Research Brief

Women's Representation in the Union Parishad

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The recent local government acts in Bangladesh have enabled women to be first selected and then elected to reserved positions, as UP members and as Upazila vice chairs. The impact of quotas and direct elections on women's representation at the local level have been well studied (Panday, 2013; Khan and Mohsin; 2008; Frankel; 2004). However, there is a lack of nuanced and context -grounded scholarship on what are the different pathways through which women gain access to political power at the local level and what enhances women's political agency (i.e. being effective representatives). This means that while there is an understanding of the barriers women face and the limitations of how they are able to exercise leadership, less is known about how, when and in which areas they do exercise agency and can influence structures, processes and people to bring about change or make decisions in their favour. This study, under the Sharique Local Governance Programme, mandated by SDC, and implemented by a Consortium of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University aimed to address this gap. The fieldwork was conducted in 2015 in 6 Unions in 2 Upazilas of Rajshahi. Twenty-two elected women representatives were interviewed, of whom six were re-elected and four did not seek re-election after a first term. In addition,

UP chairs, UP male members, civil society representatives, local level political leaders and UNO were interviewed. Community opinions in those unions were elicited through a total of twelve focus groups discussions with women and men.

We found that most of the female members had not been directly involved in politics before elections and most of them did not have a clear idea about what it would mean to be a public representative. Political affiliation of their family, kinship ties in the community, requests by family member or community members and their own community level engagement and reputation encouraged them to contest the elections. "Serving society" was the key motivation female members mentioned to compete in the UP level elections and "expectations of monetary benefit" was another consideration according to the community. In order to take a firm decision the women would discuss the matter with family members, relatives, friends and local political and community leaders. Family consent and support is essential and, in the case of widows, the extended family's consent is needed. This is in contrast with men who also need support of others to succeed but their initial decision might be taken more autonomously or independently than that by women.

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Women UP members preferred to contest for reserved seats because they would then not have to compete against men, thus reducing competition and reducing election expenses. Political parties and citizens also favour voting for women in reserved seats. On one hand women do not have either the economic resources necessary to contest the general seats or the "strength" to compete against male candidates. On the other hand the views of citizens and politicians is that if general voters had to choose between voting for women and men for a UP member seat, the male candidate would probably be given preference. Citizens are willing to vote for women representatives and also appreciate their value, but not at the expense of male candidates.

A concern by observers is that many women who have been elected once do not seek re-election a second time whereas the hope was that they would in fact want to contest for general seats in the second round. Among the reasons for not contesting a second term, female members mentioned that they felt they had not been able to deliver on their commitments and promises made at the time of elections which is why their voters had lost faith in them (they had not been able to carry out development work or distribute safety net allocations as demanded by their constituency). Family level responsibilities and pressures were also reasons, especially if the family felt that the female member had not gained as much benefit as they had hoped for (either financially or otherwise). In a few cases, the reason was not having a good relationship with the UP Chair and feeling that they had no influence in the UP. However, there are also cases where the women felt that they had benefitted from their engagement socially and/or economically and where there was a sense of vocation in being a public representative.

We found that women representatives have had to learn to deal with local level administration and government agencies from which they seek services and projects for their constituents and also benefits for themselves. Visits to the police station are common as the

female members deal with cases of family conflicts but they also visit LGED, PIO, DWA and Social Welfare. To get their work done they pay for tea and snacks, or even bribes. Even though the UNO can be an arbitrator in dealing with conflicts with the UP chair, in the long-run this was not found to be effective. Female members have also learned to work with male members and make compromises if necessary so that that they can share resources and benefits. They were also found to seek rent from people wanting safety net allocations.

