

Women Vice Chairman at the Upazila Parishad in Bangladesh: A Ceremonial Adaptation

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Abstract

Upazila Parishad is the second tier of the local government system based on the Local Government Ordinance 1982 to strengthen local government in Bangladesh. After several changes the act added one female vice chairman post to represent women in local bodies. However since its inclusion these elected members are facing several barriers while performing their duties. This paper based on both primary and secondary data tries to argue whether the role of women vice chairmen in the Upazila Parishad are ceremonial or real panacea. The paper revealed that their role in the UZP are rather ceremonial and could not perform their assigned duties due to social and cultural context.

Key Words: Woman Vice Chairman, Upazila Parishad, Local Government, Bangladesh.

Introduction

In Bangladesh, the local government system is being improved by making sure that local representatives can take part in politics and development at the local level. Since half of the people in Bangladesh are women, they need to have a voice in the local government. Women's involvement at the local level would give the local government more power and, in the end, make democracy more stable. Also, both the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in the focus on peace, justice, and equality between men and women. Stopping all kinds of discrimination against women is not only a basic human right, but also a key part of speeding up the process of sustainable development. Bangladesh's National Women Development Policy aims to make men and women equal in all areas and to end all kinds of discrimination against women. In the policy, it says that women's involvement improves the quality of local government. The constitution also says that men and women have the same rights. At the moment, more women are taking part in different areas of Bangladesh. At the local government level, women are getting a voice by being able to vote directly and by being nominated. Therefore, women members are now included in the local government by reserving seats to increase the participation of women's representatives. This system has been introduced to ensure women's participation in local government as a result of women's movements and struggles to establish women's

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representation at upazila level. In this regard, women have to overcome social, political, familial and religious barriers. The scope of representation has gradually increased for them as a consequence of state policy regarding women's empowerment. But it is found that much progress of women's empowerment has been made on paper but not so much in reality. Representatives of the reserved seats face various problems at the local level. The distribution and allocation related issues and their responsibilities are not yet clear. The women representatives of the Upazila Parishad are not getting opportunity to fulfil their term. In many cases, women are losing interest in representation at the upazila level when women's role is insignificant for their empowerment and for building their institutional capacity at the local level.

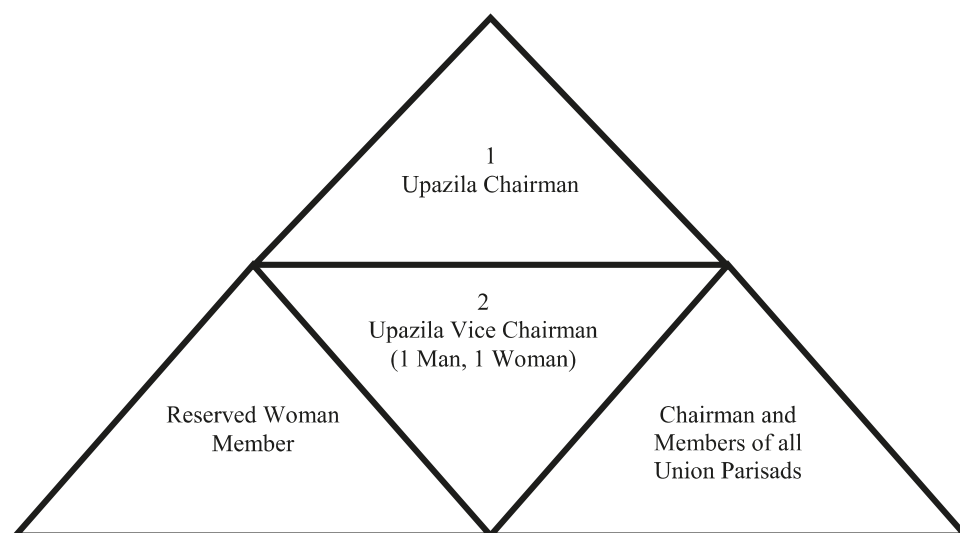
There are 495 Upazilas in 64 districts of Bangladesh. Upazila Parishad is responsible for all development activities, implementation, monitoring and evaluation at the upazila level. The development plan of the upazila is based on the union development plan. It is also the duty of the Upazila Parishad to provide encouragement in various programs of the union. Various policies and programs of the government are implemented through upazilas. Health, family planning and family welfare issues are seriously implemented and monitored by the Upazila Parishad at the upazila. Programs are introduced to protect the environment and control pollution at the upazila level. Besides, Upazila Parishad works for the development of agriculture, education, socio-cultural activities, fisheries and animal resources of the upazila (Siddiqui, 2014:167). It is important to find out the functions of Upazila Parishad and analyze the role of women vice chairman in these multi-faceted activities of Upazila Parishad. At the same time, it is necessary to find out what kind of obstacles are being faced by women vice chairman in performing their duties. Therefore, this study analyzes the role of women in various activities of the Upazila Parishad as elected representatives and at the same time their role in the development activities of the upazila during the last 10 years. It has been searched how much help the women vice chairman are getting from male colleagues while performing duties. Their barriers have also been explored in the sphere of performance. The findings will be helpful for the researchers, policy makers and public representatives.

