

Governance by Women Leaders in Union Parishad in Bangladesh: Unheard Voices from the Grassroots

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Abstract

Union Parishad (UP) has been serving as the lowest rural local government in Bangladesh since 1870. Women's representation in the UP first began with the nomination system in 1976. Again women's representation in the UP received further momentum in 1997 with the provision of direct adult franchise. Within these 2 decades time span, women leaders (WLs) have failed to ensure their effective participation in the UP. But it is deemed that through their ceaseless struggle and limited participation, WLs have contributed to governance in the UP. Against such a context, the paper is aimed at unraveling the research questions: how do WLs contribute to governance in the UP in Bangladesh? The paper is based on qualitative research methods that include hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), case study, content analysis and observation methods. The findings of the paper reveal that the WLs are promoting governance through establishing transparency, accountability, social justice and reducing corruption in the UP. WLs are also trying to transform rural governance through increasing

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pro-poor benefits for the community people and maintaining better quality of development projects and following participative management style in the UP.

Keywords: *Local Government, Union Parishad, Women Leaders, Transparency, Accountability*

ธรรมาภิบาลโดยผู้นำหญิงในองค์กรปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่น (Union Parishad) ของประเทศบังกลาเทศ: เสียงที่ไม่ได้ยินจากรากหญ้า

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บทคัดย่อ

Union Parishad (UP) ก่อตั้งขึ้นในฐานะองค์กรปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่นในระดับล่างสุดของประเทศบังกลาเทศตั้งแต่ปี 1870 เริ่มมีการเสนอชื่อผู้แทนหญิงครั้งแรกในปี 1976 และมีแรงผลักดันให้ผู้แทนหญิงผ่านการออกเสียงเลือกตั้งโดยตรงในปี 1997 ตลอดระยะเวลาที่ผ่านมาผู้นำหญิงเหล่านี้ไม่สามารถเข้ามามีส่วนร่วมในการบริหารองค์กรได้อย่างเต็มที่ และต้องเผชิญกับอุปสรรคนานัปการที่แฝงอยู่ในระบบ แต่ผลพวงของการกีดกันดังกล่าวไม่สามารถทำให้ผู้นำหญิงเหล่านี้ลดความพยายามผลักดันให้เกิดธรรมาภิบาลขึ้น งานวิจัยนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายในการค้นหาคำตอบว่าผู้นำหญิงช่วยผลักดันการสร้างธรรมาภิบาลในองค์กรปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่นของบังกลาเทศหรือไม่และอย่างไร โดยมีวัตถุประสงค์ที่จะค้นหาคำตอบที่ผลักดันการสร้างธรรมาภิบาลในกิจการขององค์กรโดยใช้การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพแนวปรากฏการณ์วิทยา เทคนิคการสนทนากลุ่ม การศึกษารายกรณี การวิเคราะห์เนื้อหา และการสังเกตการณ์ ผลการวิจัย พบว่า ผู้นำหญิงสามารถผลักดันให้เกิดธรรมาภิบาลโดยการสร้างความโปร่งใส มีความรับผิดชอบในหน้าที่ที่มีธรรมในสังคมและการลดการทุจริตในองค์กร ทั้งนี้ การวิจัย ยังพบว่า ผู้นำหญิงพยายามที่จะปฏิรูปการปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่นโดยการเพิ่มผลประโยชน์ให้แก่ผู้ยากไร้ในชุมชนและยกระดับคุณภาพโครงการพัฒนาต่าง ๆ ให้ดียิ่งขึ้น เป็นที่ประจักษ์ว่า

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องค์ประกอบที่สนับสนุนธรรมาภิบาลในองค์กรปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่นมาจากการปรับใช้หลักการบริหารแบบมีส่วนร่วม ความจริงใจ และความซื่อสัตย์ของผู้นำหญิงในองค์กรที่กล่าว

คำสำคัญ: องค์กรปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่น Union Parishad ผู้นำหญิง ความโปร่งใส
ความรับผิดชอบในหน้าที่

The Research Context and the Problematic

Local government (LG) in Bangladesh has a long history. The present structure of LG in Bangladesh was laid down by the British colonial rulers in this subcontinent in 1870. Since from the colonial era there was hardly any provision of women representation in the lowest level LG body or unit, *i.e.* Union Parishad (hereafter UP only) in the then undivided Indian subcontinent which was divided in to India and Pakistan in 1947. In later stage Bangladesh achieved its independence through a nine-months bloody armed struggle from Pakistan in 1971. As an independent state until 1976 there was no provision of women representation in the UP in Bangladesh. In fact women's representation in the UP was ensured in 1997 which provided thirty percent reservation of women. Having ensured their representations in the UP women leaders have been struggling for coexisting with their male counterparts in this grassroots based local government in Bangladesh *i.e.* Union Parishad. My paper is based on the argument that through their prolonged struggle for ensuring their participation, women leaders have contributed to governance of the UP but there are lack of evidences how they are promoting governance in the UP. Against such a backdrop, this paper will try to unravel the research questions that how women leaders (WLs) help promote governance in the UP of Bangladesh?

Methodology Followed

This study is based on qualitative methods. It is deemed that only qualitative methods would help explore the research question properly to tap the WLs' lived experiences and multiple realities faced by them in the UP. In order to uncover how these WLs are contributing to rural governance in the UP affairs hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used which was supported by the case studies, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), content analysis and observation methods. To cross check the findings obtained from the face to face interviews, 2 FGDs, a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) were conducted. Researcher's observations gained through the prolonged (more or less about 100 hours) field work were incorporated in the paper as well. In order to make the study credible and authentic, primary data were collected from 19 UPs,

covering different socio-cultural zones¹ of Bangladesh. In most cases women leaders were interviewed separately so that they could share their experiences and realities properly, whereas in few cases some male members were also interviewed to tap their views and get better insights about the research questions, contexts and problems. In some cases leaders of social institutions² and general villagers were also consulted. The whole discussion was recorded with the informed consent of the participants and afterwards an English transcription was prepared from Bengali by the researcher. Following content analysis method, the secondary data were collected from research reports, books, Ph.D. dissertations, journal articles and so on adopting a heuristic search from NIDA library and online both.

