
EMPIRICAL EVIDENCES ON HOW WOMEN LEADERS CHANGING GOVERNANCE IN THE GRASSROOTS BASED LOCAL GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH

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Abstract: *From colonial era there was hardly any scope for women's representation in the UP, a local government unit in Bangladesh. Entering into the trajectory of local governance, since 1997 to till date the women leaders (WLs) ceaselessly struggled to ensure their participation and by doing so WLs have been able to achieve their limited participation and thereby as an aftermath of their constrained participation they have brought some changes in rural governance. Against such a backdrop, the paper purports to unravel the research questions: i) What were the challenges WLs encountered towards playing their role in the UP? ii) How did these WLs change rural governance through their leadership performance? The paper is based on in-depth case study method. The findings revealed that women's major challenges towards ensuring their participation were male domination, corruption, faulty legal provision, and the autocratic structure of the UP. Amidst their limited scope of participation in the UP some women leaders have changed local governance though rendering social justice and community services, ensuring women's rights in the UP.*

Keywords: *local government; Union Parishad; woman leaders; social justice; community service.*

1. Introduction

The present structure of Union Parishad (hereafter UP only) in Bangladesh was laid down by the British colonial rulers in 1870. Since from the colonial era there was hardly any provision of women representation in the UP. In fact women's representation in the UP was ensured in 1997 which provided one-third reservation of women. In a traditional society like Bangladesh just after securing their entry into the scene of local governance in the UP, women leaders (WLs) needed to encounter immense barriers to coexist with their male counterparts for playing their role and participation in the UP. Since their reservation, these women leaders have already passed about two decades

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and several terms in the UP amidst massive struggle and conflict. My paper is based on the argument that within this two decades time span, through their prolonged and ceaseless struggle towards playing their roles in the UP, these women leaders have ushered a few positive changes in the sphere of rural governance but there are lacks of such evidences in the existing literature. Against such a backdrop, this paper aimed at uncovering the research questions: i) what were the major challenges women leaders (WLs) encountered towards playing their role in the UP? ii) How did these WLs change rural governance through their leadership performance?

2. Methodology of the Paper

This paper is prepared from a Ph.D. dissertation and hence based on a few in-depth case studies comprising one case on Woman Chairperson, two cases on Women Members and one case on a particular UP, this paper aimed at delving into the major challenges and contributions to governance of the WLs while playing their role and participation in the UP affairs. To address the research questions, all these cases were abridged substantively deducting some data in order to make the cases focused and pin pointed. This paper is mainly based on primary data. These data were collected during July-December 2013. To support primary data some secondary data were also used. Following the principles of the qualitative method¹ the selected cases were chosen based on purposeful selection and easy access from different socio-cultural zones² of Bangladesh. However, sample design³ of the whole research is given in Table 1 below.

¹ In qualitative research, the size of the sample is of secondary importance to the quality of data, as “qualitative research is concerned with smaller numbers of cases with more intensive analysis” (Davidson and Layder, 1994, p.173). Moreover, in qualitative research, the selection of the sample does not matter much; rather collecting data from the real world and its analysis is much more important and even the term sampling is not used.

² In total there are 4527 UPs in 7 divisions and 64 districts in Bangladesh. The sampled UPs were selected from covering all seven divisions and 7 districts of Bangladesh i.e. Chittagong, Comilla, Faridpur, Sylhet, Barisal, Bogra and Gaibandha districts.

³ In the main research, in line with the research questions, 10 in-depth case studies, covering 5 women chairpersons and 5 women members, were done in the major socio-cultural zones in Bangladesh. For doing case studies, data were collected from 73 Women Members, and 6 Women Chairpersons of 27 UPs from 5 divisions of Bangladesh using a short questionnaire comprising demographic, socio-economic background, socio-political network, and challenges encountered and contribution of the WLs in the UP (Table-1). But for phenomenological analysis data were collected from 19 UPs from 5 major socio-cultural zones of Bangladesh. To verify some aspects of collected data obtained from the case study and phenomenology, 3 FGDs and 2 PRAs were conducted in 3 and 2 UPs respectively comprising different sections of villagers.

Table 1. Selection of Research Participants for All Methods

Division	District	Upazila	Union Parishad	No. of Women Members	No. of Women Chairpersons
Chittagong	Chittagong	Mirsarai	Wahedpur	3	
		Comilla	Comilla Sadar	Bijoypur Modham	2
	North Durgapur			3	
	South Durgapur			3	
	Amratali			3	
	Kalir Bazar			1	
	Chouddagram			Alkora	Alkora
		Suvapur	3		
		Chiwra	3		
		Gunabati	3		
		Jannath Dighi	1		
Dhaka	Faridpur	Faridpur Sadar	Machaar	3	1
		Vanga	Manikdaha	3	1
		Boalmari	Chandpur	3	1
Sylhet	Sylhet	Sylhet Sadar	Jalalabad	3	
			Tuker Bazar	3	
			Khadimpara	3	
			Khadimnagar	3	
Khulna	Barisal	Agoljara	Bakal	3	
			Ratnapur	3	
			Rajihar	3	
			Goila	3	
		Wazirpur	Jalla	1	1
Rajshahi	Bogra	Sherpur	Mirjapur	3	
			Garidaha	3	
	Gaibandha	Palashbari	Betkapa UP	3	1
			Pabnapur	3	1
5 Divisions	7 Districts	11 Upazilas	27 UPs	73	6

Source: Data collected from the field by the researcher himself, 2013.