Methods

This qualitative study has been conducted on the basis of in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and secondary documents such as articles, government documents, newspapers, etc. For in-depth interviews and key informant interviews, we gathered data from four upazillas, namely, Sujanagar upazila of Pabna district, Baghaichori upazila of Rangamati district, Meghna upazila of Comilla district, and Belabo upazila of Narsingdi district. We interviewed 4 upazila chairmen, 8 upazila vice chairmen, 4 upazila nirbahi officers, 10 union parishad chairmen and members, 4 local government experts, 4 female vice chairmen, and 30 people from the community who actively engage in upazilla parishad activities. KII generally lasted around 20 to 40 minutes, and in-depth interviews were 10 to 30 minutes, depending on the character of the interviewee's response.

An Overview of Upazila Parishad of Bangladesh

The Upazila Parishad has been formed with elected representatives who are elected by the local people and are in charge of the administrative functions of the Upazila Parishad. Upazila is an important tier of the local government system in Bangladesh. The Upazilla replaced the oldest institution, called Thana. It has been created as an institution for local administration under the decentralisation programme of the government. An upazila is made up of several unions. Upazila Parishads have been established to play an effective role in ensuring that local people's representatives participate in local level politics and development activities. The upazila system was introduced by dint of a local government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Reconstruction) ordinance on November 7, 1982, in Bangladesh. It provided the legal framework for a new local government institution at the Thana level (Ahmed, 1993:145). After the introduction of the upazila system, the first election was held in 1985 for the Upazila Parishad for the election of a chairman, and the second election was held in 1990. At that time, all the upazilas were transformed into complete administrative centres in Bangladesh. That ordinance was repealed in 1991 (Siddiqui, 2014:79). Later, the Upazila Ordinance 1998 was passed in the Jatiya Sangsad, and the upazila system was reformed. No Upazila Parishad election was held at that time. The Upazila Parishad Act-2009 provides for the election of one chairman and two vice chairmen (one of whom is a woman) through direct voting of the people. According to this law, for the first time, a woman vice chairman was elected at the upazila level by direct popular vote. Upazila elections were held in 2019 for the fifth time in Bangladesh.



Source: Authore

The first upazila election was held in 1985, and the next election was held in 1990. The elected BNP government abolished Upazila Parishad in 1991 after the removal of General Ershad from power in 1990. When the Awami League took power in 1998, it took the initiative to re-establish the Upazila Parishad by passing the Upazila Parishad Act of 1998. Upazila elections were held in 2010 according to the Local Government

(Upazila Parishad) Act of 2009 (GoB, 2009). The act was amended in 2011. The role of Upazila Parishad was rearranged in the Act of 2011. Initiatives were taken to make local government more representative and people-centered by giving the responsibility of formulating development plans (annual and five-year plans) and budgets to the local level.

According to the Upazila Parishad Act of 2009, one chairman, one male vice chairman, and one woman vice chairman will be elected by the people of the upazila, the mayor of the municipality (if any), and female members of the reserved seats. The women members will take up one-third of the reserved seats in all the unions under the Upazila Parishad. Elections of at least 75% of the members, including the chairman and vice chairman, have to be complete before starting the activities of the Upazila Parishad (GoB, 2010:6).

