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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DRIVING GRASSROOTS GENDER EQUALITY: EMPOWERING WOMEN IN BANGLADESHI LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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Abstract

Bangladesh is one of the most overpopulated countries in the world where women are involved in domestic work. Political and economic empowerment is considered a male-dominated public activity. This paper aims to explore the dimensional issues and challenges faced by women representatives in Union Parishads in the decision-making process which is crucial for ensuring women's economic empowerment at the grassroots level. This study attempts to critically assess the extent of women's economic empowerment in local government institutions in Bangladesh. This paper also investigates the low rate of women holding elected positions at the grassroots level and the reasons behind their dismal performance in the objective and decision-making process and economic empowerment. From this point of view, this study has identified some factors that are negatively affecting the active participation of women representatives in the Union Parishad such as lack of education and training facilities, lack of social and cultural norms and values, lack of awareness, social constraints, family constraints, lack of family support, lack of economic awareness, lack of peer support, patriarchal mindset, lack of freedom of movement, sexual harassment, domestic violence, low status, unequal distribution of work and religious misinterpretation. Finally, this paper provides a summary of proposed improvements to the current system as well as alternative system options for enhancing women's economic empowerment in local governments in Bangladesh to achieve gender equality at the grassroots level.

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Introduction:-

The total development of a country depends on the proper use of its population, both male and female. Almost 50% population in Bangladesh is women. Nevertheless, the status of women is comparatively lower than that of men in every situation of life. Women at all levels have less access to economic opportunities and resources, but equal participation of women in economic activities is an essential prerequisite for the overall development of the country. Democracy will not be fruitful when 50% of its population does not actively participate in its economic and democratic decision-making processes. Therefore, the participation of both men and women in all development

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activities is an essential prerequisite for sustaining democracy. Economic development cannot be ensured without the active participation of 50% of the population. Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh has been a democratic, moderate Muslim country with a parliamentary system. However, there is a structure of reserved seats for women in national and local level politics and the administrative structure, culture and customs in Bangladesh are gender-biased (Nazneen and Sultan, 2010). However, women's equal right to participate in governance is a constitutionally recognized fundamental right and has been repeatedly affirmed in several laws of Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2017). Without consistent economic empowerment, fair social status and a fair economic position for women cannot be achieved or sustained (Khan and Salma, 2003).

A strong and effective local government body is a very important institution to ensure good governance and strengthen local government bodies. Representatives of local government bodies can promote greater socio-economic emancipation of the people of the country based on democratic concepts. The introduction of the Local Government/Union Parishad (UP) Ordinance 1983 saw a significant increase in the number of women in local governments than before (Ali, 1986). As a revolutionary effort, the Local Government Amendment Act, of 1997 was passed. It nominates three directly elected women members from three reserved seats in UP (Khan and Ara, 2006). Local government generally provides various services and facilities to the people of a particular area and women should be contributors and beneficiaries of such services (Kadir, 1984). Participation is not easy in economic activities at the grassroots level of local government. Once she decides, she has to convince her husband, children and her family. Overcoming all these hurdles as she runs for office, male contestants make all sorts of slurs about her. After all, when his name came to the party leaders, they did not choose his name for fear of losing that seat. Political participation allows women to shape the political agenda through participation in politics such as discussions and debates, lobbying and activism through formal and informal means. Similarly, economic empowerment allows economic activities to develop through 'grassroots participation' through various activities such as women's empowerment projects and women's activities through formal and informal channels. This is a common premise that implies and even influences most of society to think that women are incapable of economic empowerment and representation. The reason behind this is that women have to be confined within four walls to do household work only. But in reality, without meaningful representation of women, it is not possible to achieve true empowerment.

Problem Statement:-

Local government bodies are a subsystem of the national government. Active participation and representation of women in these organizations is essential from all perspectives. Economic activities and empowerment of women in this sector are not satisfactory due to socio-economic and religious constraints, and even elected women cannot effectively play their decision-making role in local government. It has now become imperative to find out the problem and take effective steps to ensure the active participation of women in decision-making processes in local government to reduce the gap between male members and women representatives (FRs). Steps should be taken to increase the number of women representatives and improve the quality of participation. Strong and effective participation of women in local government is one of the most important factors in ensuring the level of economic empowerment. Economic empowerment of women is essential for both the democratic development of the country as well as the empowerment of women in Bangladesh. The government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh implemented a quota system for women for the first time in the 1972 constitution for 10 years, with a total of 15 reserved seats for women in addition to a total of 300 general seats in the State Assembly. This quota system for women was increased to 50 seats in 2011 by the legislature in the Legislature through the 15th Amendment. Accordingly, legal provisions for reserved seats in local government were also introduced. For example, at the Union Council level, they have been in place since 1976, with direct elections to reserved seats in 1997. Limited to women in elected positions only; this is a major problem at the local government level in Bangladesh. From this perspective, this paper examines these systems and provides an overview of gender-based challenges for women representatives for economic empowerment. It also provides a summary of recommendations for ensuring gender equality at the grassroots level.

