

Women Empowerment in Rural Local Government of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT: Bangladesh is one of most densely populated country where women are identified with domestic life while politics is viewed as a male dominated public activity. This study seeks to critically appraise the extent of women's empowerment in local level in Bangladesh. It also investigates the reasons for women's low rate of holding elected office. The study is based on secondary data. It found a number of determinant factors for lower status of rural women. Self-respect, unity, co-operation, collective strength will increase the group function that finally leads them to empower themselves. The constitution has given the opportunity for women to participate at local level to national level of government with reserve seat but the fact is quite different. The elected female candidates at local level are not more than ten percent and the major political parties are not willing to incorporate women, it is about fifteen percent at highest level of the parties. However the constitutional provisions of Bangladesh can be seen as milestone towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in political power structure but still there is a structural problem of women's incorporations at union parishad level. Women are marginalized in functions and service delivery at union level due to a number of factors.

KEYWORDS: Women, Empowerment, Local Government, Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

The overall development of a country depends upon the maximum utilization of her people, both men and women. In Bangladesh women comprise nearly half of the total population. But the status of women is much lower than that of men in every sphere of life. Women are identified with domestic life while politics is viewed as a male dominated public activity that is typically masculine in nature. With the advancement of time, the fact has now been recognized that without ensuring women development, the national development cannot be achieved. Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. It is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved (Khan and Ara, 2006:73-74 and FWCW, 1995:1).

This study seeks to critically appraise the extent of women's empowerment in local level in Bangladesh. It also investigates the reasons for women's low rate of holding elected office. In short, the study attempts to address the following questions. Why are so few women elected to public office in Bangladesh? Why are women not welcomed enthusiastically in political and electoral processes? What are the impediments to women's participation in politics? What strategies has the government adopted for increasing women's representation in local politics? What have major parties done to increase the proportion of women's participation in politics? What advancement has been made toward women's participation in public life?

A study on the political empowerment of Bangladeshi women from a historical and analytical perspective has been carried out mainly for two reasons. First, one of the most important resources of Bangladesh is its people, and women

comprise about half of the population and a substantial part of workforce. Second, the study is expected to contribute to an understanding of the present condition of Bangladeshi women's participation in local politics and in national policymaking process.

METHODOLOGY

This study is mainly based on the review of information collected from secondary sources i.e. published books, reports, journal, newspapers. A number of information is also collected from internet browsing.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPTS:

WOMEN

A woman is an adult female human being, as contrasted to men, an adult male, and a girl, a female child. The term woman (irregular plural: women) is used to indicate biological sex distinctions, cultural gender role distinctions, or both (Wikimedia, 2005:1).

Women constitute about half of the total population of the country. Apart from the household activities, they are contributing substantially to the national economy. Bangladesh is one of the first developing countries to establish a Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1978, three years after the First World Conference on Women in Mexico. The government has already prepared a National Policy for Advancement of Women and made some noteworthy progress in implementing the National Action Plan, prepared in response to the Beijing Platform for Action.

In spite of these achievements, the majority of women in Bangladesh have yet to be empowered to participate actively in the social, cultural, economic and political life of the country.

PARTICIPATION

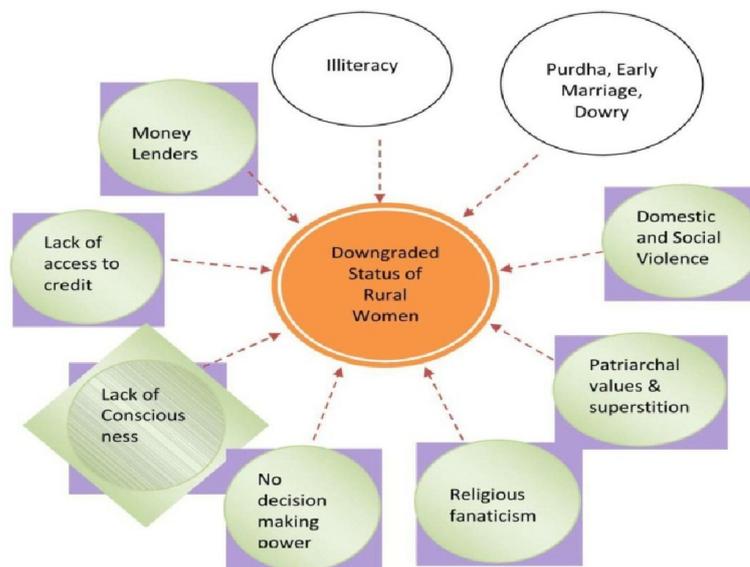
Participation is a development approach, which recognizes the need to involve disadvantaged segments of the population in the design and implementation of policies concerning their wellbeing. The strengthening of women's participation in all spheres of life has become a major issue in the development discourse.

