

Summary of findings

The development of research on women in Bangladesh began in late seventies. Reflection of various facets on the issue, however, emerged through different attempts but a sound and organised study on 'women leadership at local level' centering the local governance covering its culture, role, problems and prospects of development is wanting. Besides, the issue is also a new one in the perspective of local government in Bangladesh. So, significant researches over the usual ones on the issue are very urgent. The present study is something different that has beaten the routines. It is an attempt to know the types, origin and development of local level women leadership in rural Bangladesh. The study analyses the union parishad as an institutional 'growth point' and a 'ground' of local level women leadership identifying the problems on the way of development of this leadership.

In this study we have carried out survey on the elected women leaders of union parishad of two successive elections-----1997 and 2003. We have noticed a qualitative change in the rural formal women leadership between the two elections. The women leadership is emerging out from its traditional stream of pseudo activities and taking comparatively modern shape.

Our study found that traditional social structure and its culture were significance for rural people to choose the women as their leaders. Age, education, family status, caste, social manner etc were observed to cast them vote. Quality to carry out work was also another tool of criteria to choose the representatives. But it was also observed that things were dependent on the areas concerned. People of educated, rich and culturally developed areas had chosen the women comparatively educated and qualitative as the leaders. In some areas, comparatively backward, elected women on the basis of caste and class, while in some areas it was dependent on political affiliation of the candidates. The study observed that political consideration to choose the leaders was a growing phenomenon.

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1. Our study found that a good number of women leaders elected at the local bodies were literate than the past. More educated women were participating in the election of local bodies and their number was increasing.

2. This study found that the young aged women mostly energetic and competent were being elected as representatives in union parishad. Though the local bodies are a composition of both old and young leaders, the numbers of young were comparatively increasing.

3. The traditional trends of coming leadership at the local bodies from high profile of occupation, high income and big landholders were changing. The study found that a good number of women from different categories including low profile of occupation, low income and even land less were emerging as leaders in the local areas.

4. The study has found that comparatively well aware and conscious women were coming into the bodies. It has found that a good number of the elected women were very much conscious about various local, national and even international issues. They have also found enough interested on the issues concerning local people and local problems.

5. The study found a good sign of media exposure among the leaders. Electronic and printing media is the major sources of knowledge of various events in and around the country in these days. A good number of local leaders have found to read newspaper and to listening radio and television regularly that was helping to broaden their knowledge and understanding significantly.

6. In this study, we have also found that awareness of the leaders about their responsibilities as local leaders was increasing. Besides, ability of the leaders to suggest solution to local problems based on their responsibilities were also increasing. It has also found that a good number of elected local leaders are always spending a lot of their times for the local people.

7. Different social studies have proved that ability to deal with various issues is an important source of development of leadership at local level. In our study we have seen that most of the leaders were involved in different social activities like Salish (village arbitration), school committees and different social and cultural organisations. This trend is also on increase.

8. The study also found that a good number of leaders are politically conscious. Some of them maintain good relation with major political parties and its front level leaders. They also play important role in upazila or union level politics of major political parties. Some of them are holding key posts of the parties.

9. A good numbers of women leaders have expressed their willingness to compete for higher level of leadership like upazila chairman or Member of Parliament in future. This has made a favorable atmosphere for development of women leadership from local level. It is our realization that a good number of local leaders hold a prospect of development in future.

10. The study has found that participation of women as leaders at the local bodies were also increasing. A significant change in this regard was made after enactment of “Local Government Ordinance” passed in parliament in 1997. The act made the structure more meaningful with adding the women members in the body through direct election. Now all the three women members, who were earlier nominated in status, are being elected by direct vote of the people of concerned ward. Three general wards constitute each reserved seat. This is a good sign of development of women leadership from local level.

The researcher however, identified some ‘leaders’ in general in the long history of local government who had experienced through handling role in local body at their primary stage. And during this study several example were also found where some of the male members were elected chairmen, while some chairmen as municipality chairmen and chairman at upazila parishad. Another

good sign was found that an UP chairman was elected Member of Parliament (MP) through a by-election, while two chairmen contested in previous parliamentary election. A number of local level leaders were holding different important ranks and file of different political parties including major ones. Some of the leaders during talk also expressed that they were willing to contest in next higher level posts including upazila or parliamentary election.

The study further observed that after the introduction of the upazila parishad, all political parties expanded its activities to local level, which was earlier based on district level. As a result, prospect of development of leadership at upazila level increased. But upazila system was suspended for last 15 years after only for six years of run. The system however, has regained in 2009 through direct election where a new post names 'Women Vice-chairman' has been introduced. Total 478 women vice-chairmen are now working at upazila who are elected by direct vote of the people.

Now it is our clear opinion that if the upazila level is strengthened with institutional base, it will work as second turning point of growing leadership after union level.

