manage and supervise the district council's work.

In 1986, the district board was renamed when The Local Government Ordinance was issued. Later the Local Government (District Council) Act-198 (1990) was passed during the Ershad government. Under this Act, the model introduced resembled the Pakistani period system; the council's chairperson was elected through indirect elections. Provisions were made for the election of other members. However, the Ershad government did not elect the party MPs and appointed them as the chairperson of the district council.

The Local Government (District Council) Act-198 was repealed when the (BNP) Bangladesh Nationalist Party came to power in 1991, and the district council was abolished. The Zila Parishad Act was passed again in 2000 when the Awami League came to power. Before the election, the

BNP came to power again; unfortunately, the law did not come into force. In 2011, administrators were appointed in 61 districts of Bangladesh for interim duties as part of the initiative to activate the district council when the Awami League came into power again. However, the Awami League government has taken the step to elect the council after five years.

In Bangladesh at present, there are 64 Zila Parishads, and 3 of them are with more autonomy for having different structures because they are situated in hill districts. The remaining 61 districts are run under the control and guidance of the Local Government Division. In accordance with the relevant law, a district council will be formed with a chairperson, including fifteen members, of which five seats will be reserved for women. The last Zila Parishad election was held in 2016 for a term of 5 years which was supposed to end in 2021 but ended in August 2022.

Women's level of active participation in politics was constrained by various issues (Gol/UNDP, 2018). First, ingrained stereotypes consigned women to the home, severely restricting their participation in public affairs, a field predominately controlled by men. Second, the political space given to women is heavily influenced by caste and class limits as well as the patriarchal structure and mindset. The third point is that women themselves are not exposed to politics and have little experience carrying out their political duties. Many women lack the courage to understand the spirit of decentralisation and appreciate its benefits due to low literacy rates, lack of education, and limited or no exposure (Gol/UNDP:3).

In the last four decades, it is evident from the records that there has been an increase in women's participation in politics and governance. For reserved seats, the seat-candidate ratio fell from 1:3.4 in 1997 to 1:3.1 in 2003 (Khan & Ara, 2006). One has to be cautious and examine if the number translates into policies and decisions advocated by women. More scrutiny has to be done to establish how the women representatives, who have come from different political, ideological, class, and religious backgrounds, can change and structure

the democratic exercise at different levels, which over the last four decades been transformed by patronage politics.

Methodology

The research on this subject is a step toward understanding if positive action for women under the new Constitution has led to qualitative political representation. The findings of this study highlighted the female members' experiences of performing their roles as members, as well as promoting specific agendas and implementing them. Adopting a qualitative research design, researcher conducted in-depth interviews (IDIs n=15) and key informant interviews (KIIs n=5) with female and male members of the Zila Parishad in Sylhet Division, Bangladesh. Thematic analysis used to understand the experiences of female members in ZP, who came from different background. Audio data transcribed verbatim and translated into English. The findings contribute to establishing that their experiences are not overarching and monolithic, but in contrast, their differing experience and intersecting identities shape and have an impact on the Zila Parishad offices that they serve. The research ran across ten members in four districts in Sylhet.

Women and Political Leadership

Many studies (Chowdhury 1994; ADB 2004; Panday 2008) have been forthcoming to answer why there is still a vacuum in the participation of women in politics in Bangladesh.

The experts in this field have indicated that historically lack of women's involvement in politics is an inherent gender issue in public and private life. As women as a "class" are categorised as homemakers, and politics is considered a male-dominated profession (Anwar, 1991; Takhar, 2014), it creates obstacles for women restricting their entry from private to public life. This study however does not engage the debate of private and public life. The gender issues of women's place at home in a private setting is one of the main reasons why women are not apparently visible in politics, according to Ombert (2005).

Husain and Siddiqi (2002) asserted that the extent of women's level of incorporation into

political decision-making largely decides the sustainability of economic and social development. Jayal (2005) acknowledged that the level of female representation and participation in local government regulates the level of development of a country. Thus, it is crucial for women to participate in the decision-making processes of their nearby local government bodies (Opore, 2005). According to Carli and Eagly (2001), the role of women is recognised in every sphere of life at present.