Women's Representation in Local Government in Bangladesh

Local government (LG) in this sub-continent has its deep roots in the past. The foundation of today's LG was laid down by the British colonial rule in the undivided Indian subcontinent with the promulgation of *Village Chowkidary Act of 1870*, which was the cornerstone of today's Union Parishad. 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 from the "internal colonialism"³ of Pakistan and inherited the LG system from Pakistan with some modifications in its structure and composition. Since from 1870 the functionaries of local government⁴ were always in the hands of males (Chowdhury *et al.*, 1994: 6) and rights to vote

¹ In total there are 4498 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.

² Social institutions include cooperative organizations and schools in the study villages in the selected UPs.

³ The term internal colonialism was used by Rawnak Jahan(1972) in her book *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration*, USA: Columbia University.

⁴ 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 144 years that spanned from 1870 till 2014, UP never loses its representative character and election was continued every 5 years alternate in UP unlike many ups and downs in Bangladesh society.

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 1977, which for the first time in Bangladesh 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 regime⁵ 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. According to the Local Government (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 UP was made in 1997, which provided reservation of one thirds seats for women members. Later on by an office order from the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives

⁵ 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.

(LGRD&C) women representation in the UP has been made 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 is the lowest administrative unit of 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 these representatives represent villagers ranging from 10,000 to 30,000. Among 12 members only 3 positions are reserved for the women members in the UP. According to the legal provision of 1997, a Union is divided into 9 wards⁶. In these 9 wards, 3 wards are reserved for a woman member. Every 3 wards make a single unit that is kept reserved for a woman member. Nine male members are elected from 9 wards and 3 women members are elected from their respective reserved wards. According to UP ordinance (GOB, 2010) it was found that the activities performed by the Union Parishad cover a wide range of community services such as, maintenance of law and order, promotion of cottage industries and family planning, protection and maintenance of public property (roads, bridges, canals and culverts), maintenance of birth and death registers; lighting of public ways, public streets and public places; plantation and preservation of trees; maintenance and regulation of cattle pounds; maintenance of UP records; maintenance of hats and bazaars; 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.

Conceptual Labyrinth of Governance

Globally and nationally governance is a multidimensional concept and huge issues are involved with the concept of governance. In the realm of academic discourse, perhaps governance, which is still expanding, evolving and also elusive to some extent, occupies the most predominant place. Ara and Khan (2006: 91) have opined that governance has become the hottest issue in the discourse of

⁶ Ward is the lowest planning unit of Union Parishad, which is composed of one or more than one villages. Nine Wards make a Union.

contemporary political and global development. There are differences in the views regarding the meaning and importance of governance among the scholars, academicians, professionals, practitioners, international donor communities, etc. The concepts and definitions of governance are full of overlapping—no two definitions appear to be the same (Islam and Asaduzzaman, 2008: 2). Despite numerous attempts in recent years it is yet to be defined and the definition of governance remains controversial (Olowu, 2002). Keefer (2009: 439) also notes that “there is no agreed definition of ‘governance.’” According to Pierre and Piters (2007: 28), the concept of governance is “notoriously slippery” and Schneider (2004: 25) comments that the conceptual vagueness of the term is the “secret of its success.” Kohler-Koch and Rittberger (2006: 28) put it bluntly: despite decades of work “there is still confusion about the conceptualization of the term” (quoted in Chhotray and Stoker, 2010). In fact, there is a great deal of definitional ambiguity in the concepts of governance (Weiss, 2000; Doornbos, 2001; Andrews, 2008; Keefer, 2009; Williams, 2009; Grindle, 2010).

The term good governance has become a strongly-desired value (Zafarullah and Huque, 2001) and an obsession of current debates on development in developing countries (Williams and Young 1994 cited from Jamil, 1998). In fact, during the last three decades, it has become a common phenomenon in the literature of international aid agencies, which generally advocate establishing governance as a precondition for aid receiving countries (Rhodes, 1997). In general, good governance is associated with efficient and effective administration in a democratic framework. It is equivalent to purposive and development-oriented administration, which is committed to improving the quality of life of the people and enlarging the scope of people’s participation in the decision-making process of development (Jefries, 1993). Governance refers to “all processes of governing, whether undertaken by a government, market or network, whether over a family, tribe, formal or informal organization or territory and whether through laws, norms, power or language” (Bevir, 2013). According to former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, “good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development” (UN, 1998).

The international aid or donor agencies are the major proponents and advocates of the concepts of governance, and those agencies have tried to view and define governance according to their own agendas and perspectives. The World Bank (1994, 1997), UNDP (1997, 2002) and the OECD (1995) have become the major proponents and frequent users of this concept, especially for the aid receiving countries, to promote democracy, decentralization, accountability, transparency, rule of law, and people's participation in their development. The World Bank (1994) defined governance as "the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development". They highlighted the administrative aspects of governance, addressing civil service reform, public sector downsizing, service delivery and contracting out, capacity building, and institutional strengthening (World Bank, 1997 quoted in Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2002). The World Bank (1997), from its lending experience in many developing countries, has realized that good governance is central in creating and sustaining an environment which fosters strong and equitable development and its essential complements to sound economic policies. The World Bank has also identified a number of aspects of good governance, such as political accountability, freedom of association and participation, rule of law and independence of the judiciary, bureaucratic accountability, freedom of information, a sound administrative system, partnership between the government and the civil society organizations, etc. (Blunt, 1995).

According to the UNDP (1997), "governance is the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority in managing a country's affairs on all levels". This perspective of governance comprises the mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations, and mediate their conflicts (Hyden, 2001). The UNDP (1997) notes that good governance means equal participation of all citizens in decision-making. It is transparent, accountable, and equitable and it promotes the rule of law. It allows the local people and the most affected to be heard when decisions are being made and when resources are handed out. The UNDP (2002) further argues that good governance advances sustainable development for three reasons: 1) enjoying political freedom and participating in the decisions that shape one's life are fundamental human rights; 2) it helps to protect people from economic

and political catastrophes; and 3) it can promote sustainable development by empowering citizens to influence policies that promote growth and prosperity and reflect their priorities (cited from Hope, 2005). The ESCAP views governance as a process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented) According to the ADB there are four basic components of governance: accountability, participation, predictability, and transparency. For the IMF, it is “the process by which public institutions conduct public affairs and manage public resources’ (UNDP, 2007: 128). For the OECD, it is “the use of political authority and exercise of control in a society in relation to the management of its resources for social and economic development,” which “encompasses the role of public authorities in establishing the environment in which economic operators function and in determining the distribution of benefits as well as the nature of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled” (OECD, 1995a: 14). Again the UNDP (2000) notes that governance, including its social, political and economic dimensions, operates at every level of human enterprise, be it the household, village, municipality, nation, region or globe” (UNDP, 2000, as cited in OECD, 2009: 24). Thus, the term is widely used in relation to a variety of specific contexts and approaches: e.g., corporate governance, participatory governance, global governance, information technology (IT) governance, environmental governance, local governance, NGO governance, and sustainable governance. Governance as addressed in the policy literature reviewed here refers primarily to governance in domestic politics and is distinct from these other uses. In general, this means a focus on governance at the national level, although governance at various sub-national or local levels is also central to some work.