3. Women's Representation in Local Government in Bangladesh

Local government (LG) in this sub-continent has its deep roots in the past. The British colonial rule founded the cornerstone of today's Union Parishad in the undivided Indian subcontinent with the *Village Chowkidary Act of 1870*. After the end of British rule in India in 1947, India and Pakistan emerged as two different states. Afterwards, Bangladesh achieved its independence in 1971 and inherited the LG system from Pakistan with some modifications in its structure. Since from 1870 the functionaries of

local government¹ were always in the hands of males (Chowdhury, Islam and Mahtab, 1994:6) and rights to vote in the local bodies were dependent on the educational qualification, possession of property and tax payment etc. (Smock, 1977:117; *Women for Women*, 1992). Although women's representation in the political community was allowed by the Government of India Act in 1935 (Forbes, 2002) but women for the first time took part in the election of the rural local bodies in 1956 (Rashiduzzaman, 1968; Inter Parliamentary Union, 1987). Following this provision during Pakistan regime only one female candidate was elected in the UP election of 1956 and 1969. After independence of Bangladesh, in the first UP election of 1973, out of 4352 UPs, only one woman from Rangpur district was elected as UP Chairman (Alam and Begum, 1974: 38-51). Afterwards, women's representation to local government was enshrined by two presidential ordinances namely the Local Government Ordinance of 1976 and the Municipal Ordinance of 1976, which provided a provision of nomination of 2 women members in the UP. Regarding women's representation in the UP, important development took place during Ershad regime² through the passage of the Local Government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Administration Reorganization) Ordinance of 1982 and the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance of 1983. Following the Union Parishad Act of 1983, provision of nomination of three women members was introduced (Haque, 2003; Khan 2011; Khan and Ara, 2006). In 1993, the system of nomination of women members in the UP was changed to indirect election and accordingly three women members were elected by the 9 elected male members and the elected Chairman. A major breakthrough regarding the process of representation of women members in the UP was made in 1997, which provided reservation of one-third seats for women members. Later on by an office order from the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (LGRD&C) women's representation in the UP was ensured in different standing and project committees. Still there are lack of clarity and vagueness in the legal provision regarding the roles and responsibilities of the women member in the UP.

Union Parishad serves as the lowest unit of rural local government in Bangladesh that covers an area of 10-12 sq. km. In every five years, UP representatives are elected on a non-party basis. A UP shall consist of an elected body comprising a Chairman and 12 members and it represents villagers ranging from 10,000 to 30,000. Among 12 members only 3 positions are reserved for the women members in the UP. A Union is divided

¹ Here in this paper local government connotes rural local government, more specifically Union Parishad, the oldest rural local government body in Bangladesh. Till 1983, the only local government in Bangladesh was Union Parishad. In the last 145 years that spanned from 1870 till 2015, UP never loses its representative character and election was continued every 5 years alternate in UP unlike many ups and downs in Bangladesh society.

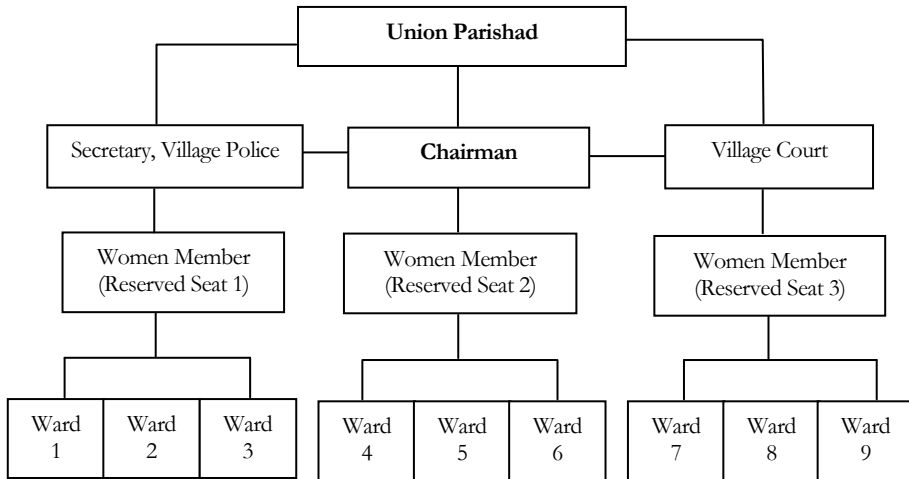
² Hussain Muhammad Ershad was one of the military rulers in Bangladesh. While he was the Chief of Army Staff of the Bangladesh Army, he declared Martial Law following a bloodless coup and became Chief Martial Law Administrator in 1982. Afterwards he became the President of Bangladesh from 1983 to 1990. During Ershad regime, following the suggestions of National Executive Committee for Administrative Reform and Reorganization (NICARR), he undertook substantive reform measures in the sphere of civil administration and local government system in Bangladesh.

into 9 Wards¹, among which 3 Wards are reserved for a woman member. In each Union nine male members are elected from 9 Wards and 3 women members are elected from their respective reserved Wards (Figure1). Apart from the elected representatives there are few other salaried employees *i.e.* Secretary, *Dafader* and *Chowkidar* in the UP. Jurisdictionally UP covers a wide range of community services such as, promotion of cottage industries and family planning; protection and maintenance of public property; maintenance of law and order, birth and death registers, UP records, hats and bazaars; lighting of public ways, public streets and public places; plantation and preservation of trees; maintenance and regulation of cattle pounds; issue of various kinds of certificates and license; settlement of pretty disputes; and excavation of derelict ponds for pisciculture; building and development of physical infrastructure; regulating community behaviour; and improving environment, forestry and disaster mitigations etc. UP has been involved in various food assisted development projects *i.e.* Rural Development, Vulnerable Group Development (VGD)², Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF)³, Rural Maintenance Program, Food for Works etc. UP has to maintain a close relationship with lots of GOs, NGOs and international donor agencies.