Major Functions and Activities of Upazila Parishad

The Upazila Parishad is involved in a number of activities. Article 60 of the Constitution clearly defines that, "... Parliament shall, by law, confer powers on the local government bodies, including power to impose taxes for local purposes, to prepare their budgets and maintain funds." So Parliament is constitutionally bound to provide the local government bodies with full autonomy (Rahman, 2012:106). Their activities have been determined according to the Upazila Parishad Act, 2011. As the second level of local government, Upazila Parishad is involved in a variety of activities. These activities are conducted through the chairman, vice chairman, and members of the Upazila Parishad. According to the Upazila Parishad Act 2009, these activities include development proposal and project approval, as well as implementation of all other development projects of Upazila Parishad assigned by the government at different times. These include adoption of annual and five year development plans for Upazila Parishad and updating of the plan book, approval of a work plan, and an estimate of the work to be implemented by Upazila Parishad. They must review, monitor, and evaluate the progress of all types of government-implemented development projects every two weeks. Activities include adoption of plans for investment of funds and management of the council, including the officers and employees engaged in deputation by the government. They are responsible for the formation of various committees and sub-committees for development work, the execution of various contracts for the implementation of work by Upazila Parishad, and conducting all other activities of Upazila Parishad. They review the law and order situation in the upazila, the relief, rehabilitation work, and take the necessary steps in the upazila. They take measures for the collection of all taxes, tolls, and fees and impose other taxes in the upazila. They are also responsible for receiving money, issuing licence permits, approving notices on behalf of the upazila, and disposing of all offences committed under the Upazila Parishad. The Upazila Parishad conducts various public welfare activities. These activities include public health, nutrition, and family planning services, expansion of education, development of small and cottage industries, agriculture, livestock, fisheries, and forest resource development activities, creation of

self-employment; and the adoption of various programmes for poverty alleviation. The Upazila Parishad also works to prevent violence against women and children and to build awareness on those issues. It coordinates with Union Parishads in various development activities and provides necessary assistance. As a whole, these activities of the UP broadly catagorieses into three functions–

- (1) To take decisions in the Upazila Parishad;
- (2) To perform planning and development works;
- (3) To Make the budget.

(1) Decision Making in Upazila Parishad

A meeting of the Upazila Parishad is held once a month according to the Upazila Parishad Act of 2009. The Upazila Chairman will convene this meeting. Quorum is not required for the meeting. It is not mentioned who will set the agenda. An emergency meeting may be held on 24 hour notice.

- a. When an issue is presented in the monthly meeting of the upazila, the chairman can decide on this question. If a vote is required, it can be submitted for voting.

[Section 6 (1) of Upazila Parishad (implementation) Rules, 2010]

- b. All decisions will be made on the basis of consensus of the members. If there is any dispute or confusion on any issue then the matter will be settled by majority vote.

[Section 6 (4) of Upazila Parishad (Implementation) Rules, 2010]

- c. Necessary steps will be taken to publish the decisions of the meeting.

[Section 8(1) of Upazila Parishad (Implementation) Rules, 2010]

- d. The Upazila Nirbahi Officer will take necessary steps to implement the decisions of the Upazila Parishad.

[Section 5 of Upazila Parishad (Implementation) Rules, 2010]

(2) Planning and Implementation of Development Projects

The important work of the Upazila Parishad is planning and implementation of development projects in the interest of the local people. The Upazila Parishad prepares annual and five year plans for this development work. The Upazila Parishad forms a development fund for the implementation of this development plan. The fund includes the allocations for the Central Government under ADP, additional revenue, local donations, allocations for project implementation of any organization. If the Upazila Parishad wants, it can collect money from any other source in the upazila for the implementation of projects.

(3) Making the Budget

According to the local government (Upazila Parishad) Act, 2009, the Upazila Parishad prepares the budget 60 days before the start of the new financial year and keeps a copy on

the notice board of the Upazila Parishad for public opinion, advise and comment. The budget is approved on the basis of everyone's opinions and suggestions and a copy is sent to the DC office. It is necessary to analyze the role of women vice chairman in the overall activities including decision making of Upazila Parishad, planning and implementation of development projects, making the budget.