Reviewing the concepts and definitions of governance propagated by the donor agencies, some scholars have identified seven core components that were highlighted in the working definitions of good governance. These components are: democracy and representation, human rights, the rule of law, efficient and effective public management, transparency and accountability, developmentalist objectives, and a varying range of specific economic and political policies, programs, and institutions (Santiso, 2001: 4-6; Nanda, 2006; Hout, 2007).

The governance concept encompasses fast changing political, social and economic environment, along with exogenous factors including international environment and conditions of operational governance. Most reviews on the development of governance theories begin with the observation that governance has been used in a variety of ways in the political science and public administration literature (Kjaer, 2007; Pierre and Peters, 2005; Jordan et al., 2005). According to Landell and Serageldin (1991), governance denotes “how people are ruled, how the affairs of the states are administered and regulated, as well as a nation’s system of politics, and how this functions in relation to public administration and law.” Governance is the interaction among structures, processes and traditions that determine how power and responsibilities are exercised, how decisions are taken, and how citizens and other stakeholders have their say (Graham, Amos and Plumptre, 2003).

The most influential and three major dimensions of governance are accountability, transparency, and participation (Mills and Serageldin, 1992 quoted in Rahman, 2009: 7). These three aspects of governance are seen as basic to good governance because it means: a) the governance structure has built-in mechanism which ensure that politicians, civil servants and service providers are held accountable to citizens, peoples and customers for their actions; b) their action is guided by clear, codified and transparent rules of conducts; and c) citizens have sufficient scope for participation in decision making.

A maximal definition of good governance would include: checks and balances among various organs of the government, legitimacy and authority structures of the state institutions, rules and norms that determine who holds power and the exercise of this power, relationships of functionaries and citizens, the capacity of government to make policy, manage administrative and fiscal affairs of the state and delivers good and services (Rahman, 2005: 7). The Commission on Global Governance (quoted in Aminuzzaman, 2006) defines governance as the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs. Eight major characteristics of good governance are: being participatory in nature, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive rule of law. Nowadays the country-specific performance of governance is measured with innumerable lists of indicators. The widely-accepted

indicators, developed by the researchers of the World Bank Institute, are: voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption (Kaufman and Pablo, 2000 quoted in Rahman, 2009; Aminuzzaman, 2006). Good governance is both “a broad reform strategy and a particular set of initiatives to strengthen the institutions of civil society with the objectives of making government more accountable, more open, transparent and more democratic” (Minogue, 1997).

In the ultimate analysis governance can be viewed as the sum of three major components: process, content or values, and output or deliverables (Aminuzzaman, 2006: 13; Rahman and Robinson, 2006: 8). The process of governance encompasses factors such as accountability, transparency, and participation. Content includes values such as ensuring social justice, welfare, equity, institutionalization of democracy and a sustainable poverty reducing and developmental strategy. The output or deliverables can be better public administration and quick service delivery to the citizen. If all of these three components are fulfilled or obtained, then governance becomes good governance.

Based on the above discussion it can be summarized that the notion of good governance is still developing in terms of its definition, its ethical connotations, and its usefulness (Kruiter, 1996). Therefore, the meaning of good governance cannot be confined to a time frame. Succinctly we can say that governance concepts include a huge range of issues such as better service delivery, establishing democratic norms and values, plurality, separation of power, independence of judiciary, establishment of rule of law, empowerment, conscientization, people's participation, awareness rising, capacity building, transparency, accountability in the affairs of state-fostered development process, privatization, voice and inclusion of the poor, political stability, freedom of expression, free flow of information and press and media, human rights and liberty, privatization, sustainability and environment and it encompasses a pro-poor developmental strategy in the state affairs. Moreover, governance connotes a citizen-friendly, citizen-caring, responsive, decentralized local government system, an autonomous political society, an efficient and accountable bureaucracy, strong civil society, and a free media (Huque, 2001; Minocha, 1998; Stowe, 1992). The contemporary literature suggests that good governance cannot be attained in any

developing countries unless and until power is transferred from the centre to the local institutions and people's participation is ensured in local development (Hye, 2000; Siddiqui, 2005; Haque, 2003a; Haque, 2003b; Peters, 2001; Fung, 2006; Dible, 2003; Schneider, 1999).

Political institutes are the most vital institutions for ensuring the democratic governance in a nation. As a grassroots-based local government, the Union Parishad is one of the important institutions through which governance in rural society can be promoted and nurtured and where women leaders can play an effective role in addressing the problem of governance in the UP.

How Do Women Leaders Promote Better Governance at the Grassroots?

In answering how women leaders contribute to the governance of the UP, it was obvious from the textual narratives of the research participants that they were contributing to the rural society through the UP governance in diverse ways. In promoting governance in the UP, the WLs were making a real difference in the rural society. They were striving for ensuring pro-poor and better governance in almost all aspects of the village life amidst severe constraints by the socio-political milieu and reinforced by structural and cultural impediments imposed and textured 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 are the summaries of the WLs' contribution in the UP jurisdiction.

Women Leaders Facilitated the Promotion of Transparency and Accountability in the UP

The women leaders are trying their utmost to contribute to governance of rural society in many ways. Through the entry of women members into the structure of local governance, it was found that they were trying hard to establish transparency and accountability in the sphere of UP affairs, which could be understood from the utterance of the Chairperson of the Jolla UP, Wazirpur Upazila, Barisal, who stated the following:

“As per government rules, when we undertook any development project in any ward, the respective ward member should have to serve as the head of the Scheme Selection Committee and the respective woman member should have to serve as the adviser of that committee and other village respectable elderly and few socio-cultural village elites also served in that committee but the main point here that due to the women members’ involvement in the Parishad, transparency, accountability and participation of the people had increased a lot” (Chairperson, Jolla UP, 31 October 2013).