Socio-economic development cannot be fully achieved without the active participation of women at the decision making level in society. Various scholars define 'Participation' in various ways.

According to Mishra (1984:88), "participation means collective and continuous efforts by the people themselves in setting goals, pooling resources together and taking actions which aim at improving their living conditions."

According to Human Development Report, "participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political process that affects their lives (1993:1)."

Exhibit: Factors Responsible for Downgraded Status of Women in Rural Bangladesh (Naz:2006)



EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment of women is now a global issue. Although this term is usually used for improving women's condition, in real sense it may be applied to any disadvantaged group of society for bringing them to the same level of advanced section.

Empowerment is a process, though the result of the process may also be termed empowerment. But more specifically, the outcome of empowerment should manifest itself as a redistribution of power between individuals, genders, groups, classes, castes, races, ethnic groups or nations. Empowerment means the transformation of structures of subordination, through radical changes in law, property rights, control over women's labor and bodies, and the institutions that reinforce and perpetuate male domination (Batliwala, 1993:5).

WOMEN CHANGE FROM FEELING WEAK TO FEELING STRONG:

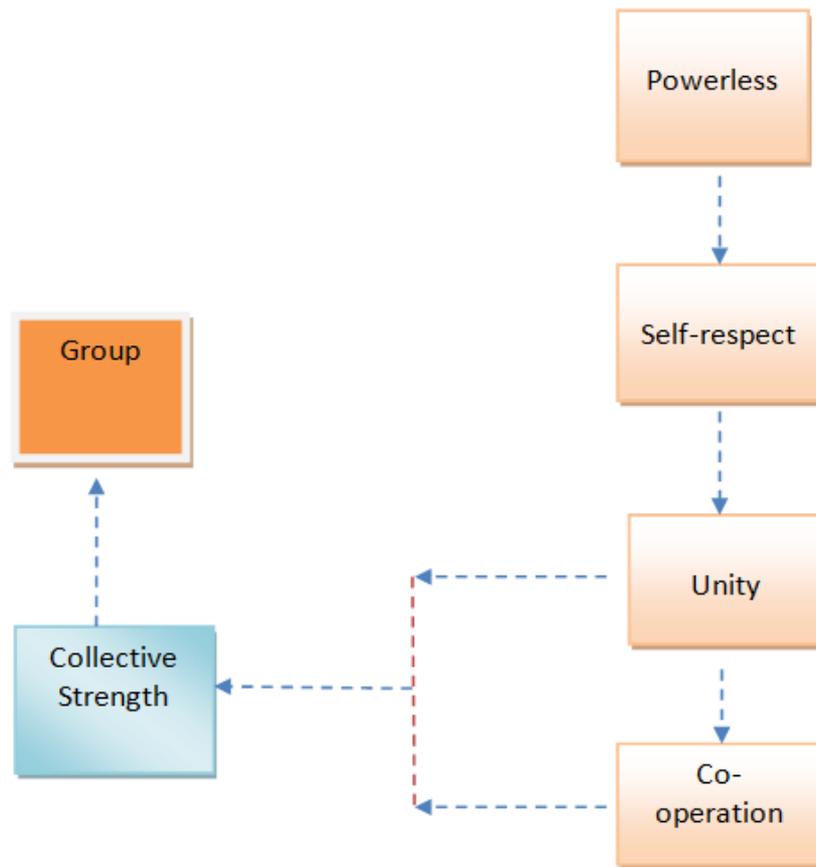
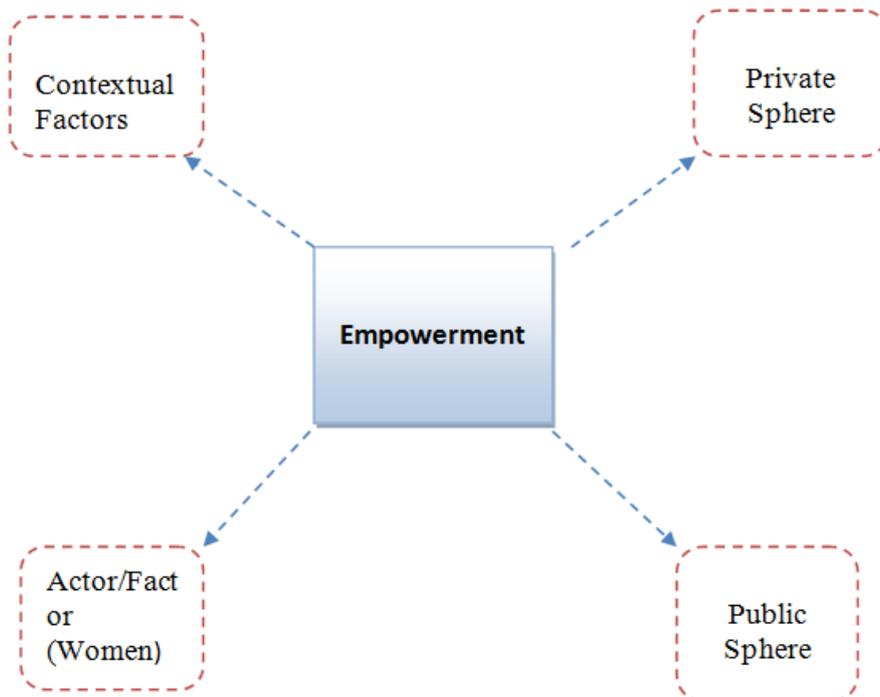