Responsibilities of Structural Body to Perform the Activities of UP

Chairman, male vice chairman, and female vice chairman carry out the majority of the UP's responsibilities and duties. According to his executive authority, the chairman of the Upazila Parishad plays an important role in implementing the decisions of the Upazila Parishad. He will preside over council meetings, supervise the work of officers and employees assigned or delegated to the council, and report to the authorities on their progress. The chairman will not, however, release the annual confidential report (ACR). If officers and employees act in an undisciplined manner, the chairman may write to the higher authorities to take action. However, he has the ability to appoint his own officers and employees of the council, take disciplinary action against them if necessary, and prepare proposals and projects for the various council functions. He stores all upazila-related data and issues licenses and permits for a variety of businesses, scholarships, and professions. He performs the government-assigned tasks at various times and evaluates the progress of completed and ongoing projects. He oversees the responsibilities and functions assigned to the vice chairman. The chairman oversees all accounts of the Upazila Parishad and jointly signs their approval with the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (GoB, 2010 : 36-37).

The male Vice Chairman serves as the chairman of Standing Committees authorized by the council and implements their decisions by taking the necessary steps. He supervises secondary education and madrasa education activities, construction, repair, and maintenance of inter-union connecting roads, and acts as interim chairman in the absence of the chairman based on the panel's priority. By creating public opinion against crime, he works to prevent terrorism, militancy, theft, robbery, smuggling, and drug use, among other crimes. Among his additional activities are environmental protection and social forestation (GoB, 2010 : 37).

The women Vice-Chair serves as the chair of one or more Standing Committees vested with authority by the council and implements their decisions by taking the necessary steps. She serves as interim chairman in the absence of the panel's chairperson, in accordance with the panel's priorities, and takes steps to ensure health, nutrition, family planning, and maternal health, as well as to improve sanitation and drainage systems and provide potable water. The vice chairwoman is responsible for identifying and implementing initiatives to improve the status of women and children globally. She aids in the establishment and implementation of development projects for small and boutique businesses. She takes steps to prevent the mistreatment of women and children, as well as to eliminate dowry and child marriage.

Official Role of Women Vice Chairman

According to the Upazila Parishad Act, the duties and responsibilities of the women vice chairman have been mentioned-

- (1) Act as the chairman of one or more Standing Committees empowered by the council and take appropriate measures to implement the decisions of the Standing Committees concerned.
 - (2) According to the provision of sub-section (3) of section 15 of the Upazila Parishad Act, in the absence of the chairman, she will act as the temporary chairman.
 - (3) From among the various responsibilities and functions prescribed in the Second Schedule of the Act, to make necessary recommendations to the council from time to time on the following matters, such as:
 - i. Related to the measures to be taken for the purpose of verification to ensure health, nutrition, family planning and maternal welfare service ;
 - ii. Related to the measures for improving sanitation, drainage system, and access to safe drinking water ;
 - iii. Providing and implementing necessary assistance for the overall development of women and children ;
 - iv. Concerning the adoption of development projects for the establishment and development of small and cottage industries;
 - v. It is related to the creation of self-employment, adoption, and implementation of government programs to alleviate poverty and to provide overall assistance to the government in this regard;
 - vi. Regarding the prevention of abuse of women and children and it's adverse effect on child marriage ;
 - vii. Regarding the adoption and implementation of activities for the development of livestock and fisheries resources ;
 - viii. Provide assistance including supervision of the work of co-operative societies and non-governmental voluntary organizations and concerning the co-ordination of the work ;
 - ix. Concerning the identification of measures to be taken for the implementation of such activities including participation in social welfare and public welfare activities ;
- Government or as the case may be , the discharge of duties and functions specifically assigned to it by the chairmam.

It is observed in this study whether the women vice chairman are able to perform the above functions and responsibilities properly. Thereby the role of upazila women vice chairman has been analyzed by reviewing whether she is getting help from her male colleagues.

Why Women Vice Chairs Role is Ceremonial in Upazila Parishad?