¹ Ward is the lowest planning unit of Union Parshad, which is composed of one or more than one villages. Nine Wards make a Union.

² Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) is a food based Social Safety Net Programs in Bangladesh, sponsored by World Food Program. The VGD target group comprised mainly destitute women covering landless and asset less women who are widowed, divorced, abandoned, having under-nourished children, lactating mothers and women with handicapped husband etc. In recent times, the program has moved from its role of relief provider to larger development role like providing training on life skills and income generating skills to women beneficiaries. The aim of the program is to enhance food and nutrition security of women and children through improved food consumption, education, skills development, livelihood diversification and risk mitigation. To achieve objective of VGD program, currently about 3.75 million beneficiaries from ultra-poor households are provided with the provision of monthly food ration of 30 kg of wheat or 25 kg of fortified wheat flour (*atta*, in Bangla) for a period of 24 months, and a package of development services for human capital development.

³ VGF is an acronym for Vulnerable Group Feeding. The VGF program is one of the food-based social safety net programs in Bangladesh. It was created in the 1970s by the World Food Program (WFP) for emergency aid caused by disaster. Now the government provides food subsidy for the poorest under this program. The targets of the program are: i) daily labourers whose income is low or irregular; ii) the landless or those that have less than 0.15 acres of land; iii) persons with disabilities or their wives; iv) poor women/men affected by natural disaster.

Figure 1. Structure of Union Parishad

Source: Prepared by the Author, 2013.

4. Few Empirical Evidences of the Challenges and Contribution of the Women Leaders at the Grassroots: The Case of the Union Parishad

Based on the following evidence based in-depth case studies it was found that women leaders have contributed to pro-poor governance in some aspects of the rural life amidst severe constraints by the socio-political milieu and reinforced by structural and cultural impediments imposed by the patriarchal value system. These women have engaged themselves to a greater extent in transformative politics for the greater interests of the poor people of the rural society. The following cases will reveal the WLs' contribution in the UP jurisdiction.

4.1. The Case of Razia Begum (Mina), Chairperson, Bethkapa UP

Running for election 3 times Razia Begum (Mina), a widow of aged 48, was elected Chairperson in Bethkapa UP, Palashbari Upazila in the Gaibandha District in Bangladesh. As a widow she runs her small but single family¹ with a monthly income of

¹ Single family refers to a single unit family of husband, wife and their children. In general husband acts as the family head in the single family concept. With the gradual development of the society the tradition of extended or joint family is changing whereas single unit family is getting preference in the rural society like the urban society.

about 40,000 taka¹ (514 US\$). Her family is composed of 2 sons, both of whom are now studying at the master's level. Mina obtained a BA (Bachelor of Arts) degree, and she inherited some agricultural lands of about 2.5 acres from her husband and parents. Razia comes of a good family. Her parents were matriculated and service holders. Nobody in her family was found directly involved with any political party but a few of her ancestors served as Sardar/Matbor² in the village. Before she was elected in the UP she worked in the *Grameen* Bank³. She and her husband were found involved in student's politics during their college life.

Being the chief executive Mina had to face serious male domination in the Parishad. Sometimes the male members used to protest in groups when she distributed projects to the female members. At some point, a few male members even threatened her quite often, saying that they would file a fake case against her. However, Mina, an honest, skilled and articulate woman was able to handle the trouble because of her past experience at the *Grameen* Bank. Mina nevertheless tried to distribute project assignments to female and male members equally in line with the legal provision but the male members did not accept that and therefore they imposed their domination in unjust, cruel and illogical manner by unnecessarily harassing the female members. Thereafter, as the Chairman, she shared how she resolved the problem while a male member suited a fake case against one female member in her UP. All male members several times verbally threatened her to start movement and write against her in the media due to practicing her judgment for ensuring gender equality in the UP. Once she gave big projects to the female members, male members jointly made a complaint against her to UNO⁴, ADC⁵, DC⁶. Now she tried to consult with the male members when she provided any project to the female members. The Chairman informed that

¹ One US\$=77.88 taka as of 27 March 2015. The figure is calculated more or less in full digit deducting the fraction amount.

² Sardar and Matbor refer to the local leader that performs a leadership role in local dispute resolutions in the community through an informal and unstructured mechanism. The act of providing service from the sardar or matbor may be regarded as sardari or matbori. Both terms are interchangeably used in Bangla and English.

³ Grameen Bank is a specialized financial institution in Bangladesh. The Grameen Bank is a Nobel Peace Prize-winning microfinance organization and community development bank founded in Bangladesh. It has developed a group-based micro credit approach which is applied to use peer-pressure within a group to ensure the borrowers follow through and conduct their financial affairs with discipline, ensuring repayment and allowing the borrowers to develop good credit standing. More than 99% of its borrowers are women and through micro-credit program Grameen Bank helps empowering the poor women in rural Bangladesh.

⁴ UNO stands for Upazila Nirbahi Officer meaning executive head of the Upazila, a sub-national administrative unit of Bangladesh.

⁵ ADC is an abbreviation for Additional Deputy Commissioner at the District level, who assists the Deputy Commissioner in the work at the district level.

⁶ DC refers to the Deputy Commissioner and DC is the administrative head at the district level. The activities of the nation building departments are coordinated by the DC. It is the third tier of the local government unit in Bangladesh although there is no representative local government body at this stage.

each woman member had to work in 3 wards and their jurisdiction was 3 times higher than that of the male members.