In replying to a query about how people were getting benefits from the women members, the women Chairperson of the Manikdaha UP, Vanga Upazila, in the Faridpur district opined that *“due to the entry into the women, transparency, accountability in the overall affairs of the UP had enhanced immensely.”* Another woman member, Fatima Akhter Parul, from the Khadimpara UP, Sylhet, shared her experience in the following words:

“Yes we get VGD cards tantamount to male members but despite that people just run after to get that card, especially when it is VGF we face lots of problem because poor people never loose hope to get it from me. You know sometimes when I could not give them VGD card I just give 100 taka from my own pocket” (Woman Member, Khadimpara UP, 28 September 2013).

An analysis of the above quotation from Fatima shows her respect for the voters and her accountability to them. Due to scanty resources in the UP, it is hardly possible to satisfy all of the demands of the general mass, so she chose an appropriate way to satisfy her compliance with the voters of her jurisdictional area. Thus she proved that she was accountable to her voters. Furthermore, this also shows how women members maintain their commitment with the community people. This is unique; she provided better services to the community and her constituents also rewarded her when she contested the election for the second time because she was elected by the villagers for the second time also. Khan (2009: 23) also found that nowadays, the Chairmen and male members are becoming more and more inclined

to gradually open up to the women members and help in maintaining transparency and accountability in UP affairs.

Women Leaders Contributing to Social Justice through the Rural *Salish*⁷ System

Despite serious male domination, women members are contributing to better governance by mitigating family feuds and establishing social justice. This has been substantiated by the utterance of a school teacher of the Kalirbazar UP, who said that the *“involvement of women has eased women to get social justice and previously when the women became victims they could not tell their real problem to the male members but now these helpless victim women could easily share their painful saga to the women members.”*

Siddiquee (2008) found that about 74% of the women leaders responded that they played a role in the cases of divorce, child marriage, dowry, acid throwing, women's repression, rape, etc. Women members' participation in issues such as divorce and child marriage aspects is much higher compared to other areas, such as acid throwing and rape. Amin & Akhter (2005: 8) found that 76.25% of the villagers have reported that the women members have been successful in resolving conflicts in the community; 13.75% have reported that they have been partially successful; and the rest, 10%, have asserted that they have not been successful in resolving local conflicts. Supporting such a view one villager of the Chandpur UP, Boalmari, Faridpur district, added that *“as there are women members in the UP, sometimes they can help mitigating family quarrel, cases of violence and separation very easily taking help from relevant NGOs”* (One Villager from Chandpur UP, 31 October 2013).

In response to a question about how these women members were contributing to ensuring better governance, some villagers opined that *“due to such provision, women have got opportunity to flourish their leadership potential and thus they can represent the women and uphold the needs and wishes of the women through a structured arrangement.”* Evidence also shows that female politicians view women

⁷ 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.

as a distinct part of their constituencies or that they feel a special responsibility to women (Childs, 2002; Reingold, 1992). Replying to the relevant question a woman member from the Amratoli UP, Comilla, immediately replied as follows:

“Due to entry of the woman member into UP, the women folk are getting huge benefit from us because when they experience male oppression and violence they immediately come to the woman member for remedy and they demand justice to us and they never go to male members for seeking justice for oppression and violence against woman. Sometimes we went for taking advice for legal action against that violence to the Upazila Officer for women affairs” (Woman Member, Amratoli UP, 25 September 2013).

Siddiquee (2008) found that 66% of the women members were found to participate in salish on regular basis, which was quite high. Amin & Akhter (2005: 6) found that 75% of the women members have taken part in salish and the judgment of the UP like the male members; 15% of the women members reported that they were at times called in to attend the salish and judgments; and 10% reported that they have never been called in to attend the same. In reply to the question whether and how the general public benefitted by the presence of these women members in the Parishad, Fatima Akhter Parul, a woman member from the Khadimpara UP, stated the following:

“I do not know how general public are being benefited by the inclusion of women members in the Parsishad but I can firmly assure you that women would get enormous benefits by us. Especially in the village salish where women members remain present, the victim woman can share her personal experiences or opinions or grievances to us easily without hesitation and with enhanced courage and will force. Previously when women members were not in the Parishad, they never get courage to open their mouth before the male villagers and members during the local arbitration/dispute resolution process. At that time women became more victims by the judgment given by the male villagers but now the situation has completely changed due to

the involvement of women UP members in the Parishad” (Woman Member, Khadimpara UP, 28 September 2013).

In a lively discussion with the Chairman of the Tukerbazar UP, Sylhet Sadar, Sylhet district, being asked what benefit people were getting from the women members in the UP, replying to the researcher’s question, stated the following:

“People had been benefited a lot by women members because in some familial issues male members had nothing to do but in these issues woman members had been playing excellent role in the village society. Still women in our society are lagging behind and we are to address all these problems through proper education in the society” (Chairman, Tukerbazar UP, 28 September 2013).

A long discussion session was employed with the male members in the Wahedpur UP, Mirersarai, where efforts were taken to know how the women members were contributing to the rural society nowadays. One male member answered the researcher’s question saying the following:

“When a woman falls prey to victim and gets oppressed by her husband or anyone, women member can interview and see everything how her husband or others tortured her personally checking the cut mark in her body but it was never possible for a male member” (Male Member, Wahedpur UP, 30 August 2013).

Supporting the views of the above male member a female member from the Wahedpur UP also indicated that *“sometimes women members come forward to help women and help them get an employment, what cannot be think of when women members were not there in UP.”*

Through analysis of the above utterance it is understood that the women members in the UP are trying their utmost to establish social justice by improving the outcome of the rural salish. Before their entry into the UP, the male members could not see women victims and based on verbal description from others, the salish council provided judgment, but after women’s inclusion in the salish process, now women members have resorted to their prerogatives to check the cut marks in

their own eyes or marks of physical torture done to them by their husband or other actors, and being direct witnesses of the physical assaults, the women leaders are contributing to establishing improved social justice in the rural society.