Women vice chair has a number of obstrucles in the parishad which makes their role more ceremonial rather making an impact. These are;

i. Power to Make Decision

Although the responsibilities and works of chairman and vice chairman have been distributed according to the law of Upazila Parishad. The women vice chairman have been asked to act as chairpersons of multiple standing committees and at the same time, take appropriate steps to implement the decisions of the committee of the Upazila Parishad. But all women vice chairman said that they have no power to sign the paper of the upazila activities. As a result, their position has become rhetorical one. They are not allowed to do any work other than going to different events. It is decided in the standing committees that they are supposed to be present in the meetings of the Upazila Parishad but many respondents have given their opinion that these decisions have not been taken at all. The government officials do not give importance to the opinion of the vice chairman. Many times in committee meetings, they decide on their own and present these decisions in the meeting of Upazila Parishad.

During interview women vice chairmen complained that many times, they are not informed about the projects and decisions. The projects are made and implemented without their consent. Besides, the power of official authority of the Upazila Parishad is less in the development activities conducted from the center where the opportunity of women's participation is low. Although the women vice chairman is the chairperson of various committees, their decisions are not evaluated by the government officials included in the respective committees. They said that women vice chairman have to go to remote areas to prevent child marriage and resolve various issues related to violence against women, but there are various problems due to lack of transportation for them. Many times official transports arrive late and they can not go at all.

Some people think that women should not be involved in upazila parishad, because there are one upazila chairman, one male vice chairman. They can work for all people in the upazila. They think union chairman is more powerful than women vice chairman of the upazila because union chairman can select any person's name in any VGD, VGF or other cards. Local people also think that woman vice chairman has limited power. Uneducated people have no idea about women vice chairmen's role in upazila parishad. Women Vice Chairman have been given the opportunity to submit necessary proposals but their participation has been limited in implementation.

In the absence of the chairman, it is said that the vice chairman can act as interim chairman, but the male vice chairman is given priority, according to the panel. In this case, the women vice chairs are seen as the victims of negligence. In most cases, the male upazila chairman selects the male vice chairman. The women vice chair acts as chairperson of the women's, children's, health, nutrition, family planning, and other committees. But the women vice chairs do not always get the cooperation of the

concerned departments and officers. Government officials do not evaluate the opinions of the women vice chairs of Upazila Parishad. Furthermore, the committees' decisions are presented at the Upazila Parishad meeting, but only the chairman and the Upazila Nirbahi Officers can make decisions.

Democracy is not practiced in the Upazila Parishad. Women vice chairs are not even given the authority to name anyone on the V.G.D. and V.G.F. (Vulnerable Group Development and Feeding) cards. They believe that the chairman of the union parliaments has the same authority as the upazila parliament's female vice chairman. In making such cards, the chairman of the Union Parishad has the right to include the names of 80% of the people. The remaining 20% is in the hands of the Upazila Parishad. Only the upazila chairman and the male vice chairman make the list. They make these lists without consulting with the female vice chairs. They frequently recommend, but it is up to the chairman to include their suggestions on the list. When the women vice chairmen belong to the same party as the chairmen, sometimes they get some opportunities to include some names in the list.

The women vice chairman is the chairperson of the upazila women's development forum. In these cases, they have the opportunity to work. This forum provides sewing machines, tubewells, school bags for school-aged children, and other materials to needy women. In this case, some of the respondents said that they were satisfied to work in this forum. However, most of the respondents think that the upazila chairman and the male vice chairman decide to provide the sewing machines by themselves. Many times, sewing machines and tubewells are provided by making this list in exchange for some money. Women running for vice chairman are allowed to include a limited number of names. A female vice chairman stated that she had already donated four tubewells and six sewing machines. It has been learned that other female chairpersons are in the same boat. The women vice chairmen have to visit different schools in the upazila. In these cases, their travel fare is paid. Many respondents think that this allowance is more limited than their expenses. They have very few opportunities to use Upazila Parishad vehicles. If there is a program with the upazila chairman, some of them will be able to attend. However, due to the gathering of party workers in the car of the upazila chairman, the women vice chairmen are deprived of travel facilities, and they feel embarrassed. That is why, they have to travel at their own expense.