Bangladesh, in recent years, is highly praised internationally for being at the forefront in South Asia of gender equality and representation of women in public office and the workplace. This is of course a substantive change in the mindset because in Bangladesh, historically women's role and their low level of representation and sparse presence in leadership are a result of long-existing patriarchy (Nussbaum, 2003). Between 1997 and 2003, in six years, there was only a marginal increase in the numbers from 24.1% to 24.8% (Khan & Ara, 2006). Naznin Ahmed (2016) states that despite the participation in reserved seats at local government initially reaching its objective, the participation has declined over the years. As per her findings, out of 2,900 female candidates, 481 women had been elected in the seats reserved for the Upazila Vice Chair in the UZP election of 2009. In the election of 2014, a total of 1,507 female candidates declined in 458 Upazilas, reflecting a 48% decline in single term. There is a struggle for women from the lower-status background to enter public life in most underdeveloped countries like Bangladesh (Beaman et al., 2010, 2012). Those that are in prominent positions in public life are women who come from the higher strata of social class. The usual route to leadership for women is not the same as for men. Hart (1988) identifies and indicates that family legacy is critical that leads to the easy way to leadership and power; other factors also play a part, such as institutional succession and traditional hero's transformation into politics. Hart (1988), however, based his findings on India; however, this can also be the case in Bangladesh. The research conducted by Grey (2002), and Childs and Krook (2008) in their studies also emphasise the fact that there is a

dire shortage of women councillors. Bangladesh needs to move away from this historical legacy. Things have been changing in Bangladesh since its independence. One can notice the entrance and engagement of women from various political backgrounds. The change happened because of the introduction and implementation of legislation that certain political positions are reserved for women; therefore, these positions have to be filled by women and thus allow women from other or lower strata to engage in politics. The law helps towards paving the way to encouraging women not from a political, famous or wealthy family to enter politics. Another more overwhelming obstacle to women's empowerment is corruption (Guhathakurta et al., 2014). The detriments for women have been identified as corruption that forces them to suffer. In fact, women need to have the three M's, money/*mastan*/muscle, which they lack (Sultan et al., 2016).

Bangladesh is a conservative country with a 98% Muslim population. However, it is a secular country by Constitution. But there still is a reservation about the interaction between men and women in public. Women, therefore, lack the courage to contest important seats in local or central government. The Bangladesh constitution does not distinguish between men and women. However, it takes great courage to contest a seat where a highly influential male candidate is in the opposition (Sultan et al., 2016).

Limbu (2018) argues that it is apparent that these obstacles exist, but there has not been a drive to change the structure for the better so that women have an equal footing. All the government operating machines of politics are structured around gender inequality and remain so. This inhibits the fair contest between men and women. Women are missing out on real politics of building connections, forging alliances, devising political strategies, formulating election manifestos and garnering party loyalty because these take place in informal and 'closed spaces', which are based upon and promote gendered power structures (Limbu, 2018).

Nazneen and Sultan (2009) found that gendered

relations define authority and power. It is evident that historically authority and power have been dominated by the male gender. Some believe that the male gender inherently owns the realm of power and authority (Goethals et al., 2004). In other words, the male gender was born to rule. We find these structures across cultures (Spray, 2008).

We can reasonably assert that the above notion can be confirmed in Bangladesh as Bangladesh has been a male-orientated society like most of the patriarchal societies in our world. In many societies, the male family member is the breadwinner (Hasan, 2010). The male dominance created a society where women were seen as homemakers, thus becoming marriage material to maintain the patriarchal order. Religion is the primary tool used to reinforce gender inequality. In the family, the male member, as the head of the family, makes all the critical decisions. The female is deemed unfit for such a task because of a weaker, powerless, brainless gender (Panday, 2013).