Women Leaders Contributing to Improved Governance through Maintaining Integrity

Among the important components of governance, ensuring integrity and controlling corruption cannot be overemphasized; rather, for Bangladesh it is one of the most exigent issues for overcoming the problems of governance. It was learnt from the ground reality that the women members have challenged conventional corrupt practices, although sometimes they have needed to adjust to it being compelled by the stark realities embedded in the local governance system. Nevertheless, these women members themselves are striving to stick to their inherent sense of integrity. It was learnt from the common people of the Chandpur UP, Boalmari, Faridpur district, that male members usually took money ranging from 400-1500 Taka (5-20 US\$)⁸, while people came to them to ask for various services from the UP. The villagers informed the researcher that at the time of giving out the old age pension card, the widow allowance card, disabled people allowance, succession certificates, and other services rendered by the UP, the male members took money from the people that wanted to have those services but in general the female members never took any money from the people. The women members generally allotted these cards based on rational judgment and justified grounds, but the women members were given very few cards for distribution among the poor people and that is why the women members had to experience a lot of pain because they could not provide services to the poor people of the UP. The following quotation from one woman member from the Wahedpur UP, Mirsarai, is a glaring example of how WLs are contributing to ensure the integrity in the UP:

“Not always we get money because we have to maintain the quality of the project when we construct any road. You know people want this

⁸ One UD\$ = 77.78 taka as of 22 March 2014. The figure is calculated more or less full digit deducting the fraction amount.

road, so considering prestige concern we never think of doing profit and we don't run after money because people voted for us. So we try our best to deliver the best and we never practice corrupt practices like male members" (Woman Member, Wahedpur UP, 30 August 2013).

Kaushik (1993: 6) also found that women are more sincere, stable, committed, capable of hard work, and above all, not corrupt. Schein (1989: 154 quoted in Genovese, 1993: 10) opines that "women's leadership has been linked with enhancing world peace, reducing corruption, and improving opportunities for the downtrodden. If women, as keepers of the values of social justice, nurturance, and honesty, are put in charge, then the conflicts, corruption and greed around us will go away." That such is the case is quite evident with the new women entrants to the leadership in the Bangladesh. Desai (1997: 53) describes how individual women have resisted the corruption that plagues the Indian local government, have used their budget carefully, and cleared the debts of their locality. The women that he interviewed pursued different goals from the men elected in their areas, particularly in relation to combating domestic violence, controlling the sale and consumption of alcohol, safeguarding drinking water, improving sanitation, establishing girls' education, and caring for women's health and maternity.

Women Leaders are Providing Pro-poor Community Services

Now the government of Bangladesh is providing various kinds of safety net programs for the poor and vulnerable people of the country and the UP functionaries have been vested with the responsibility to distribute many of those safety net programs. Field data analysis revealed that the WLs are contributing enormously to the improvement of service delivery in the UP.

Replying to a question concerning whether the people were getting more services from the women members in the rural society after they were elected to the UP, a male member from the Amratali UP, informed the researcher that women were serving the society in different ways. He noted the following:

“All 3 women member are helping in distributing VGD⁹ cards, old age pension¹⁰ and VGF¹¹ card, birth registration and many other things. When the beneficiaries of old age pension scheme withdraws money from the bank the women members are required to attest the form and sign with their seal. As they represent 3 wards, so when the beneficiaries of all those wards need to withdraw money from bank the women members need to be present always and thus they are serving the community” (Male Member, Amratali UP, 25 September 2013).

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- ⁹ Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) is a multi-dimensional food based Social Safety Net Programs in Bangladesh, sponsored by World Food Program. The target group of the program is 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.
- ¹⁰ Old age allowance is one of the Safety Net Programs of Bangladesh Government being implemented by the Ministry of Social Welfare. Being illegible for getting old age allowances old people who: i) is at least 65 years of age; ii) has income equal to Tk. 2000; iii) must have worked in formal sector; iv) number of beneficiaries is determined on the basis of category union; v) 50% of the beneficiaries are women and the other 50% is men. For livelihood support old age allowance card holders receive Tk. 220 per month from the nationalized commercial bank of Bangladesh. UP helps selecting the beneficiaries and obtaining fund from the Bank.
- ¹¹ VGF is the acronym of Vulnerable Group Feeding. VGF program is one of the food based social safety net programs in Bangladesh. It is originated in 1970s by World Food Program (WFP) for emergency aid caused by disaster. Now government provides food subsidy for the poorest under this program. Criteria targeted by the program are i) Daily labourer whose income is low or irregular; ii) Landless or those who have less than 0.15 acres of land; iii) Persons with disabilities or their wives, iv) Poor women/men affected by natural disaster.

Amin & Akhter (2005: 6-7) found that in distributing VGF and VGD cards 60% of the women members were allowed to be fully involved; 25% had partial involvement; and 15% had no opportunity to become involved. However, it was found that not only women leaders have integrated with distribution of VGD cards and VGF cards but they have also enhanced the number of beneficiaries, which can be grasped well in the following quotation from a woman member from the South Durgapur UP, Comilla Sadar, Comilla district, who described the following:

“After we enter into the UP, the service delivery has improved a lot. In the previous day, the villagers get only 30 VGD cards, whereas now we distributed 120 VGD cards in just one ward, so whether we are doing well to them or not, they understand easily. We select the beneficiary very consciously, if the villagers see any slur to it, they just inform the Chairman immediately. We are available for the public as and when necessary and even when it was 12 am at 0 hours” (Woman Member, South Durgapur UP, 26 August 2013).

In the same study, Amin & Akhter (2005: 6-7) found that 60% of the women members were seen to be involved in disbursing funds for the old-age women. Based on the researcher’s field experience it was found that these women members were also involved in providing safety nets for women and the same was the case with maternal allowances. In line with this, a woman member from the Wahedpur UP, Mirsarai mentioned the following: “In our society government has started maternal allowance in every village. In such activities women members’ help and cooperation is a must for the smooth implementation of this program” (Woman Member, Wahedpur UP, 30 August 2013).

Obviously, the above quotations imply that women are getting better support and services from the women in the UP now. Although while they claim to be providing VGD and VGF cards to the Chairman, the women members are required to engage themselves with the male members, but due to their easy access to the poor women, the right selection of the applicants, their modest approach and their integrity, community people find these women leaders to be very beneficial and helpful to them, which has helped them to improve the service delivery of the UP

to a great extent. Evidence also shows that there is no denying the fact that by ensuring selection of a fair list of eligible beneficiaries for safety net programs, local governments can contribute to increasing the access of excluded groups (Sikder et al., 2011). Rahman (2005) found that engaging local communities proved better implementation of the development schemes at the grassroots level due to ensured transparency and accountability as well as improved service delivery by the UPs. These findings have also been corroborated by Nazneen and Tasneem (2010), where they found that both the communities and women councilors value the role they play in implementing safety net related programs and development projects, even though the female councilors' responsibilities are not fully demarcated from those of the male councilors.