Every day, locals gather in the office of the women vice chairman of the Upazila Parishad. They have to be entertained. There are no extra allocations and no manpower for their hospitality. The cost of entertaining the people in the Upazila Parishad area is borne by the women vice chairmen. They have to pay their dues on various occasions as public representatives. Most of them said that they arrange this type of entertainment at their own expense.

ii. Problem of Resources

Most of the respondents have said that even if they have chairs and tables, they have no work. Everyone said that the disadvantaged, destitute women come to the women vice

chair and express their grievances without any hesitation, which they can not express to the male vice chair of the area. They expressed that women should be given the opportunity to work to bring about change in the socio-economic conditions of the area. In order to do these activities, extra allocations have to be made in their names. But in these spheres, they have to be dependent on the upazila chairman. They think that the government is not giving them power. They could do better work if they were given specific responsibilities. The real destitute women are being deprived of the benefits of the allocation, especially the elderly, widows, and divorced women. The chairman and other members provide these facilities in exchange for money, providing a shelter for nepotism, and they give benefits to ineligible person. Women vice chair have no opportunity to talk about the list.

iii. Relationship with the Male Colleagues at Work Place

An investigation was conducted to determine the extent to which female vice chairs receive assistance from male colleagues at work. It is well known that many women are not evaluated after being elected. Although women want to work for the sake of education, welfare of mothers and children, they often can not work due to the discriminatory attitudes of male colleagues. A woman vice chairman told me that she did not get any support from the chairman of the ruling party or the male vice chairman because of her involvement in opposition politics. Although the women vice chairmen are given responsibilities for the Upazila Women's Affairs Department, Social Services, Land Office's Jalmahal Committees, and Family Planning Development Committees, the assistant officers of these offices often work on various development activities on their own initiative without any discussion with the women vice chairmen. Indeed, women vice chairs are undervalued as a result of a lack of specific and effective policies. Women vice chairs face workplace discrimination as a result of patriarchal mentality. Where women have the opportunity to work in committees, the chairman and vice chairman frequently do not allow women to work in union council. Government officials often do not respond when they call meetings. Women vice chairs have no authority to sign any Upazila Parishad file. This is why, they feel that their powerlessness is undermining their status. One of them said that she had gotten support from male colleagues, but the MP did not cooperate with her to work. The use of vehicles by the Upazila Parishad also has to rely on the decision of the chairman. Women vice chairs are being held back. The chairman does not give them the opportunity to develop their workplace endowment.

iv. Legal Barriers in Performing the Activities of Upazila Parishad

Women vice chairs often face various obstacles in performing their duties, as found in the study. Women vice chairs do not have the authority to sign virtually under Upazila Parishad law. They have no official activities. They feel that their activities have been legally hampered. Although the chairpersons of various standing committees have been appointed, the opinions of the chairpersons of these committees are not taken into consideration in the decision making process of the Upazila Parishad. Therefore, it can be

said that structural defects and legal weaknesses are also hindering the performance of women vice chairs. Although every woman vice chairman has promised to change the socio-economic status of women and children in the area before her election, she has not been able to do so due to a lack of government allocations. The views of women vice chairs are not taken into account when providing different types of allowances. Because of patriarchal mentality, women vice chairs are denied this opportunity in the workplace. The chairman and the male vice chairman often negotiate with them to include names for the provision of sewing machines and other materials. Although women vice chairs have been appointed chairpersons of the committees, government officials do not want to cooperate with them on many issues. In this case, it has been reported that male vice chairs often face the same problems. The government officials consider themselves more qualified than the representatives of the local people due to their professional status, and they give less importance to the vice chairman. This kind of behavior is hindering the work of women vice chairs. Women vice chairs find it difficult to visit remote areas due to a lack of self-transportation. Despite their best efforts, they are unable to fulfill their obligations. In some cases, the woman vice chairman is not given adequate opportunities to work because she is a member of the opposition party. In many cases, she is fired by the chairman or a male vice chairman.