Suggestive remarks

Now, we would like to frame a schedule of recommendations, which is based on the study. We assume this will help strengthen the local government first. Then our desire is to develop a stage for women leaders where they will smoothly play their role and lastly get entertain a prospective development of leadership. These are:

1. The first priority has to given to remove all longstanding structural loopholes the union parishad suffers. The system would be obedient to the age and time. The present frame of the body is something out of constitutional sprit. Our clear suggestion is that structure of union parishad has to ensure that the

constitution directed. All rules, regulation or promulgation has to reform and remove the clauses dissimilar to the spirit and guideline of the constitution.

2. There was no affluent thinking before inlaying the women leaders into the body. As a result, the present structure can not fully accommodate the women leaders to work. Moreover, gender discrimination between male and female leadership is prevail that is damaging confidence of women leaders. More attention is needed to this regard. Our observation suggests that representation of women leaders should to increase from its present number----- three (3) to six (6). It will help to eradicate gender inequality and enhance encourage among the women leaders.

3. The concept of women leadership at local government is new. Mostly inexperienced women are coming to the position of leadership there. They actually have not enough knowledge about the responsibilities and entire working process of the body as well as fresher in political or electoral politics. Our remark is that specific 'intervention strategy' is needed that must be initiated by the government. The government has to pay special attention to develop women and their empowerment. Our suggestion is that training programme for the women leaders has to introduce where they will be given training about working process of local governance and their responsibilities. With this, they have to teach about socio-cultural, economical and political arena. This will help to increase encourage and make them conscious and confidence. The programme will have to continue. It may be built up a permanent training cell by central government in this purpose.

4. Equal distribution of functions between male and female leaders must be ensured. Specification and clarification of the responsibilities is another tool of eliminating patriarchal dominance in the body. The development projects, heart of the local body have to be distributed equally. Our clear suggestion is that the women leaders have to give opportunity to carry out their part. They incur fail but once they will learn and gain.

5. There is no alternative of cooperative mentality by the male leaders. The male have to come out leaving their patriarchal negative attitude to female.

Our observation also attracted the following suggestion :

1. The elections of the body have to be held at regular intervals. And the process of the election would be on the basis of universal adult franchise. Through the election people get an opportunity to scrutinize the activities of their leaders. An independent election commission should conduct the election.

2. Our clear suggestion is that, there is no necessity to empower any local higher authority like upazila or district level bureaucrat to look after the union affairs. Because, the past experience of local bossing on these bodies are not pleasant. Another opinion is that other elected representative bodies like upazila at upazila level and Zilla parishads at district level should be treated as local authorities of union parishad. Here election at Zilla Parishad should be held.

3. The union parishad is to perform a large number of functions. For this it requires a competent staff. If a union parishad is to carry its functions, it has to ensure a good number of educated and efficient staff. Our clear opinion is that number of staffers has to increase and the power of recruitment gives to union parishad as municipalities in urban area do. The employees will be the union's staff. The employees would assist the union parishad in making plan as well as its implementation. A qualified person would be recruited as union secretary. This job would be class one level official. Some other technical skilled staff also be recruited in the body. The functions of other government employees engaged in union level should be coordinated by the union parishad.

4. To protect law and order at rural level, union parishad maintain the village police. The number of the existing village police should be increased. Their salary and other benefits should also be enhanced. To ensure law and order at local level government should make provision for enough funds to maintain village police at every union. Our observation found that police outposts have in many union parishad to check the law and order. These are running under supervision of

concern police station and have no relation with union parishads. Our suggestion is that a concert between the police camps and the union parishad concerned should be enriched. It will help to curb the crimes.

5. It may be that, the policy-makers have had all the good intention of making the UP a fully functional local government unit, catering to all of their development needs. But that does not alter the objective condition prevailing in most of the UPs. In fact, from observation and investigative studies undertaken so far, it is quite evident that the union parishad is very weak and its capacity to transform policies into plans and then implementation is grossly inadequate.

Our findings proved that the union carries a huge load of functions, which is actually beyond its capacity and no fruitful initiative has been taken to increase its capacity. As a result, the body has always suffered from operational weakness and confusion. So the functions of the body must be specified by the acts and it would be fixed according to its capability.

1. Our study found that most of the leaders were unhappy with the power distribution. They feel that they had nothing to do, but to spend most of their valuable time in signing certificates and doing arbitration ‘although there are many things to do.’ However, in reality, there is no work worth mentioning in the union.

Our clear suggestion is that the local leaders should have full power to carry out their duties or functions. The union would be the center of all local affairs. So that the leaders can serve the local people easily whenever they come to them. Conduct of activities at local level increases the leader’s quality for better performance. If they get adequate opportunities to conduct UP activities, they would be enriched with experience, knowledge and efficiency on social service, which leads the leader towards higher level leadership.

2. Fresh step is necessary on the issue of role of local lawmaker on union parishad now. The policy-makers might have good intention of making MPs role into local institutions, particularly when both are public representatives in the

areas concerned. So it may be a good intention that as leaders of local areas both would make constructive role in any development works. But the experience is not encouraging. Some union parishad representatives complained about the MPs unnecessary influence on them. In some cases the MPs compel them to act according to their (MPs) wish.

