

The Status of Women member of Union Parishad in Bangladesh

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The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh recognizes basic and fundamental rights of the citizens irrespective of gender, creed, cast, religion and race. It also makes provision for promoting causes of the backward sections of the Population. Related articles of the constitution of Bangladesh regarding women's participation may be seen in the following sentences such as Article 9 which states that, 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 of the constitution states that Steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life. Article 19 (1) states that, The State shall endeavor to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens .Article 27 states that All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law. Article 28 (1): expresses that The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. (2): Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life. And (4) : Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favor of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens (GOB, 1993:9,13,19).

But the scenario of Union Parishad is quiet different. The Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance 1983 provides the legal basis for the formation of the Union Parishad. But it does not contain any clause for the role, power and responsibility of the women members.

After the new law that was enacted in 1997, the government increased the number of standing committees set up by the Union Parishad. At the same time the government instructed that women members should be president of at least twenty five percent of these standing committees. However, the terms of reference of these committees and their modus operandi were not clearly specified. Therefore, a sort of ambiguity persists with regard to the participation of women members in the Union Parishad activities. Moreover, government by another notification directed each Union Parishad to form Social Development Committees in each of the three female wards to be headed by the female members concerned. Though the ordinance did not restrict women from contesting for the seats of general members as well as the chairman, the number of elected women members from the general seat can not be taken in to consideration. Therefore, the ratio of male-female members virtually remains almost 3:1.Relevant laws/rules provide that decision-making in the Union Parishad will stem from what the majority supports. Therefore, it leaves no doubt that in terms of numerical strength women members are three times weaker than the other (male) members which clearly shows that the women members can do little to

influence the decision taken in the Union Parishad. However, women's participation in local government system remained very minimal. The number of women in elective positions of chairperson and members in the Union Parishad was abysmally low and practically minuscule. The present government formed a task force to review the law and ordinances of Union Parishad and they did. But still there have been no significant changes or reforms so far to improve the quality of women leadership at grassroots level.

Practically the Union Parishad election in 1997 encourages women participation in decision-making and empowerment process in Bangladesh. Government has made a law of direct election in reserved seats for the women at local level. This was a major initiative by the government for ensuring women's participation in politics. In the election of 1997, 102 women contested directly for the post of chairman and 20 of them elected. In general seats for members 456 women also contested against male, of them 110 were elected. 44134 women contested for reserved seats in UP, of them 592 were elected unopposed and some 13,437 women were elected for reserved seats. Later on other three women were also elected as chairperson through by-election. In those election women voters participated overwhelmingly, 80 percent women voters cast their valuable votes (Islam, 2000:113). Union Parishad Election 2003 was 7th and the largest local government election in this country's history. The election started on January 25 and ended on March 16, 2003 consecutively in 4234 unions out of 4492 unions. In this election 232 women candidates contested for the post of chairperson and 617 women contested for the general seats. 22 women were elected as chairperson and 79 won in the general seats. For 12,684 reserved seats for women, a number of 39,419 women candidates contested. Total number of female voters was 3, 01, 71,698 (Ahmed et. al., 2003:20). After that a genuine ground was prepared to think about the women empowerment at grassroots level in Bangladesh, but all in vain due to lack of proper policy and its implementation. Though Government emphasized on women empowerment in the political arena and made a provision to nominate at least 33 percent women candidate from the political parties in the election by 2020, but the ratio of women in the political party is still very low.

Recently the Research department of People's Reporting Center (PRC) project of Democracywatch conducted a huge survey to determine the women status at grassroots level in Bangladesh. They surveyed 28 unions with a structured questionnaire and interviewed general people and UP women members to get the real status of UP women members. The research titled 'Role of UP representative in Union Parishad' was conducted among 82 representatives of 28 union Parishads under four district (Jessore, Gazipur, Nilphamari and Dinajpur) observations and interviews.

The report found that 96.3 percent women UP members know about their responsibilities.

Of the total representatives, 32.9 percent women members passed SSC, 12.2. Percent HSC, 2.4 percent are graduate and the rest remained below SSC or primary level education.

The research revealed that about 32.9 percent women members endorsed that they are getting good behavior from their male colleagues. About 48.8 percent said that its average and 18.3 percent responded said that the behavior of male colleagues is not good.

The UP women members are involved in distributing VGD and VGF card (18.3%) among the poor, distributing honorium of widow's (8.9) and ensuring law and order (8.5) with in the Union Parishad.

About 75% women member's endorsed that they are acting as chairperson of project implementation committee, but they don't get any opportunity to work with male members. Women members usually act as a chairperson of certain committees which are: Law and order committee, Family planning committee, Women and children committee etc.

About 65% women members said that they have 13 standing committees in their Union Parishad, but about 20.7% said that they don't have any standing committees in their own union Parishad. Some one said, 'May be we have our own standing committee but it is only written on paper, we don't have any effective committee as such a UP is supposed to have.

About 73.4 percent UP women members do not face any obstruction to work with UP. The rest of 26.6 percent women members faced difficulties from their colleagues and UP people to work with the Union Parishad.

Regarding allocation of work, about 50 percent women members do not get their work properly. The rest of the women members get their work properly but in that case they don't have any role to implement the project in most cases.

It is for sure that the status of Women Up representatives in UP is not very satisfactory. The civil society and government now understand the real dilemma of Union Parishads especially in women representative perspective. There are some recommendations which could be considered seriously for improving the situation and are as follows:

- Women UP members should get exclusive training on their specific roles and responsibilities from National Institute of Local Government and other non-government organizations on a regular basis.

- A campaign should be conducted to inspire more educated women members to come up and participate in next election.
- A resource center should be formed in every UP to assist UP women members to disseminate relevant information
- Since each UP women members are elected for three wards of a union, but are getting allocation for one ward. Due to this, they have some times become controversial among the general people. Government should take into consideration resolving this issue.
- The participation of women representative in proposed Local Government Commission should be ensured.
- At least one woman representative should be included in village court.
- Media can play a vital role to improve the quality of UP women members.
- Government should introduce a monitoring cell to asses the performance of UP women members on a regular basis.

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