v. Working Relationship Between Women Vice Chairman and Government Officials

Creating positions for female Upazila Parishad vice chairmen and opportunities for them to work in local level politics are unquestionably positive steps toward women's empowerment in a country like Bangladesh. Local people, people's representatives, and government officials are looking at the participation of women at the upazila level from a positive point of view. However, they consider it reasonable to keep many women vice chairs and male vice chairs among the UNOs, as they are currently involved in the activities of the Upazila Parishad. It would not be right to create opportunities for them to sign separately since the Upazila Parishad has a chairman and a UNO. They will maintain contact with the people as public representatives and inform the Upazila Parishad about the overall affairs of the upazila. The responsibilities of the chairman and Upazila Nirbahi Officer include their role in decision-making. Upazila Nirbahi Officers mention the financial gain of women vice chairs as they collect travel allowance without visiting schools and providing sewing machines, tubewells, and other materials in exchange for money. It is positive in their opinion because it can bring together so many leaders in Upazila Parishad. Local people, especially women, have expressed their satisfaction over the inclusion of women vice chairpersons at the upazila level. They think that women should be given power to issue cards and other items like the male chairman.

vi. Blurred Allocation of Responsibilities

The matter regarding the distribution and allocation of their responsibilities is still not clear. Participation in local government is becoming backward as a result of patriarchy

(Sultana, 1998). To expedite the activities of the Upazila Parishad, the positions of chairman and vice chairman have been created. In order to involve women for the sake of development, the post of Woman Vice Chairman is kept, but instead of providing overall support to the Upazila Nirbahi Officers, he or she manages the Upazila Parishad himself/herself (Morshed, 1998). Socio-cultural obstacles, structural deficiencies, and attitudinal problems hindered women's political participation (Panday, 2013). Local government experts also give their opinion about the role and functions of a woman vice chairman of the upazila. Female Vice Chairpersons are frequently less active in raising issues than male chair. Most female vice chairs (as well as their male counterparts) are also apparently aware of the rules, but really are not. Female vice chairs have better records than male colleagues in attending UZP meetings, but they are less assertive (Ahmed, Ahmed, Faizullah, 2011).

The provisions of the 2011 Act require 17 committees to be chaired by two vice chairs (male and female). It has provided the structural framework for women's participation in political decision-making. It has also provided an opportunity to bring women to the center of local development and build new grassroots leadership (Islam, 2020). Despite being elected representatives, they have to work with constraints and inadequate funds, which hamper their day-to-day activities. Complaints by female vice chairmen about the control of UZP cars and computers by (all-male) chairmen similarly reflect their exclusion from UZP resources. According to the Upazila Parishad Act, women vice chairpersons have some role and responsibility in the parishad but this does not reflect reality. They have less opportunity to do their duty in a male dominated upazila parishad. Women vice chairs face hurdles in chairing various committees as well as conducting committee meetings. Citizens and civil society, including citizens more broadly and the women's movement and civil society organizations in particular, have the responsibility to mobilize to create a mandate to promote gender equity concerns at the Upazila level. Mobilizing public opinion to secure a mandate for actions that promote gender equity through policy and implementation changes is important. Of course, female public representatives have to prove their capability through work and dedication. Women vice chairs must be made aware of and involved in audits of local budgets and spending plans, beneficiary selection procedures, and reviews of final lists for the VGD, VGF, widow's and old-age allowances, stipends, or school feeding schemes (Islam, 2020). Above all, political will must continue to be upheld, and the spirit of unbiased participation, irrespective of gender, in the sustainable development process under the guidance of UZP must be preserved. Sharing power can help empower women. In this regard, changing society's mindset is also inevitable.

The government, according to one UNO respondent, does not specify the functions of the female vice chairman, and there is no separate fund for working in various committees. Meghna Upazila said that it is positive that a woman vice chairman can act as panel chairman in the absence of Upazila as chairman. She is also the chairman of the Upazila Women Development Forum. She has the authority to do something for deprived women in the upazila. UNO of Sujanagar also supported the post of woman vice

chairman in upazila parishad, but he said that it is very difficult to play a significant role as a woman vice chairman. He contended that the upazila chairman and male vice chairman wielded more political power than the female vice chair. The female vice chairman lacks both muscle and financial power. She cannot spend a lot of money on the local people. Moreover, a woman vice chairman cannot solve local disputes like a male vice chairman and upazila chairman, because of patriarchal male dominance.

The upazila chairman and male vice chairman also think that women should be empowered in local government, but they said that the functions of the women vice chairman should be specified by the act of local government. During the interviews, all of the people who answered said that they respected their female vice chair.