Sharing her experience as a woman Chairperson she shared how Upazila¹ administration sometimes took away some shares that were supposed to be channelized to the UP from Upazila. Citing memory from the last year she alluded that out of 12 tons rice allocated for the food for works, UP was given 10 tons rice because Upazila took the rest 2 tons rice. In case of 40 days' work; the government allocated fund for 160 villagers but Upazila gave UP only 115 and the rest was forcibly taken by the Upazila. Mina further elaborates that in the case of the VGD and VGF card, the Upazila administration followed the same strategy, which in fact created huge problem for the UP. According to her opinion, due to scanty resource allocations from the government, she could not undertake many development projects in her UP.

Mina noted that through attending rural salish² women members are providing various services to the society. She informed that when she could not attend any salish program, then she telephoned relevant female member to remain present over there. In some village women conduct salish themselves and doing good to the society. She told that when they faced problem, she went there with the UP secretary to look into the matter and do the needful. She achieved some crowning success in some areas, especially setting up a tube well for ensuring safe drinking water for the poor villagers. Before Mina's coming to the UP, many villagers used open toilets and also practiced open defecation, but after she staged a special movement to destroy/break those unhygienic bamboo-made open toilets in her territory Mina achieved remarkable success in sanitation coverage because she provided support from her UP to set up low cost water-sealed toilets. Due to her dynamic leadership she obtained more than 95% sanitation coverage in her UP. She solved a long-standing water-logging problem by constructing a drainage system in her Union and also upgraded most of the important roads in her Union. She was also very successful in increasing/extending the number of poor beneficiaries of various safety net programs in her UP, bargaining with the local administration.

Analytical implications of Mina's Case

Structural bottleneck: The UP structure is responsible for male domination: Being the head and chief executive of the UP, Mina faced serious problems from the male

¹ President Lt. General Hussain Muhammad Ershad introduced the Upazila system, abolishing the Sub-Division system during 1982-4. Before that, it was known as Thana (Police Station). Afterwards, different governments used both terms (Upazila/Thana) interchangeably according to their preferences. At least 22 nation building departments (NBDs) are working at the Upazila level. Upazila is an administrative unit at the sub-district level in Bangladesh. The immediately-passed ruling party (2009-2014) formed an elected local government body at the Upazila level in 2009.

² Salish refers to informal local arbitration council for resolution of petty disputes conducted by the UP representatives. Salish is the platform of providing judgment in the village court.

members, who challenged her leadership position and role. In fact, the structure of the UP is one of the major challenges for women leaders.

Autonomy and corruption problems in the UP: Mina's case shows that without sufficient autonomy local government cannot perform better. The findings of the case study also corroborate the massive corruption in Bangladesh administration.

Male domination: The case also revealed that Mina encountered huge male domination in the UP. It was learnt from her case that when she started ensuring equal rights for women members in the UP, the male members were very annoyed with such a practice and they warned her that they would file fake cases against her; but as Mina was out and out honest and she knew how to tackle such problems, she tried to overcome the male domination.

Contribution of the women leaders in the UP: Because of her good leadership quality she achieved success in sanitation coverage, made available safe drinking water, increased the number of safety net benefits bargaining with the local administration, constructed a drainage system which was a much-demanded issue for the villagers, successfully managed serious male domination in her favour, and reduced the corrupt practices in the UP.

Women for women: Mina's case shows that women have empathy and feelings for women. She always tried to assign project responsibilities to the male and female members equally and unlike other male Chairmen, she provided big projects to the women members in her UP, which in fact spurred/evoked serious dissatisfaction and anger by the male members, but she did not compromise with their undue demands. She successfully overcame the threats and challenges posed by the male members. She had sufficient confidence in the female members and that is why she involved those women members in big projects and allowed them to perform Salish and when the female members faced challenges she personally handled those cases with boldness and courage. Above all her previous managerial position/qualities which she obtained in her work at the *Grameen* Bank job also helped her to manage the problems in the UP.

4.2. The Case of Fatema Akhter Parul, Woman Member, Khadimpara UP

Fatema Akhter Parul was elected UP member for two terms; the first time in 2005 and second time in 2011 in the Khadimpara UP, Sylhet Sadar Upazila, Sylhet District. She is 38, read up to class ten and hails from Jahanpur village. She is married to a non-matriculate village doctor¹. Fatema's family is composed of 6 members comprising 2 sons, 2 daughters, and her spouse. She lives in a single family. Her monthly expenditure is about 35,000 Taka (450 US\$), and the lion's share comes from her husband's medical

¹ In Bangladesh village doctor refers to those people that have some a smattering knowledge of medical practices which can be acquired or learned through serving in a small pharmacy or serving as a compounder/assistant with a registered doctor. There are also para-medical diploma courses for being a village doctor. They are basically practitioners or sometimes may be quacks.

practice. Apart from homestead, Fatema has only .08 acres of land. Her husband heads the family with the active support of Fatema. Fatema's cousin, father-in-law and grandfather served as the UP Chairperson in the past. Her forefathers acted as Sarder and Matbar in the village. Before coming to the UP she was engaged in 2 NGOs: Grameen Bank and the Friend's in Village Development Society (FIVDS). She has good social mobility and linkages with some government officials including the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO). Her knowledge about UP has substantially enhanced after she was elected second term. When she was elected for the first time she had no idea about the jurisdiction and prerogatives in the UP. At the initial stage the male members could not at all tolerate the female members, and they always frowned her saying that the women members were elected in the reserved seats so they had nothing to do with UP activities except supporting everything with them. In general, the UP Chairmen were men, so they tried to keep the women members subservient to their control. If any woman member had good understanding with the UP Chairman, then that particular woman got more projects from the Chairman. Parul shared a painful saga of deprivation done by the UP Chairman with the researcher. Once UP Chairman requested her to prepare an estimation of a small feeder road approaching to a male member's house in the Ward no 2 where she represented Ward no 1, 2, 3. She was very happy to prepare the estimation but when she was about to finalize the project proposal, the concerned male member came to the UP Chairman and requested the Chairman to assign that project to him. He convinced the Chairman saying that if the woman member implemented the project in his own Ward no 2, he would never be able to win in the election again. Thus the male member got the project assignment from the Chairman. Due to Chairman's such decision she was quite upset because she worked hard for preparing the project proposal. As per legal provision the women members should get a one-third share of the total projects conducted by the UP, but still women members had to face lots of problems to ensure their rights in the UP. In fact women members hardly got their equal share from the UP. Having represented 3 times higher jurisdiction, women are getting only one-third project benefits which are quite illogical and irrational.