EXHIBIT: EMPOWERMENT



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT:

In recent times, "Gender Equality" and "Women's Empowerment" have been two of the most pervasive themes in development. Unless women are involved in the decision and policymaking process at all levels of the state, changes in women's political and to some extent social and economic status will continue to be marginal.

According to Caroline Moser "The capacity of women to increase their own self-reliance and internal strength. This identified as the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change, through the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material and non-material resources."

Sen and Grown , " Women's empowerment is the transformation of structures of subordination , including changes in law , civil codes, property , inheritance rights, control over women's bodies and labor and the social legal institutions that endorse males control."

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government is basically an organized social entity with a feeling of oneness. By definition, local government means an intra-sovereign governmental unit within the sovereign state dealing mainly with local affairs, administered by local authorities and subordinate to the state government (Jahan, 1997:92).

In political terms, it is concerned with the governance of a specific local area, constituting a political sub-division of a nation, state or other major political unit. In the performance of its functions, it acts as the agent of the state. In other words, the local government is an integral part of the political mechanism for governance in a country. Then, as body corporate with juristic person, it represents a legal concept (Muttalib and Khan, 1983:2).

According to the article 59(1) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "Local Government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with law (GOB, 1993:43)."

EVOLUTION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH

It is usually assumed that local government was the basic form of government in the sub continent till 6th century B.C. Village self-government in the sub-continent is as old as the villages themselves (Siddiqui, 1994:24). Therefore, Local Government of one sort or another has a long history in the geographical area that now constitutes Bangladesh. This country was a colony of the British for about two hundreds years. Most of the local government bodies in Bangladesh owe their origin to the British rule, which ultimately passed through the Pakistan period to independent Bangladesh.

The introduction of local government in British Bengal goes back to the passing of the Bengal Village Chowkidari Act of 1870, which established Chowkidari Panchayet consisted of five persons all nominated by the District Magistrate. Subsequently the Local Self-government Act, 1885 and the Village Self-government Act, 1919 are some principal instruments that led to the development of the present local government in Bangladesh. In the Pakistan period the Act of 1959 introduced a new local government system called the Basic Democracy System in the East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). During the British and Pakistan period the local government at the union level not only had changed its name several times but also its functional jurisdiction and financial powers were widened (Ahmed and Nabi, 2001:3). The constitution of independent Bangladesh was adopted in late 1972, where in Article 59 provided for elected local government institutions at all levels (Ali, 1986:2). The P.O. of 1973 changed the name of Union Panchayet to Union Parishad without any significant changes in its character. Since then the Union Parishad is acting as the lowest administrative unit of rural local government in Bangladesh.

There are at present two types of local government institutions in Bangladesh: one for rural areas and the other for urban areas. The local government in rural areas comprises four tiers, i.e., Gram Sarkar, Union Parishad, Upazilla Parishad and Zilla Parishad. On the other hand local government in the urban areas consists of Pourashavas and City Corporations.

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISION:

The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh recognizes basic and fundamental rights of the citizens irrespective of gender, creed, cast, religion and race. It also makes provision for promoting causes of the backward sections of the population (Ahmed et al, 2003:14).