According to the study's findings, union parish chairmen and members believe that women vice chairs only have the position. But they have no institutional work in reality. According to one union chairman, the woman vice chairman occasionally requests that the union counselor manage some VGD or VGF cards in her favor. In UZP committees, she has no decision-making authority and even less implementation authority in development projects.

Discussion and Conclusion: A Ceremonial Adaptation

There is a lot of scope for the female vice chair to perform in the parishad. However, as mentioned in the previous section, they are mostly ceremonial. However, our interviews with various stakeholders indicate that these activities have the potential to be a real panacea. For example, most community members believe that women's participation at the upazila level is a positive indicator of women's empowerment, but this was explained by educated individuals. They believe that female vice chairs should focus on women's issues. Local government experts also think that women should participate in local government. Women should participate in the policy making process. Unless women are involved in the decision- and policy-making 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 (Baetz, 1995). An important tier of local government is the Upazila Parishad. Although the post of female vice chairmen has been created, their work has been restricted. As a result, they are not getting an opportunity to show their administrative skills and abilities.

The overall impression of the respondents to this study is that participation of women has increased in politics at the local level by creating the post of women vice chairman at the upazila level. According to the Upazila Parishad Act, they have been given the power to perform certain tasks. Analyses of the activities of the women vice chairman show that they are facing various problems in performing their duties. Allocations should be increased as it is difficult for them to work through the limited allocation that is given. Their power has not been formally transferred from the center. They have not been given any power to oversee and ensure the accountability of standing committees as mentioned in law. Their agendas are often overlooked or underrepresented in office meetings.

Although under the Upazila Parishad Act, women are supposed to act as representatives, male colleagues never think about it when making decisions.

General people and other respondents expressed their opinion that the patriarchal mentality is keeping women emotionally inferior in the workplace and at home. Religious barriers are also blocking them from doing all kinds of work. As women, they are not always able to go everywhere. They are also being discriminated against in project allocation by male colleagues. According to the female vice chairman, they are often isolated from their male colleagues because, as women, they are unable to spend much time outside of office hours. There is a lack of a friendly environment for them in the workplace. Women have to bow down to political and social pressures. The study finds that male colleagues stand beside them on political considerations, but women are less important to them in matters related to financial activities. Although the scope of work of the women vice chairman is wide in the Upazila Parishad, they are not getting the opportunity to perform their duties due to various obstacles. Male colleagues said that they cooperate with their female colleague, but they are not helping her in most of the cases.

As a whole, to overcome the problem of a female vice chairman of the Upazila Parishad, some measures need to be considered, such as ensuring equal allocation of funds for men and women representatives; defining the role and responsibilities of the women vice chairman in the manuals and orders of local government; giving importance to the decisions of the women vice chairman as chairman of various standing committees; evaluating the opinions and thoughts of the women vice chairman as a part of overall development; and finally, political parties can play an important role in shaping women's representation in politics and giving women strong positions in national and local politics.

All the women vice chairs who have been interviewed for the study, think that it is possible to increase the power of women vice chairman as elected representatives if there is good will from the government. Through reform of the existing law, opportunities have to be created for the people's representatives to work at the upazila level. They think that women are less corrupt than men. If the law is reformed, women public representatives will have the opportunity to prove their worth through hard work and dedication. Political good will and a power sharing mentality will drive women's empowerment forward and make it meaningful. The work of women vice chairman is being hampered due to male dominance, abuse of power, and a lack of good will on the part of the government at the upazila level. Some high level bureaucrats are also not in favour of women gaining local leadership at the upazila level. The influence of local MPs is also noticeable in the Upazila Parishad. According to article 25 of the Upazila Parishad Act, the elected members of the parliament become the advisors of the concerned Upazila Parishad which takes advice from the adviser. The Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) has direct influence on the management of the Upazila Parishad. The upazila chairman virtually has no power. They can not do anything beyond the opinion of the members of the parliament and against the will of the Upazila Nirbahi Officers. Therefore, by creating participation for

women vice chairs at the upazila level, the possibility of empowerment can be created for women at the upazila level. But in reality women's empowerment is hampered by the obstacles within the system and due to structural barriers at a wider level.

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