Being blessed with some intrinsic human values, the women leaders have accelerated the provision of various community services, which are directly affecting the wellbeing of the poor rural women in today's Bangladesh. With their interactive leadership, which combines modest behavior, integrity, sincerity, fellow-feelings, easy access and friendly attitude, the women leaders have gained good acceptance in the community. Khan (2009: 16) found that greater interaction of the women members with the community members has helped change the perceptions of the male co-colleagues regarding women's public roles and responsibilities. Finding the community people to be appreciative of the women members' efforts and importance of the women in their families is also being enhanced. Amin & Akhter (2005: 7) found that 96.25% of the rural dwellers reported that the women members fully interacted with all sections of people irrespective of religion, creed, or caste; 2.75% reported having partial interaction; and 1.25% reported having no interaction without regard to religion, creed, or caste. During an interview with a male member the researcher was informed of the following: *"There might have little conflicts between male and female members in the UP but anyway we have accepted them"* (Male Member, Mirjapur UP, 8 November 2013).

The underlying assumption behind the above utterance represents the idea that due to their community feelings and better service for the villagers, their popularity and acceptance reached such a level that the male members were trying to accept the women members, who were hitherto denied by the male members.

Example of Community Service by the Women Leaders

The following case will reveal the real fact concerning how women leaders are providing community services for rural women. During the researcher's field visit, a woman member from Amratali UP, Comilla shared her experience about how she provided community service to one woman victim, which is narrated below.

Nazma Akhter, a woman member, Amratali UP, Comilla 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 demolished all of the valuables in the house. After that he went away to Dhaka and the victim woman came to a UP woman member 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 she (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, Nasima provided this community service for one of the constituents in her jurisdictional [Retold by Nasima Akhter, Woman Member from Amratali UP, Comilla, 25 September 2013].

Women have better community feelings and from this standpoint the women leaders in the UP are now serving the community in many different ways. Examples of such community service provided by the women leaders all over the world are numerous. Siddiquee (2008) found that 77% of the women members assist the women of their area in obtaining access to micro credit from various sources. According to a research conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2000, 89% of the 200 women from sixty-five countries believed that women had a special responsibility to

represent the needs and interests of women (Waring, Greenwood and Pintat, 2000: 133; Sawyer, 2002: 8). In the study of Buckley (1997: 173) it was found that women in the Russian Duma claimed that “they acted differently from their male colleagues. They emphasized that their commitment to hard work, describing themselves less aggressive, less envious, more progressive, more productive, more pain-staking, scrupulous, conscientious, more hard working, more pragmatic and opposed to war.” In Uganda, following the implementation of a 30% reservation policy in local councils, it was found that women began participating more in community services (Johnson, Kabuchu, and Kayonga, 2003). The same finding was also corroborated by Drage (2001), who found that women have a greater sense of social issues, well-being, and welfare for their communities. It was also found that women members have contributed enormously to areas such as housing, safety, clean water, sanitation, environment, and education, social implications of policies, health services, childcare, poverty alleviation, and community development. Explaining the policy choice of US state representatives, researchers found that compared to men, women are more likely to prioritize bills related to children, family, and women (Thomas 1991; Thomas and Susan, 1991) and healthcare and social services (Little, Dunn, and Deen, 2001). In the case of Sweden, it was found that female members of parliament are more likely than men to give high priority to issues such as family policy, elderly care, and healthcare (Wangnerud, 2000; Skjeie, 1991, 2002; Solheim, 2000).

Women Are Maintaining Better Quality Development Projects in the UP

During the data collection at the Union and village level, it was learnt that women are engaging in a lot of development projects, which prompted the researcher to visit some of the projects implemented by the women and male members as well. In the wake of data collection, delving into the case in point it was learnt from the villagers that in some cases, the women members are doing an excellent job. Following that a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) was done, taking villagers from different professional and occupations groups in order to obtain deeper insights concerning the quality of the work of men and women members. After discussing this with various participants in the UPs, the findings were found to be very interesting. A detailed summary of those textual descriptions is portrayed below, which will be analyzed regarding the meaning and essence in the concluding section.

Undertaking development projects for community people is one of the *sinequanon* responsibilities of the UP leaders. Siddiquee (2008) found that more than 60% of the women UP members reported participating in UP development activities such as infrastructure, health, education, peace and discipline, etc. but most of the respondents were found to be involved in infrastructure development. Amin & Akhter (2005: 6) also found that 65% of the women members stated that they have fully taken part in developing roads, khas land, and hut bazaar; 25% reported that they had received partial chance to do so, and the rest 10% said that they did not have a chance at all to be involved in the same. Compared with their male counterparts, the women were implementing development undertakings with sincerity, honesty and commitment, which is reflected in the following quotations from the women leaders and the villagers as well. While the researcher asked the general people of Chandpur UP, Boalmari, Faridpur district about the quality of the project performance of the male and female members, the villagers opined that “the quality of the women’s work was much better than that of the male members.” The same finding was derived from Fatima Akhter Parul, a Woman Member, Khadimpara UP, while the researcher was speaking with her, and at one point, addressing the differences between the quality of work of men and women leaders, she stated the following:

“I think that the quality of our work is better than male member because I implement my projects in my presence in the work sites and I never expect any profit from it and I think it is a great challenge for us to ensure the quality because if I could implement the projects better people would praise me and I would be respected more by the villagers. After implementations of the projects in the UP, I get some profits and even sometimes I get nothing. To me work is the main issue. In reality if the work is relating to cement, sand and bricks, it is hard to make profit because the estimates are calculated much below the market rate” (Woman Member, Khadimpara UP, 28 September, 2013).

This is how the women members have valued their work performance, and they are working in an entirely male dominated environment, but the main issue here is that they have taken their work as a challenge for their acceptance in the

society. They never think of making a profit out of it; rather, their main concern is maintaining the quality of the work and fulfilling the community's development demands. Through this utterance it appeared to the researcher that they are firmly committed to their work rather than motivated by other mundane interests and compulsions. Other ramifications reflected in her quotation are no less formidable, such as the suggestion that the "guesstimates" prepared by the Upazila engineering office for development projects did not reflect the market rates properly.