Parul was able to win the love of the common villagers by playing a role in the village salish. She elaborated that once she attended a village salish where she come to know that a young man forcibly raped a young woman. Realizing the significance of such a sensitive incident in the context of Bangladesh she pointed out that as the young man just spoiled the young woman with force and cruelty, she thought that without finishing salish and giving justice for such issue she would not leave from salish. Then she called her husband there so that he could accompany her if it took late hours to finish the judicial procedure. She also requested some village elderly to remain present there so that they could provide due judgment to that case. Almost 150 villagers were present there to help her and it took several hours to finish the whole judicial procedure. Then the juries unanimously decided that as the young man put the women in extreme shame and it would be very tough for that victim woman to get marry with anyone because all villagers already came to know this, so it was decided that the young man should have to marry that girl on that particular night. Then the juries summoned an official match maker to register this marriage following proper religious fanfares and rituals. When

everything finished, it was 3 am. While the judicial procedures were going on, no male member was present there in the salish.

Analytical implications of Parul's Case

Male domination: Parul case represents the fact that women members were highly neglected by the male members in the UP during their entry period. Still, such male domination, negligence, and deprivation are quite existent now. Here she depicted the real picture of how women representatives were being deprived of their due rights in the UP and how the legal provision in the UP made the woman member's role shaky and subservient in relation to the role of male members.

Faulty legal practice imposed on the women in the UP: This is really surprising to think that as per legal dictum women members are given only one third of the total projects, while they represent an area that is 3 times larger. This is how state or legal provision also subjugates women by depriving them of their due rights.

WLS are serving the community through providing culturally-suitable judgments: The conduct of the salish is a glaring example of the community service of the woman members in her jurisdictional area. Such an act of social justice shows that woman have proper capacity to deal with life-related matters with proper dignity and honour. Through this case we can understand that woman members can perform their social commitment and responsibility with a strong hand and ensure the rule of law in the society. Thus these women members are contributing to social justice and good governance at the local level. This case shows that that woman can play a proper role in the community if they are provided with a suitable and favourable environment and a legal framework or structure to deliver justice in the society. There are other ramifications of such a case which demonstrate that she has an aggressive attitude to this extremely male-dominated patriarchal society, where she also considers herself as a victim, so she thinks that the rapist should not go unpunished rather by providing punishment she has ventilated her wrath and anger on the irrational draconian patriarchal social norm. Therefore, when she got an opportunity to take revenge through such a wrongdoing or misdeeds done by male domination and masculinity, she left no stone unturned to deal with it with an iron hand. Obviously men and women both live in a specific culture-bound, value-laden society, where all norms, values, actions, thoughts and beliefs are properly governed and applicable in line with that specific more of that culture. According to the social norms of Bangladesh, the judgment provided by the salish committee might be a culturally-appropriate decision. However, viewed from the substantive rationale it can be easily understood how awful it might be for a woman to endure her whole life being the wife to a rapist. Therefore, the pivotal question lies here is how will she suffer for the rest of her life, especially if her husband take revenge on her for a forceful marriage? Therefore, Parul's judgment concerning the rape case could not be supported at all; it axiomatically and unquestionably calls for necessary value changes in the society, where men and women can both enjoy the same rights and privileges without any discrimination.

4.3. The Case of Nazma Akhter, Woman Member, Amratoli UP

Nazma Akhter has won the UP election of 2011 from Krisnapur village, Amratoli UP, Comilla Sadar Upazila, Comilla District. Nazma, 37, is now married to a service holder. She has one son and one daughter and she lives in a joint family¹ with 16 members. Both spouses have an HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) level education. She runs her family with a monthly income of 80,000 Taka (1027 US\$). Nazma comes from a rich family and she possesses 3 acres of landed property. In her family no one played a representative role in any of the existing political institutions in Bangladesh, but her family had been involved in local judicial activities in the village for a long time. Before coming to the UP she used to work in an NGO named Prime Worker. She was involved with the student wing of the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), one of the major political parties in Bangladesh since her school life and now she is also involved with the BAL. Her husband is actively involved with the local committee of the BAL politics. She maintains a linkage with the local MP in Comilla.

Nazma shared that once the UP Chairman assigned projects for improvements of Hut-Bazaars to all male members without informing the female members. But after few weeks women members came to know about such projects from the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO). Immediately after receiving such information when they enquired about it to the Chairman, the UP Chairman then managed to provide each female member Tk. 10,000 (128 US\$) collecting money from 9 male members and thus he managed the WLs in the UP.