There is a social expectation that a leader should be vocal, gifted in public speaking, authoritative, confident and everybody should listen to him/her. However, although different, women leaders/UP members' contributions and capacities are increasingly valued and recognized. Both women and men repeatedly emphasized that female citizens can approach female members more freely, they are more approachable and they are good at dealing with family conflicts. This is perhaps an alternative model of leadership that is being socially recognized and that can be promoted with men as well. It is acknowledged that female members do play a role in decision-making in the UP, ward meetings, standing committees and the various UP structures and processes have allowed women to play a leadership role and gain management skills. NGO interventions in capacity building are also acknowledged. However, in itself, capacity building initiatives are not enough to enable women to fully play their roles and fulfill their responsibilities.

Women's influence and decision-making in UPs depends on having good relationships with the Chairman, male members and Secretary of UPs. Some factors that can increase their influence include having strong political connections, ties with administration (central and local) and having high family and social status. In general, women try and avoid disputes with the Chairman and most of the examples of dispute between the chairman and female members result in "victory" for the Chairman and "defeat" for the woman member. However, there are also instances of

the use of political pressure, social standing, using of government circulars, seeking information from various sources and using of emotions such as anger or tears to convince the Chairman. In addition, some of the female members are able to extract advantages from their cooperation with the Chair. In a few of the unions where the female members were united, they also had a stronger voice in the UP than if they had been isolated from each other.

Most female members were not involved directly in party politics before being elected, but after becoming a UP member most of them become "strategically" involved with the expectation that it would give them bargaining power in the UP and provide a means of communication with higher level political leaders. This would help them in two ways: a) getting importance or priority for allocations from Upazila level and b) using this influence to get more importance and allocations in the UP itself. While in some cases it was found that they gained advantage, importance and more allocations if they were involved in party politics, other factors such as education level, awareness and relationship with the UP chairman also played a role.

Regarding the choice of which party to join, some of the female members tried to involve themselves with the "chairman party" to get the favour of the Chairman mainly for allocating resources and incentives. It is also seen that if any female members or their respective families were not affiliated with any political party previously, many of them tried to involve themselves with the party in power. In some cases, they even left their previous party and joined another party. However, the dominant trend is that the women UP members are loyal to the political party that their families are affiliated with. While the local political parties give the most importance to the post of UP Chairman, party support for a particular woman candidate may reduce the number of candidates for that post as other party supporters will not contest the seat out of party loyalty. The political parties play a role in encouraging women to enter

election, seek re-elections, and, if they have good connections and relations with the party, also give them backing for what they say or do in the UP.

While both the women and men strategize and negotiate with various persons, parties and institutions to overcome opposition and achieve their goals, the women are less experienced and skilled at this compared to the men. Peer to peer learning and support can help the women to be more conscious and strategic. Also the study found that in some of the unions the women had been able to develop solidarity between themselves and support each other when they faced problems. Where they were isolated from each other the UN Chair and members were able to dominate them more easily.

Political parties are playing an ever increasing role in the local government bodies, and local level in general. While there is interest among the parties to increase the involvement of women and the interest of women and young girls in the same, various social norms and prejudices prevent them from joining. In addition, the culture and the ways of functioning of the parties are not women friendly. The role that student wings of political parties previously had in involving and developing women and girls' leadership seems to be absent. This gap needs to be addressed by the political parties to expand their membership, develop their younger members and ensure that women and girls are encouraged to join and develop their skills and leadership. The provision of safe spaces and culturally appropriate activities could help break the barriers and hesitations that women and their families have.

One of the biggest constraints mentioned for female members to exercise their leadership was limitations to their mobility. They cannot go around (by motorcycle or other modes) as easily as men and they cannot go out at night. Some programmes have tried to emphasize that shalish should be done in daylight hours so that women complainants and shalishkars can attend. Emphasizing the use of the UP premises for meetings and for citizens to

come and meet the UP members can also minimize the differences of access between women and male members

In conclusion, we can see that female members are strategic actors who decide to contest general or reserved seats based on an assessment of the context and the factors in their favour or disfavour. Some of them have suffered in the process of confronting the UP Chair, political party or government officials but at least they have tried to contest and place their views. The overall picture emerging is of a more conscious, vocal and capable group of women leaders and public representatives who cannot be discounted by any means.

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