During the researcher's discussion with the woman Chairperson of the Manikdaha UP, Vanga Upazila, Faridpur district, at some point in the conversation one of the villagers, who was attending the discussion, reiterated that *"relatively women were sincere and their work quality were better than the man's work."* During the discourse with the Chairpersons at the Manidaha UP, she has also agreed with that, saying that *"when I assign any work to the female members I need not think about the quality but when I assigned any project to the male member, I must look into those projects"* (Chairperson, Manikdaha UP, 31 October 2013).

The underlying fact behind this is that women are more sincere than the male members. Due to their inherent positive and philanthropic mental make-up, the Chairperson, being another woman, found her to be quite sincere and committed to her assigned work. Such a perspective on women was also gauged by a male member of the Amratali UP, who firmly confirmed this idea, stating the following: *"women are relatively more honest than the male members and there are less tendency and thinking for corrupt practices among the women members"* (Male Member, Amratali UP, 25 September 2013).

Again in congruence with the view of the above male member, another male member of the same UP also supported the view of that previous male member and opined the following:

"Male members have a tremendous propensity for corrupt practices whereas women members never have tendency of such thinking. Men are very prone to think about number two things¹² first, they never

¹² In the context of Bangladesh if anyone tell other that he or she is number 2, it denotes that man or woman is not good rather he or she is dishonest, bad or not pure or clean.

think positively” (Male Member, Amratali UP, 25 September 2013).

Supporting a positive view, another male member added the following: “Women members take the work more seriously and they take the work for themselves” (Male Member, Amratali UP, 25 September 2013).

The above utterance was very significant. Female members have epitomized themselves as sincere and honest in their endeavour. They can be efficient and trustworthy as well. The community people have also faith and accepted these new faces. In a research conducted by Amin & Akhter (2005: 7), it was asserted that among the interviewed rural dwellers, 88.75% stated that women members’ activities were fully acceptable to the villagers; 2.75% said that their activities were partially acceptable to them; and 8.75% said that their activities were not acceptable to them. Based on the above quotations it can be easily concluded that women members were widely acceptable by the rural dwellers through their informal interaction with the masses, their role in community decision making, resolving local conflicts and creating equal opportunities, which helps bring harmony and peace in the rural community (Amin & Akhter, 2005: 9).

Women Leaders are Following Participatory Management Style

During the researcher’s field visits and interaction with the women leaders, practical insights were obtained concerning how the women leaders were managing their affairs in the UP, which uncovered the fact that these women leaders are following a participative style of governance in their day-to-day affairs. Following such participatory management, some of the women members were performing relatively better in the sphere of project implementation amidst a very complex social milieu. After the women members were interviewed, it was realized that they were doing well amidst the tremendous hegemony imposed by a patriarchal sociopolitical structure. From the pragmatic experience of the lived experiences of the woman members, the following textual descriptions were prepared. The women leaders’ participative management style was made more intelligible from the following quotation of a woman member of the South Durgapur UP, Comilla Sadar, Comilla district, who stated the following:

“I have already implemented 9 projects in the UP. In case of those projects which need to be approved from Upazila, those project proposals were prepared by UP secretary but those projects which could be done by UP, in those cases we prepared the project document in consultation with male member, secretary and engineering assistant. The projects those were supposed to prepare by the UP were undertaken through convening meeting in the respective ward by informing all stakeholders through micing and then in the meeting we set priority according to the public demand and after that we finalize the project decision” (Woman Member, South Durgapur UP, 26 August 2013).

The underlying significance in the above quotation implies that women members are pragmatic enough to follow a participatory management style in their approach to adopting a mechanism of inclusion of all stakeholders so that they can overcome many problems of arbitrary management. Evidence suggests that the women tend to be more democratic and participatory in their leadership style than the men, for example, allowing subordinates to participate in decision making (Eagly and Johnson, 1990). Men in contrast, tend to be more autocratic and directive. Studies of female legislators suggest that “women tend to be more collaborative in their leadership styles than men are, answering more positively when asked whether they try hard to find a fair combination of gains and losses for all sides, pull people together, and share power with others” (Rosenthal, 1998: 855). From interviewed state legislators from California, Georgia, Mississippi, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and Washington, Thomas (1991) also found that female legislators saw women as advocating different style of politics—one that is more consensus and compromise oriented.

Women leaders are quite accommodative in their approach, which can be found in the words of a woman member from the South Durgapur UP, Comilla Sadar Upazila, Comilla district, who informed the researcher of the following:

“My brother (one male member) implements project in one side and I implement project in another side of the ward. If the project is bigger, then we implement project together and whenever the project

is small (done from 1% land transfer tax) we implement project separately” (Woman Member, South Durgapur UP, 26 August 2013).

The verbatim quotation above shows that women members are maintaining a harmonious relationship and cooperative management between the male and female members. This also demonstrates the competency of the women members, as they are implementing development projects independently. This was possible due to their having obtained relevant knowledge and skills from various training programs given by a host of government and non-government organizations, and thus the women representatives have shown their potential to become change agents for rural women, which also has enabled them to manage various development-related issues, and their roles and functions, effectively (ADB, 2001).

Amin & Akhter (2005: 8) found that 78.75% of the respondents confirmed that the women members provided various opportunities to the rural masses without discrimination. Gani and Sattar (2004) found that women members were relatively young and modestly educated, but they felt that they had good leadership qualities. Democracy Watch (n.d.) found that about 75% of the women member’s endorsed themselves as acting the Chairperson of project implementation committees and they were found acting as Chairpersons of some of the standing committees; namely, law and order committees, the family planning committee, the women and children committee, etc. The study found that about 73.4% of the women members did not face any obstruction in working at the UP, and the rest 26.6% faced difficulties from their male colleagues. It is deemed that playing all of those leadership roles successfully required different management styles on the women leaders. There is evidence that “women are more likely to exhibit cooperative, compassionate, and humane types of behaviors than men” (Schein, 1989: 154 quoted in Genovese, 1993). Women generally prefer to follow a soft approach, being very polite and convincing in their utterances so that they can manage the state of the affairs efficiently and effectively, which has been reflected well in the convincing style in the quotation of a woman Chairperson of Palashbari UP, Gaibandha, who opined the following:

“When people go to get services to the male members, they cannot give them services always and when they did not get any benefit from

them, they came to women members and we explain the real situation patiently to them and they become happy with us” (Chairperson, Betkapa UP, 7 November 2013).