In course of the conversation, Nazma shared a few experiences of rendering community services to the women. She helped a woman victim in her village that came to disclose all her painful story to her. The victim told that she got married 3 years ago, where she got a baby there in that family. The victim somehow came to know that her husband has got married another woman and her husband was away from her since last 3 years and he was not giving any money for running her family expenses. Her husband kept the victim in her father's home and did not take any attention and care for the last 3 years. Nazma, on hearing everything from the victim, decided to meet a local advocate in the local legal aid NGO. She went there taking the victim with her and disclosed everything to that advocate. Then the lady advocate informed them that at first they could send a "show cause notice" to the victim's husband informing him of the whole case. Receiving that notice the victim's husband did not respond. After that the advocate sent the victim's husband 3 notices consequently and with the last notice it was stated that if the husband did not come to meet them within 7 working days after getting that notice, a legal case would be filed against him in the Women and Children

¹ Joint family refers to an extended family that is composed of the members of a single family plus other relatives of husband or wife living in that family. A joint family is headed by an elderly person that may be the father, mother, brother, sister, father in law, mother in law, grandfather, grandmother of either husband or wife or any other close relatives of the husband or wife. During earlier days in the typical rural society, most of the family belongs to such extended family but nowadays the concept of joint family is undergoing change in the rural society.

Affairs Court. Immediately the victim's husband came to meet the advocate. Then her husband promised that he would rent a home for her and would start a family with that victim again. However, after that her husband never did anything for her. Then they again went to that advocate and decided to file a law suit against her husband. In the meantime, the woman member also tried another strategy and contacted the UP Chairman of the jurisdiction of the husband and told him everything. Then the Chairman also informed her husband to meet him, but waiting 7 days the Chairman said that as the husband did not come to meet him within that period he requested that the woman member proceed further to file the case against the husband. Then the advocate made a case and after that her husband was forced to accept her as a wife.

In another case, Nazma informed the "interviewer" that as an aftermath of a trivial family feud, one non-commissioned soldier in military service one day severely bit his wife and then demolished all of the valuables in the house. After that he went away to Dhaka and the victim woman came to Nazma and asked for her help. Then the woman member advised the wife to collect the address of the higher authority of military services at Dhaka. Following that the woman member sent a complaint against that man to the higher authority. And at the same time, she also talked over cell phone with that soldier and requested to meet her immediately. The soldier immediately came and informed her that if the Union Parishad did not withdraw the complaint against him, the authority would suspend him. Then she told the husband that if he stopped all of this family violence and lived happily with his family then she would help him. After that the woman member took a written undertaking from the husband where he proposed that he would never do such misbehaviour with his wife in the future. Then the woman member informed again the higher authority about his current promise and thus served the woman member and saved the woman's family. From the innermost sense of humanity and community feelings, Nazma provided this community service for one of the constituents in her jurisdictional.

Analytical Implications of Nazma's Case

Male domination and deprivation to women members in the UP: Nazma's case revealed that how the male Chairman and male members imposed and practice deprivation to the female members in the UP.

Women for women: Women can play a role for the women, like a messiah, which is quite evident from her illustrations of the community service she shared in her case. This is exactly the most desired role that the women members can render to the community women. Previously the male members could never deal with such matters at the grassroots level, but now the women members are playing a formidable role to safeguard the interests of the life-related matters of women in the community and these women are contributing in terms of establishing the rule of law and social justice, which are the basic twin objectives of ensuring good governance in rural society. This is the best example of ensuring good governance at the community level by the women leaders in the UP.

Providing culturally suitable judgment: Like Parul's case, the same analysis is applicable here too. From the point of substantive rationale, the solution that Nazma provided to the

family is still questionable because other alternative solutions for the victim might represent better judgment. Forcing her husband to accept his married wife with a baby can be even more harmful for the victim's life if there is no mutual understanding, love or mental/emotional attachment for the sustenance of the marital relationship.

4.4. Male domination and deprivation and corruption in the UP: An extreme case

The following extreme case would present a vivid picture and stark realities concerning how the women members have struggled to establish their rights and how WLs tried to combat the highly corrupt Chairman in an extremely male dominated atmosphere. The following happened in the Chiora UP, Choddagram Upazila, Comilla District, where after the oath taking the Chairman convened the first meeting without the notice of 3 woman members. In that first meeting it was decided that through the VGF card, rice would be distributed among the villagers. One woman member, Laily Begum (preferred pseudonym) disclosed that the women had been deprived of their rights when all of the VGF cards had been given to the male members by the Chairman. After that, all of the women members protested altogether against such a decision by the Chairman. Laily opined that the Chairman did not give women members VGF cards because they were women. Moreover, the women members told the Chairman that they had come there by bagging popular verdict of the majority villagers, not by the mercy or whim of others, and they said that they had received more votes than the Chairman. Immediately after that, the Chairman gave 3 women members only 18 VGF cards, 6 cards for each member, but they decided not to take the cards. That was the very start of the women members' oppression in the Chiora UP. The Chairman personally offered Laily 6 cards. On the other hand, the Chairman gave 100 cards to the male member of her ward and then she requested the concerned male member to distribute the cards given to her also. The following day Laily submitted a list of 15 VGF card applicants who were extremely poor people in her village. She told the author that those people were so poor that they waited for the whole day with a hope of getting 5 kg rice each, which was supposed to be distributed through the VGF card system, even while they were fasting during the *Ramadan*¹ month. However, the Chairman did not give her rice for those people while there was enough stock of rice in the UP, and after that she went back home with a heavy heart and started crying when she reached home and became bewildered, saying that: "being a woman member I could not give rice to these 15 poor people".

¹ According to Islamic rituals *Ramadan* is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Muslims worldwide observe *Ramadan* as a month of fasting that starts before sunrise and ends after sunset with the taking of food and drinks. Fasting is "obligatory" for adult Muslims, except those that are ill, traveling, pregnant, breast-feeding, diabetic or going through menstrual bleeding. While fasting from dawn until sunset, Muslims refrain from consuming food, drinking liquids, smoking, or engaging in sexual relations. According to Islam, there are enormous rewards for observing fasting and it is believed that the offering of prayers, recitation of the Quran and other religious activities are multiplied during the *Ramadan* period.