So our suggestion is that the role of the MPs over union's activities should be stopped. The local MPs should not be given authority over the council. It is against the spirit of local government process and constitution.

3. The union parishad is suffering from paucity of fund. Our suggestion is that the problems have to be solved. The financial flows of union have to be increased so that the leaders of the body can carry out its scheduled responsibilities and meet demands of local people in time and properly.

In generally, the union parishad get funds from two sources; government grants and local taxes. It is a fact that due to absolute dependence on central grant, the union body fails to stand on its own feet. So the local bodies should have ensured some independent sources of income.

The study in its simple inquiry into the financial problems of UP found that the local bodies in our country were traditionally poor. The main cause of this is that the UP has not been given authority to extend its social services and impose tax to serve the purpose properly. Besides, the UP has to share (one third) with the government the taxes and levies which UP earned from the local recourses. Moreover, government can from time to time, reduce the resources by order. The poverty of the people in general is also an obstacle to increase local taxes and fees.

Our suggestion is that First: The local bodies have to be given independent power and sources of taxes, which should be determined by law. In most other developing countries with some degree of decentralization of local government, the local elected bodies raise some of their own income from property taxes and other kinds of tax levies and fees. To make smooth tax collection, the social

services of union parishad have to increase and ensure its quality. So that people are interested to pay tax spontaneously.

Second: The funds, which the central government allocates for the UP, have to be increased and direct. No local authorities (bureaucrats/MPs) would be the channel of allocation of grant. This is because, First: there is constant interference by MPs, which leads to politicization. Second: there is also scope of corruption on the part of upazila government officials and finally: in making decisions about the use of ADP, neither MPs nor upazila government officials listen to the opinions of the union Parishads.

The government should take some tactics to increase the flow of income by the local bodies from local taxes. In many cases, the local leaders are not interested to collect tax from the local people due to fear of losses of popularity. In this case, government can announce that grant would be poured double if any union parishad are able to collect the assessed taxes.

4. The local level leaders have to be provided with necessary training on their duties and responsibilities. If they are provided with actual knowledge on the affairs of local bodies, the total activities will get dynamism. Besides, they will receive skill and knowledge, which will help to develop them as effective leaders. We feel that most of the leaders are more or less aware of various local problems and issues. We also found that a good number of leaders are experienced. Proper training can make them more systematic, methodical and keen on the issue. Thus, the training also can teach them different techniques of leadership, which encourage them to go for higher level leadership.

All our attempts were led to search out the way of development of women leadership at local level in Bangladesh and how to improve of their capabilities in the process of rural development. We had taken the union parishad as the target point. Factually, the union parishad leaders are the main leaders at local level in rural Bangladesh, which has a formal-legal entity and to handle various local affairs as a local authority. It had important role in rural development in its long

history and which is also on run in present. Moreover, in course of time this system has turned into a leadership process styled 'local level leaders'. This carries a vibrant prospect of going to next higher positions. Because gathering experience through handling various local affairs, they can gain competency to climb up next higher-level leadership stage.

Besides, the prospect of development of women leadership has been brightened after inclusion women people into the body through direct election.

Now a large quantity of women leaders are working for development at rural level. They are earning knowledge and experience through handling local affairs that will help them to go ahead on next higher level position. In this research, we have discussed different sides of this leadership. A number of problems have also been elaborated. It is clear from the above discussion that the process of development of women leadership can be accelerated through properly involving and empowering the female members at union parishad. For this, pragmatic steps have to take and deprivations of the female union members from their due rights have to eradicate. This will be possible when local government bodies be strengthened. Participatory work-plans, preparing policies and allocation of funds and just facilities to the female union members and properly involving them with the overall development activities of the local government institutions are among those of tolls of the long cherished desires.

The female union members to be courageous take part in all activities of the local government bodies with unity, sincerity, honesty, efficiency and friendly attitudes for paving the stronger way to ensuring accountability and their empowerment. The women leaders have to involve themselves very actively in development at the level concerned. So the study strongly recommends to take steps on development of the institution as a strong local body so that the institution becomes the main center of local people in all types of necessities and the women representatives can meet those without trouble. On the other hand, the social values that dictate our behaviour towards women must undergo

transformation before a woman may fight for her right like her male counterparts. To achieve this end, we have to think to need more than the work of a few rural-based elitist gender-conscious advocacy groups. Finally, the nature and quality of the politics itself that rule our life has to be transformed lock, stock and barrel.

After a long time of military ruling, our journey has been started to the way of democracy afresh. We must restore it. So we expect of flourishing multi-party liberal democracy and its establishment on firm footing where a large number of efficient, honest and committed leaders at all sectors will sit to build the country together. We also hope that a good number of leaders in general will emerge from local level and will take part in policy making for future development of the country.