This was evident from a study conducted by Chatukulam and John (2000: 66-101) in Kerala, India which upheld the fact that despite facing numerous problems, women’s performance on the basis of qualitative and quantitative indicators was in no way inferior to than that of male members. A sizeable segment of the society has come to accept the fact that women are perhaps more suitable than their male counterparts. Experiences from other states of India revealed that the women elected to these bodies (Panchayats) have shown startling results in their performance, particularly in the sectors of health, education, access to basic services, and in ensuring a significant change in the living conditions of their respective communities. Even in a strong patriarchal culture these reserved women have been encouraged to demonstrate their leadership (Kot, 2007).

Scholars opine that by nature women are inherently sober and polite in their demeanour and approach. They value their voters properly, and listen to their problems and grievances attentively, which was confirmed by one male member from Amratali UP, Comilla, who stated the following:

“General people were benefited a lot by the presence of the women members because women generally went to women members as they could share their problems with women members politely. Women also listened to them very minutely and followed them whatever the women members said and also women members could convince the women very well and they could disseminate any message nicely” (Mmale Member, Amratali UP, 25 September 2013).

Women’s participatory approach has other positive ramifications in the society as well. Recent studies have shown that the political participation of women has positive effects on the country’s prospect for development: for example, countries with more women in parliament typically have lower levels of corruption even after national income is controlled for and other factors are shown to affect corruption (World Bank, 2001). Moreover, it is empirically evident that where the influence of

women in public life is greater, the level of corruption is lower, and some scholars have also observed that women may have higher standards of ethical behavior and may be more concerned with the common good (Dollar et al., 1999; Reiss and Mitra, 1998; and Glover, Minnette, Bumpus and Ciesla, 1997).

Brief Summary

WLs' contribution in the broader ambit of local governance in the UP has been summarized below:

- **Promote Transparency and Accountability:** By sharing all relevant information with the community people, women have ensured transparency and accountability in rural society. When they initiate a project, they discuss with the village elderly and respectable rural elites and they seek advices and consultancy from the experts. And they also maintain good linkages with the rural elites and those who matter for the society. Apart from that when the beneficiaries of the old age pension scheme, widow allowance, maternal allowances and other service receivers went to Bank for getting their alliance, women member need to remain present there in those days in the nationalized scheduled bank because they need to attest and certify necessary documents. Thus these women are helping transparency and accountability in UP activities.

- **Establishing Social Justice:** In the previous day when women were victim by violence from her husband or any other person, there was no chance to observe the victim as there were no woman members that time. Now when a woman became victim of physical assault by her husband, woman member can see and accordingly the charge can be framed by the *salish* council with evidential proof presented by the women leaders. This has brought about a positive change in the rural *salish* conducted by UP. When poor women came to seek remedy regarding any family feud or violence against women, these women member help them get legal support from relevant sources, which were non-existent while women members were not in the UP. Women members thus help rural women get their social justice and better life.

• **Reducing Corrupt Practices in the UP:** Previously male members and Chairman undertook some project but they sometimes did not implement those projects properly and they adopted unfair means and practice defalcation in such a manner that Chairman and male members can eat out certain portion in connivance with few male members by doing some paper work but due to women members it has become every difficult to do so now because they have wider network and linkage with UNO¹³, MP¹⁴ and others. Thus by maintaining constant linkage with the socio-political elites such practices has become impossible. It was evident that in distribution of all these safety net services, women choose the applicant based on the grounded reality rather than taking money from them. They are not only choosing the desired candidates but they have increased the number of service providing applicants bargaining with the male members. Whereas previously some male members provided services based on cash nexus.

• **Improved Pro-poor Community Services:** From the textual narratives of the WLs it was evident that they are providing better services in many ways. At present Bangladesh government are providing various safety net programs for diverse sections of poor people to address the problem of poverty, income inequality, mal-nutrition, maternal mortality and famine. Many of those safety net programs are implemented by the UP. Among which distribution VGD card, VGF card, old age pension, 40 days work, disable people allowances, widow allowance card, test relief and allowance for pregnant mothers etc. In distributing the assigned safety net program to the UP, women members are playing formidable roles in selection of applicants based on real judgments. Instead of taking bribe like male members WLs are choosing the right people and they were able to enhance the coverage also having bargaining with their male counterparts. In the rural society villagers maintain very friendly relationship with the women members and WLs always help villagers get their son's or daughter's birth registration certificates easily and they also help get death registration and succession certificates. Whereas in some cases male members provide services on cash nexus but women members never claim

¹³ UNO stands for Upalizi Nirbahi Officer meaning executive head of the Upazila, a sub-national administrative unit of Bangladesh.

¹⁴ MP stands for member of parliament.

anything rather they are providing quick services to the community people without any harassment and monetary involvement.

- **Improving Quality of the Development Projects:** Based on the grassroots voices and ground reality it has been strongly evident that women leaders are now changing rural governance in Bangladesh. They are bringing changes in the quality of governance through improving the quality of the development projects undertaken by the women leaders.

- **WLs Adopting Participatory Governance in the UP:** WLs are trying to improve governance by following a participative and cooperative leadership at the grassroots level, demonstrating their inbuilt sincerity and honesty by performing their jurisdictional role properly and finally by being more preferable and acceptable to the community people. In performing all their responsibilities the WLs have ensured quality governance at the grassroots level by following their sincerity; integrity; patience; positive attitude; polite behavior with convincing capacity; cooperative, participatory and consultative leadership style; strong and firm commitment towards welfare and wellbeing of the society etc. The topmost significance credited to women leaders' performance was that these women leaders were aptly able to bring such qualitative changes in local governance amidst accomplishing their regular household and reproductive role and challenges posed by the primordial patriarchal social structure.

Conclusion

To answer the research question that how women leaders promote governance in the rural society the straight-forward answer would be that women leaders having ensured their limited rights in the UP, some women leaders were successful in promoting better governance through ensuring transparency, accountability and enhanced community participation and expanding the scope of pro-poor services and benefits at the community level. Furthermore involving themselves in transformative politics, WLs are contributing positive performance by maintaining better quality of development projects in the UP and following different style of participatory management, sincerity and integrity in their jurisdictional affairs in the UP.

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