Following this incident, all women and male members became united against the Chairman and decided to propose a “no confidence vote”¹ against the Chairman to the DC office, Comilla. After that move, hearing all of this from the general public the Chairman came to her home many times because she and the Chairman both were elected from the same ward. Then the Chairman requested her to stop the move, and promised her that he would give her everything according to her shares or rights in the UP. Then being sufficiently convinced by the utterance of the Chairman she thought that no one should be judged by only one occurrence and she also deemed that the Chairman could be given one chance more. Then the Chairman asked her to sign the resolution and she signed it. After that the Chairman made her one of the signatories for UP fund management. After she was given signatory power, the Chairman always sent her blank checks for her signature. Then she asked the Chairman why he always sent her a blank check. In reply the Chairman informed her that the UP Secretary signed that check, and he also signed it and asked her what the problem was with her signing it. The Chairman also notified her that if she did not give her signature, there would be no problem in withdrawing the money. In fact, all of these blank checks which were being signed by her were for LGSP projects and represented huge money, which was sanctioned for undertaking many projects in her name. The money was withdrawn by the Chairman without her knowledge. This incident made every member (irrespective of male and female) seriously angry with the Chairman and then altogether, 8 members jointly, filed a written complaint giving all of the details about the whole matter to the DC, and the UNO both and they also sent a copy to the concerned Ministry. In its wake, the DC formed an enquiry committee to probe into the matter and the committee then came to the UP and investigated the whole case. In line with their complaint the committee found that their written complaint was perfectly true and accordingly the committee accused the Chairman of stealing or misusing 5 lacks 60 thousand taka (7191 US\$). Based on the probe committee report, the Chairman’s position was declared vacant by the Ministry in April, 2011. Immediately after that the Chairman went to the High Court and requested a stay of the order of the Ministry for 3 weeks from the High Court. Thereafter, the Chairman managed the stay order but after that he continued his illegal activities avoiding 8 members in the UP. She then stated that except for those 8 members, 4 other members (one woman and 3 male members) were now working with the Chairman. She said that one might be astonished to know that to stop her from protesting against the wrongdoings of the Chairman, he also employed hooligans/thugs to threaten her so that she could be stopped and still the Chairman’s hooligans constantly threatened her. She informed the Upazila Woman Vice-Chairperson of this incident so that something could be done about them and they were trying to bring the issue to the media but nothing has happened to date. The Chairman continued his wrongdoings apparently without caring about anything. She said that she believed that nobody might have heard about such an incident anywhere in Bangladesh. While sharing their painful experience,

¹ There is a provision in the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance (Amendments) of 2010 that says that “no confidence” charge can be framed against any act of the Chairman, members or the Parishad (council) and any elected member can submit such a charge to the UNO in written form having signatures of the majority of the elected members along with the particular complaint.

the women members even demanded justice from the present author and the media and they asked him how this was possible in Bangladesh.

During the data collection, a woman member shared a case of corruption of the Chairman of Chiora UP, which she had experienced very recently. That woman member experienced this case of corruption when she came to know that she was given a project of one lack taka (1286 US\$), which was obtained from a 1% land transfer tax from Upazila Parishad. After getting the project the Chairman advised her to sign a check and thereafter the check was cashed. As soon as the check was cashed the Chairman took away the whole taka from her giving her 5,000 taka (64 US\$) in her hand.

Another woman member shared another incident of corruption of the Chairman of Chiora UP with the author. She said that once the Chairman tried to pass a few projects by the UNO office using fake signatures of woman members and having doubt about its authenticity the UNO immediately probed it and he was caught red-handed because it was completely concocted and fake. At that time the UNO warned the Chairman that he would be suspended from his Chairmanship but the Chairman has continued his wrongdoing in the UP managing a stay order from the high court.

5. Summary

5.1. Summary of the challenges of the women leaders encountered in the UP

The above cases revealed that the women leaders in the UP have encountered the following major challenges towards ensuring their role and participation in the UP.

5.1.1. Extreme male domination: From the empirical evidence, it was found that male members are yet to mentality ready to accept the women members and to share an iota of rights, benefits and resources with women although legally government has made provisions for giving thirty per cent project responsibilities to the women members in the UP. It appears that women members have emerged as a threat for the male members as they have been well accepted by the community due to their better performance and good behaviours. In some cases female members succeeded in obtaining some shares from the UP Chairman after a serious bargaining and struggling with their rights but being defeated to stop their rights, some male members still bear the grudge of imposing such hegemony over women members by filing false cases against them and adopting various means of enmity with their female colleagues in the UP. The substantive fact is that women members are encountering serious male domination, where women's subjugated rights are accepted by men but they never accept equal rights for women. The major cause of such a mindset lies with the concept of patriarchy and paternalistic social systems, which has been continuing since time immemorial without having any change in its form, nature and structure.

5.1.2. Corruption blocked women's participation: The second obstacle women leaders identified in the UP is corruption. Corruption is highly prevalent in most of the third world countries and Bangladesh is no exception to this case. Due to massive corruption these women leaders have miserably failed to adjust themselves in the UP. Women

members have become the worst victim of corruption in the UP because women are deemed relatively less corrupt and when they experienced corruption of the Chairman and male members in the UP, WLs find helpless to coexist with malpractices. In true sense, corruption has plagued potentiality for smooth functioning of local governance, which is directly affecting the participation of women leaders in the UP. The whole society is engulfed with corruption, a draconian enemy for efficacious development of Bangladesh. Ground realities revealed the whole gamut of how corrupt practices are perpetuating in the scene of local governance through a conglomerate of patron-client relationship among the UP Chairman, local administration, contractors, suppliers, local political parties and concerned MPs.