The women that have overcome the obstacles and reached the state where they are making decisions in positions of authority adhere to the general perception of the masses. Their decision-making relates to the concept of male behaviour leadership (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). The trend of leadership is defined by gender roles as well. The experts on the subject identify male leadership behaviour with a rigid concept which is traditional in nature. On the contrary, leadership shows women as cooperative, collaborative, collective decision making and relationship-oriented (Mahtab, 2014). Women are afraid to upset the cart and tend to be balanced in decision-making. They feel reluctant to free themselves from the shackles of society. Women tend to follow the pattern defined by the male gender and culture. They imitate the male style and tend to distance themselves from women's issues. Perhaps, they fear that they may seem weak and unmasculine (Von Van Wahl, 2011; Eagly & Carli, 2007) and therefore assert that women's leadership style as communal. Instead, consider male-style leadership as agential and associated with effective leadership. However, I argue that only

women must balance both styles to be effective.

Representation, Intersectionality and Experiences

It is apparent that much is being done to encourage women to participate in public life and mainstream politics. Bangladesh is trying to move away from the structure of male-oriented public office and mainstream politics. This observation reinforces the view of McGregor and Clover (2011). The various instruments, such as reservations and quotas, have been at the forefront and have made it easy for women to have a place in political institutions. In this context, Delys (2014) asserted that the reservation system had accelerated the process of women's entry into political institutions. The reservation policy has enlightened and has caused awareness of the need for the marginalised groups, such as women, to be present in governing bodies and therefore make their voices heard (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2000; Girard, 2013).

The reservation and quotas are insufficient to balance inequality and male dominance. More needs to be done to increase women's participation in public life and politics. Women have to feel at home and be able to address and voice the concerns of those they represent. For effective impact on the legislatures, the women included will, as it were, have a significant effect on the council in the event that "they advance from a number of reserved people to an impressive minority and this increment in number will contribute to the advancement of women inviting arrangement change" (Shevdova, 2005: insert page number).

A greater struggle is required to enhance women's empowerment to equal levels to men in local public office as well as central politics. This will only happen when women are involved in decision-making, agenda setting, resource control, and altering power relations (Sen, 1993, Malhotra et al., 2002). The fact is that a significant feature relevant to women's empowerment is the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power (Batliwala, 1994, Cornwall, 2016).

According to Lotter (2017), gender imbalance is not the only contributor to inhibiting women's empowerment and their performance and experience in public office. Indeed, gender discrimination is only one aspect of the power struggle alongside caste, class, religion, and location. Lotter also argues that the woman's background also play a significant role in her success in office. A woman's identity is important; whether she is single, underprivileged classes, or marginalised. Because it can be the cause for discrimination in public office and hinder progress (Lotter, 2017, p.98).

Raj (2013) reckons that women's empowerment is a complex issue. This is clearly visible in Bangladesh. The lack of formal education, and stereotypical perception are some key factors that damage their recognition and achievement in office. The background of individual women controls power dynamics. Women who appear from politicised families inherit favourable networks outside the formal setting to further their career, which is absent for those women that emerge from a less fortunate background. To empower women across the board, the system needs to balance the power dynamics and structure should be reorganised to remove the obstacles and shackles that still remain in the pathway of women's empowerment in every dynamic (Lotter, 2017).

Findings

Gendered Roles and the Public-Private Dichotomy

The interview results show that women's role in ZP is restricted in many ways. Although the reservation process has enabled women to engage and gain entry into public life, they are still regarded as incompetent in matters of dealing with significant decisions, such as financial decisions and similar kinds of decision makings.

Most of the people in the administration of ZP are men; therefore, the tasks entrusted to women are limited. Women were permitted to participate in issues relating to women's empowerment, such as social-welfare projects, security and discipline services, and dispute

settlement. The majority of the ZP participants of the study revealed that they had limited or no participation in budgetary allocation and physical/infrastructural development issues. In fact, women often themselves adhere to the patriarchal mindset.

At times the women would face discrimination in the roles that they undertook. Their position in the organisation would be subverted or undermined. Any suggestions they raised, for example in the budget meetings would not be taken seriously. The study shows that the ZP participants had to resort to placing their idea with a male counterpart for their suggestion to be taken seriously. On some occasions, they would find a complete change of their view presented in the budget meetings. The final draft would not include what the participants had suggested. The findings further suggest that their male counterparts deemed that women are incapable of understanding budgets and any valuable solutions to budgeting.