RELATED ARTICLES OF THE CONSTITUTION REGARDING WOMEN'S:

- Article 9 The State shall encourage local government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation shall be given, as far as possible, to peasants, workers and women.
- Article 10 Steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life.
- Article 28 (1): The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.
- (2): Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life.

By incorporating the above articles, the constitution gives special attention to women in democracy and local government. The nation puts no legislative barrier in the way of promoting gender equity in the sphere of social, political, and economic activities. The constitution gives guarantee of equal rights to women and also makes special provision for providing all necessary protections to backward sections of the society.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL LEVEL POLITICS

Article 9 of the Bangladesh constitution proclaims that, 'The state shall encourage local government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation shall be given, as far as possible, to peasants, workers, and women. The lowest level of local government in Bangladesh is known as the Union Parishad. At the local level, women's representation is still insignificant, but is gradually growing. In the 1973 local government elections, for the first time, only one woman was elected as chairperson. In the 1977 and 1984 local government elections, four women won as chairpersons respectively. In the 2001 Union Parishad (UP) elections, as many as 102 women candidates contested for 4,443 UP chairmanship positions countrywide where only 20 women were elected. However, in the 2003 Union Parishad elections, the number of women candidates who contested for the position of UP chairmanships increased to 232 from 102 in 1997. But this does not mean that the major parties and the media are encouraging women leaders who enter into politics at the local level. At present, there is not a single woman city mayor in Bangladesh. No women received a nomination from the major parties to contest for the mayoral position to the six-city corporation's elections. For the first time in 1994, as many as 19 women ward commissioners were elected to the reserved seats of the Dhaka City Corporations. Table-3 provides the data of the elected female chairpersons to the Union Parishad of Bangladesh during 1973-2003.

Table 3: Elected Women Chairpersons to the Union Parishad of Bangladesh (1973-2003)

| Year | Total Union Parishad | Female Candidates | Elected Female Candidates |
|------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| 1973 | 4,352 | Not available | 1 |
| 1977 | 4,352 | Not available | 4 |
| 1984 | 4,440 | Not available | 4 |
| 1988 | 4,440 | 79 | 1 |
| 1992 | 4,443 | 115 | 15 |
| 2001 | 4, 443 | 102 | 20 |
| 2003 | 4,443 | 232 | 22 |

Source: Election Commission of Bangladesh, *Women in Bangladesh, Bangladesh National Report, 1995.p. 9*

In 1997, the Bangladesh government took a positive step to ensure women's participation in elected bodies at the local level. The government enacted a law introducing of a direct election of women for three reserved ward member seats to each Union Parishad – the lower rural administrative tier of the local government. This step was taken in conformity with Article nine of the Bangladesh constitution. Apart from the exclusive reserved seats, women can also contest for any of the general seats. Welcomed by concerned women's organizations and groups, the quota system provided women the effective right to be elected in local level politics. For example, 43,969 female candidates contested in the 1997 Union Parishad direct elections for 12,723 ward member seats reserved for females. Women members consider their participation in local level politics as less disruptive to family life. They are found to be regularly attending the meetings of the Union Parishad. In an overwhelmingly male dominated political environment, the quota system has enhanced the opportunity for women's

participation in politics at the local level. Hossain, head of the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), found that reserved seats for women have boosted women’s confidence in their capability. But he points out that lack of opportunity to play an effective role from those seats has infused them with frustration.

Although women members attend the Union Parishad meetings regularly, very few can influence the discussions and ultimate resolutions. In the male dominated Union Parishad, female ward members hold subordinate position and cannot express their views as forcefully as their male counterpart. The male colleagues have a propensity to ignore their development proposals on diverse socio-economic issues. In addition, Salma Ali alleges that many women elected through quotas were subjected to sexual harassment by their male counterparts and were looked down upon as ‘second category’ members. It is noteworthy however, that the percentage of women willing to contest at the local level has been increasing in recent years, which indicates that women are eager to participate in both national and local level politics.

ROLE OF PARTIES AND WOMEN’S ADVANCEMENT IN POLITICS

Political parties everywhere control and choose who will represent the party in elections. Thus, they play an important role in shaping women’s representation in politics. Strong party affiliation is one of the basic requirements to become selected as a candidate and eventually a position in national or local level politics. Before a woman could be assured of party support, she must be an active member and foster a relatively long relationship with a particular party. Studies on women and politics have often suggested that female quotas and affirmative action are instruments of women’s successful entry into public office. Traditionally, the major political parties in Bangladesh have not encouraged or supported prospective women candidates who wish to enter into public office. However, major political parties such as the BNP and the AL have always been very keen on mobilizing women workers and supporters to launch political campaigns, anti-government protests, and rallies in the streets to ultimately seize political power.