5.1.3. Faulty legal imposition practiced for the women leaders have squeezed their participation: In a nascent democracy women's political participation should be bolstered with the axiom of affirmative action and it is quite *sine qua non* where a fifty per cent population belongs to women. The Chairmen and male members being obsessed with patriarchal values are constantly imposing insurmountable barriers labeling them as "reserved seat members". Being extremely prejudiced with the primordial social structure coupled with other cultural barriers imposed by religious ideology, kingship, factionalism and patron-clientele syndrome that governed the rural society, the whole male elected functionaries are depriving and denying of women's due rights in almost all spheres of the UP governance. The reservation system in the UP is designed in such a way that women members have find themselves marginalized in the UP. Holding the membership for 3 times wider jurisdiction than that of men, they were enjoying just only one thirds facilities in the UP, which is tantamount to doing mockery with the rights of women in Bangladesh. This again refers to patriarchy and paternalistic attitudes in case of policy making of the government machinery in Bangladesh. Therefore, the mismatch between women's enshrined rights and their entitlement should be withdrawn without any delay.

5.1.4. Structural bottleneck: The whole structure of the UP has been structured in such a way that women members have little voice in UP governance. Women's role has been weakened, emaciated, made feeble, and curtailed by the existing structural arrangement of the UP. Out of 13 elected representatives there were 9 male members and 3 women members in the UP. Male Chairmen in tandem with male members have extremely overpowered the entire governance, where women members found themselves helpless. Male Chairmen are omnipotent in the UP, which helps them to maintain an excessively autocratic role in the UP. The women members are deemed good if they accept whatever the Chairmen allow or grant them but when women leaders call for their due rights, they no longer remain good and lose the supportive attitude of the male Chairmen.

5.2. Summary of how women are changing governance in the UP

It was evident that women are promoting rural governance by providing better services in many ways. The women leaders have engaged in transformative politics for the greater interests of the poor people of the rural society. The following is a summary of their contribution to pro-poor governance.

5.2.1. *Women for women:* All over the world women were found sympathetic to women's cause and interest, and the same was the case in the UP in Bangladesh. Drawing evidence from the global scenario it was found that all over the world, women leaders are found sensitive and sympathetic to women's issues, interests, and concerns. By serving the cause of the women, they were contributing their worth to bringing positive changes in the rural governance.

5.2.2. *Women are rendering community services through village salish:* Taking part in rural village court system (salish) women leaders have brought about a positive change in the outcome of the rural salish in the UP. Women members thus help rural women obtain social justice and a better life. The conduct of the salish is a glaring example of the community service of the woman members in her jurisdictional area. Such an act of social justice shows that woman have proper capacity to deal with life-related matters with proper dignity and honour. Evidence shows that woman members can perform their social commitment and responsibility with a strong hand and ensure the rule of law in the society. Thus these women members are contributing to social justice and good governance at the local level. This case reveals that woman can play desired role and deliver justice in the society if they are provided with an enabling environment and a legal framework. When poor women come to seek a remedy regarding any family feud or violence against women, these women members help them get legal support from the relevant sources, which were non-existent while women members were not in the UP.

5.2.3. *Women are playing role in distributing safety net benefits:* Women members are deemed pledge-bound to provide better services to the community people. At present the Bangladesh government is providing various safety net programs for diversified sections of poor people to address the problem of poverty, income inequality, malnutrition, and maternal mortality and famine. Many of those safety net programs, which include distribution VGD cards, VGF cards, old age pension, 40-day works, disabled people's allowances, widows' allowance cards, test relief and allowance for pregnant mothers, etc., are implemented by the UP. In distributing the assigned safety net programs to the UP, the women members are playing formidable roles in the selection of applicants based on judgments. Through effective bargaining they were able to enhance the coverage of those services for the women of rural society. In the rural society the villagers maintain very friendly relationships with the women members and these women members always help them get their son's or daughter's birth registration certificates easily, and they also help them obtain death registration and succession certificates.

5.2.4. *Women are taking part in development administration:* Some women leaders especially those who emerged as community leader using their NGO network and background are doing startling performance in bringing change and development by undertaking various development projects in the rural society. Based on the grassroots voices and the ground reality it has been strongly evident that the women leaders are now changing the rural governance in Bangladesh. They are bringing positive changes in the rural governance through undertaking various development projects, extending better community services to the rural poor, demonstrating their integrity by performing their jurisdictional role. The topmost significance credited to the women leaders'

performance was that these women leaders were able to bring such qualitative changes to local governance while accomplishing their regular household and reproductive role amidst challenges posed by the patriarchal social structure.

6. Conclusion

The basic premise of this paper was to delve into 2 research questions: i) what were the major challenges WLs encountered towards playing their role in the UP? ii) How did the WLs change rural governance while playing their role in the UP of Bangladesh? This paper was fully based on case study method. The paper revealed that the major challenges towards effective participation of the women leaders in the UP were male domination or patriarchy, corruption, faulty legal provision practiced for women members, and above all, the autocratic power structure of the UP Chairmen; all of these factors plagued the scope of participation of the women leaders. To answer the research question how the women leaders have helped changing rural governance, it was found that having ensured their limited rights and role in the UP, some women leaders were providing culturally suitable social justice to the women through playing role in rural salish and thus helping the vulnerable segment of the population in the rural society. Women leaders were found highly sensitive for the women's cause and interest and they are trying to serve their needs at the community level. These women leaders were also playing role in undertaking various development projects and helping distribution of pro-poor safety net benefits at the rural society. Thus, involving themselves in transformative politics, these women leaders were able to change rural governance in their day-to-day affairs of the UP.

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