The gender differences still pollute Bangladesh institutions such as ZP. Women are not given full autonomy, the same as their male colleagues. Bangladesh remains a conservative society, and the unrestricted mobility of women is still regarded as unacceptable. Because women are restricted from traveling freely, their male members inherently gain an advantage over women when it comes to political power. The usual times to arrange meetings in the ZP office are often devised at odd, mostly after the office is closed. This poses a problem for women because women have to return home on time to continue with their domestic chores. Although some families have both husband and wife working, the wife is automatically trusted with the domestic responsibility. Men have many advantages over women; men have access to a vehicle and attending out-of-hours meetings is not an issue for them. Women miss out on important decision-making meetings because of the obstacles mentioned above. The Bangladeshi society's socio-cultural values are the crucial disadvantage for women's empowerment and political leadership. These findings are similar to that of the observations made by (Batliwala, 1994; Lotter, 2017). As a

result, it gives male politicians disproportionately more political power.

From the research conducted, it can be stated that reservation has caused stereotyping of the kind of leaders or political roles women can play. The study's findings demonstrate that women's political power, leadership, and higher position plus subordinate position depend on existing patterns of patriarchy in political culture. I argue that the outcome of the policies implemented to enhance women's progress has accidentally hampered progress because of the reasons mentioned above. Women have come to accept that they are only capable of carrying out what they are as a woman. They do not articulate or become competitive in any way or shape in dirty politics.

Intersections of identities

A female ZP participant of the study responded that their identities are based on varied intersections. The situation of a female who comes from a privileged background has a certain advantage over the unprivileged female. The experience of a female from a political family is very different from that of the woman from an ordinary background.

The women who have political connections, as well as access to an informal network, can avoid all the challenges that their other less fortunate female counterparts may have. These women from the high strata do not believe that they fail to progress because of structural discrimination against women. Subsequently, whereas they endure the drawbacks of being women in a patriarchal political culture, they take advantage of their higher class and status, creating such blended reactions.

Analysing field data, a considerable gap has been found between the endorsement of the law and the actual behaviour of different stakeholders. Many UP chairpersons often do not let women expect accountability for significant tasks, asserting that they cannot put together quite a few things required to execute ventures. It appears that the male members of the ZP do not hold a positive view of the part and execution of their female colleagues. Most of them have negative perspectives regarding almost all female individuals of the ZP, on the

ground that they need valid information to substantiate the tasks of the local government, and many of them feel too modest to interact with other individuals (Panday, 2013).

Moreover, the study's findings show that women are disadvantaged in the organisation they work in because they depend on the head of the organisation for resources. Thus, they have little leverage when it comes to bargaining with the head of the ZP or UP, who are mostly men. This observation bears similarity with the observations advanced by Khan & Ara (2006), Islam & Islam (2012), and Khan & Mohsin (2008) in their work.

Overall, the research findings suggest that the political institutions of Bangladesh are embedded in a male-biased environment entrenched deeply in patriarchy where the women politicians have lower educational achievements; socio-cultural norms restrict women's free movement in public, and lack of clarity on the role of women in local government in the Constitution.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the female role in ZP in Sylhet Bangladesh. Indeed, the study sought to examine the extent to which women have made progress in local government. However, the result is not as it was intended. Although the number of women participants has increased, but many obstacles in their pathway restrict the role that they are able to take on. They are still far from the stage where they are decision makers or leaders in the field. Women's political experiences have not been meaningful in the sense that their performance is limited to mere implementation rather than taking decisions in policy making or resource allocation.

The Local Government of Bangladesh should not look at the existing provisions under the Constitution for increasing the number of women in the public arena as an end goal but rather as means to help achieve gender equity. To achieve this, organisations and instruments of government must recognise a Bangladeshi woman's identity beyond the vision of gender.

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Conflict of Interest

The author confirms no conflict of interest.

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