Despite the creation of women’s branches or committees by the parties in recent years, women still primarily hold weak and non-influential decision-making positions in the central executive committee of the different political parties in Bangladesh. A lot of prejudice though unconscious, still exists among male leaders of most political parties against women candidates in Bangladesh, as is the case in other Asian countries. The critical barriers against women’s successful entry into politics are: (a) huge campaign costs, (b) Not receiving nomination in expected winnable seats to the parliament, (c) lack of strong party backing and financial assistance, and (d) lack of powerful support base in the constituency she wanted to represent. Male politicians always occupy the top positions of the party. Table 4 below provides women’s position in the structures of major political parties of Bangladesh in 2002.

Table 4: Female Members in the Party Hierarchy of Major Parties in Bangladesh.

| Party | Structures of party | Total No. of Members | Female Members |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|----------------|
| Bangladesh Nationalist Party | National Standing Committee | 18 | 2 |
| | National Executive Committee | 380 | 45 |
| Awami League | Presidium and Secretariat | 42 | 6 |
| | Working Committee | 66 | 2 |
| Jatiyo Party | Presidium Member | 41 | 4 |
| | Central Executive Committee | 91 | 9 |
| Jamat-e-Islam | Majlis-e-Shura | 141 | 0 |
| | Majlish-e-Amela | 24 | 0 |

Source: Data obtained from the offices of the respective political parties of Bangladesh.

Table 4 clearly shows a very negligible participation of women politicians in the party hierarchy. The major parties have not really been enthusiastic about increasing women’s representation in the party leadership. For example, among the eleven members of the Parliamentary Board of the Bangladesh AL, there are only two women members in the Board including the party chief Sheikh Hasina. Similarly, out of 15 members of the BNP National Standing Committee (NSC), there is currently only one female member, the party chief Khaleda Zia. Acknowledging the issue of women’s low participation in politics, the AL in its 2001 election manifesto declared that the number of reserved seats for women in parliament would be increased to 60 and that direct elections for reserved seats for women would be introduced. On the other hand, the election manifesto of the BNP also promised to increase the number of reserved seats for women and provide direct elections. As of now, the pledges of the major parties still remain unfulfilled resulting in less representation of women in the national parliament.

Of importance is how the Bangladesh Constitution initially guaranteed at one time 15 reserved seats for women in the national parliament for a period of ten years, which expired in 1987. In order to redress the overall development of women's status, the reserved seats for women in parliament were increased to 30 by a 5th amendment to the constitution that was introduced in June 1990 and extended a period of ten years and then in 14th amendment it expires 45. The Parliament has not yet reached an agreement whether these reserve seats should expire in 2010. The reasons could be attributed to a lack of consensus, conflict, and imbroglio between the major political parties – the BNP and the AL. Hence, the major political parties are still reluctant to advance the cause of gender equality and women's participation in politics.

OBSTACLES TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH

The elected women member's participation in local government bodies remains generally insignificant, as they are not given any specific duties. The absence of operational guidelines and terms of reference for female elected representatives, the limited capacity of the female elected

representatives to operate in public institutions of this nature, the lack of awareness over their roles and responsibilities, the systematic discrimination and biases by male elected colleagues all these are seen as factors impeding women's meaningful participation in local government (ADB, 2001:14).

Some of the major problems to women's participation in local government include the following:

1. Albeit the constitution guaranteed the equal rights for women, the reality is that they are not seen as equal, their roles are closely tied to their reproductive and household activities only. At the same time women are considered as unfit to perform political and community affairs. This is due to lack of clarity in the constitution on the role of women in local government. A common complaint regarding women's reserved seats is that the law does not specify what their roles and responsibilities are to be.
2. Patriarchy as a system, an ideology and practice impacts in different ways on the lives of women wherever they are. Patriarchal attitudes become so embedded that they are taken as natural. Even where there is supposed equality, these attitudes tend to prevail. Socio- cultural norms and religious misinterpretations are used frequently for challenging and reinterpreting women's rights and create insecurity for women. And although women have equal political rights to participate as voters and representatives, in reality they can be actively discouraged to do so. The patriarchal society enforces rules and laws in such way that affect the self-confidence of women, limit their access on resources and information and thus keep them in a lower status than men.
3. Education is the strongest factor influencing women's control of their own fate. In Bangladesh women are furthermore handicapped because of lower educational achievements and the prevalence of social norms that severely restrict their freedom of movement in the public place. And so they do not show interest in participating in local government activities.
4. The male-biased environment within political institutions can deter women. The fact that there are few women on decision-making bodies means that these women have to work within styles and modes acceptable to men. As a result women cannot give attention to their issues.

Sometime they are treated by their colleagues and society harshly. Many-if not all-male elected members harbor negative attitude towards elected women members. They believe women should not run for general seats. They denigrate the value of the reserved seats. Lack of cooperation by men in the local government is a significant barrier to women's effectiveness in decision-making.

5. The introduction of direct election to the reserved seats is undoubtedly a breakthrough for women in Bangladesh. In no other way could these women have moved in to these institutions and participated in them. Still there is a gender imbalance in the ration of men and women in the local government bodies. As a result the elected women members have very limited scope to influence decisions. .

RECOMMENDATIONS

In Bangladesh, women have low political status as compared to men. The participation of women results from their low socioeconomic status stemming from social norms of a male dominated society confining women to the household. Their unequal status in society gives them unequal access to the educational, economic and other opportunities offered by the state and society. All these factors reinforce each other to keep women's political participation low. But women's adequate political participation is a precondition for bringing women in the mainstream of development process and thus empowers them. No doubt, as a step of women empowerment, the elected reserve seats for women helps to promote participation and

women access to the decision-making process numerically, though not practically much ensured. Due to socio-political and religious bindings, elected women cannot play their role and thus people's aspiration and expectation to them were not met up. And without women's access and meaningful participation in decision-making process that is the ability to influence decisions in favor of the women community. To ensure a meaningful participation of the elected women members as an essential step to empower them, the following policy prescriptions may be taken into consideration:

1. Roles and responsibilities of the women members should be clearly defined in the manuals and orders of local government. Work should be fairly distributed among the male and female members in such a way so that women member can meaningfully participate in all type of functions.
2. To create greater awareness among women about their low status in society and the need to improve it, motivational programs along with programs for expanding opportunities for education, health care and employment should be launched.
3. Specific programs should be undertaken by the government and non-government organizations in order to create an awareness among the women in the grass roots levels that political participation would give them an access to the political decision making process relating to the allocation of resources.
4. Mass media should be used to educate and mobilize public opinion in such a way that the realization about the benefits of women's full participation in the national development efforts is created among people.
5. Priority must be given to monitoring the status, conditions and rights of women. There must be a sustained campaign for women mobilization, regular reporting of monitoring, public information and advocacy in this realm.
6. Women should be given various opportunities for leadership training, training regarding the activities of local level and education in order to encourage them to take up political and leadership position. Supportive services should be provided to allow women participate in these training courses. A former member of the parliament from the AL, Sajeda Chowdhury, observed that, 'Women must be encouraged to be more independent and self-reliant and that social norms and cultural values to be re-oriented'.
7. There is urgent need to undertake research on women's participation in politics, their voting behavior, consciousness and participation in the political parties.
8. Finally, in increasing the number of women in decision making positions does not in itself translate in to greater empowerment for women. Measures to increase the quantity of women representatives need to be accompanied by measures to improve the quality of participation.

Besides these some recommendations are as follows

- ✓ To globalize women issues
- ✓ To create employment opportunity
- ✓ Prepare and implementation of national policy
- ✓ Positive socialization
- ✓ To amend family laws
- ✓ Expansion of NGOs activities
- ✓ To increase the attention towards women in mass media

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, this study suggests that in order to give Bangladeshi women a place in the decision-making process, there is a need to increase the number of women holding political office at both the local and national level. However, any substantial increase in women's representation in public life depends on the mainstream changes within the major political parties; the strong support and campaigning by women's groups, NGOs, and the media; the removal of structural impediments, traditional mindsets, biases and attitudes based on gender roles, and access to financial resources. The religion-based parties are opposed to women in public office. It is likely that in the national parliament of Bangladesh as well as in the local level politics, women's representation will remain insignificant in the near future despite their enthusiasm to provide political leadership. Empowerment is a useful concept because it emphasizes the idea of women as active agents in, rather than passively recipients of development strategies. Therefore, participation is considered as an essentially first step in order to empower women.

Finally it can be said that provision of inclusion of directly elected women members have created a new avenue to participate in the decision-making process in the only democratic institution at the grass-roots level.

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