Rationale of the Study:-

Bangladesh cannot even think of a developed country until fifty percent of the total population of Bangladesh is left behind by women. To ensure this, we must guarantee women's active participation in local government along with other sectors to ensure women's economic empowerment at the grassroots level. Ensuring equal opportunities for education, creating awareness about their duties and responsibilities and increasing the number of women in

decision-making positions will lead to greater empowerment of women. Measures should be taken to increase the number of women representatives to improve the quality of economic empowerment at the grassroots level. By taking the right initiatives and formulating the right policies, the current situation will improve and many women will come forward in politics, especially in local government. Strong and effective participation of women in local government is one of the most important elements to ensure the quality of governance and strengthening of local government institutions and economic empowerment that will ensure sustainable development. The present study is conducted to understand the extent of economic empowerment of women in the local government (UP) of Bangladesh and to find out the root causes of the current status of women members in UP and to try to find ways to improve the situation. Hope it will help the country to ensure fair economic empowerment of women.

Objectives of the Study:-

To ensure maximum participation of women representatives in economic activities at the grassroots level, the researchers set the following three research objectives: i. To understand the existing status of economic empowerment of women representatives in local government at the grassroots level in Bangladesh. ii. To explore the challenges of access, participation and exercise of economic empowerment of women representatives in local government activities. iii. Finding strategies to improve women's participation and economic empowerment in local government policymaking processes at the grassroots level.

Literature Review:-

A lot of research has been done in the area of engagement in local government. In the first decades of the 21st century, we have witnessed some improvement in gender equality, but gender inequality persists in most developing countries as well as some developed countries. In Bangladesh and other developing countries, women do not have the same legal, social and economic rights compared to men. Similarly, gender inequality is pervasive in access to and dominance or control over capital, wealth, economic potential, and power and political voice (World Bank, 2001). Economic empowerment is the maddening necessity of this era. Salary and wage occupation indicate economic control and power (Elliot, 2008, p. 86). Women can receive or earn cash and this empowers women and girls to donate or contribute to family members with a strong sense of economic independence through economic empowerment. Thus, economic empowerment is a powerful tool to reduce global deprivation or poverty (Faith, 2010, p. 27). Sahay (1998) clarified the concept of economic empowerment based on the Jakarta Declaration (1994). He said, women's empowerment is not only a matter of equal consideration. Economic empowerment is described as a means by which the poor, landless, deprived and oppressed people of all societies are freed from all forms of deprivation and oppression. They can easily provide square, nutritious food and meet basic needs like shelter, clothes, medicine and clean water and other basic needs. (p. 100). Pramila Kapoor (2001) points out that women's empowerment is a process whereby women gain greater control over resources—material, human and intellectual.

Local government is a well-organized and organized social entity with a sense of cohesion. Local government summarizes an inter-sovereign governmental unit within an independent state that deals mostly with local matters, is controlled and managed by local authorities, and is subordinate to the central government in any country (Jahn, 1997). In partisan or governmental terms, it refers to the governance of a specific local or urban area, establishing a political subdivision of a nation or other political unit. Later, as a body corporate with a juridical person, it refers to a legal concept (Muttalib and Khan, 1983). According to Article 59(1) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, local government shall be allocated to each administrative unit consisting of persons elected under the Act (GoB, 1993). The grassroots level is the common people who live in rural or rural areas. UP is the lowest or last level of local government in Bangladesh known as the grassroots level political unit.

Khan and Ara (2006) conducted a study on females, involvement and authorization in local GoB. She noted that women representatives have gained a legitimate place in rural political institutions that will increase their marginal position, although they are still a minority in Bangladesh. Just having women on the council does not automatically mean that women's interests are represented in the community. Unless women's needs and interests are taken into account, without opportunities for them to participate and impact policymaking, progress interferences and forecasting, justifiable results will not come (pp. 89-90). Hossain (2015) conducted a study on women empowerment in the rural local government of Bangladesh. She noted that in order to give Bangladeshi women a space in the decision-making process, there is a need to increase the number of women representatives holding political positions at both local and national levels, and participation is considered a necessary opening

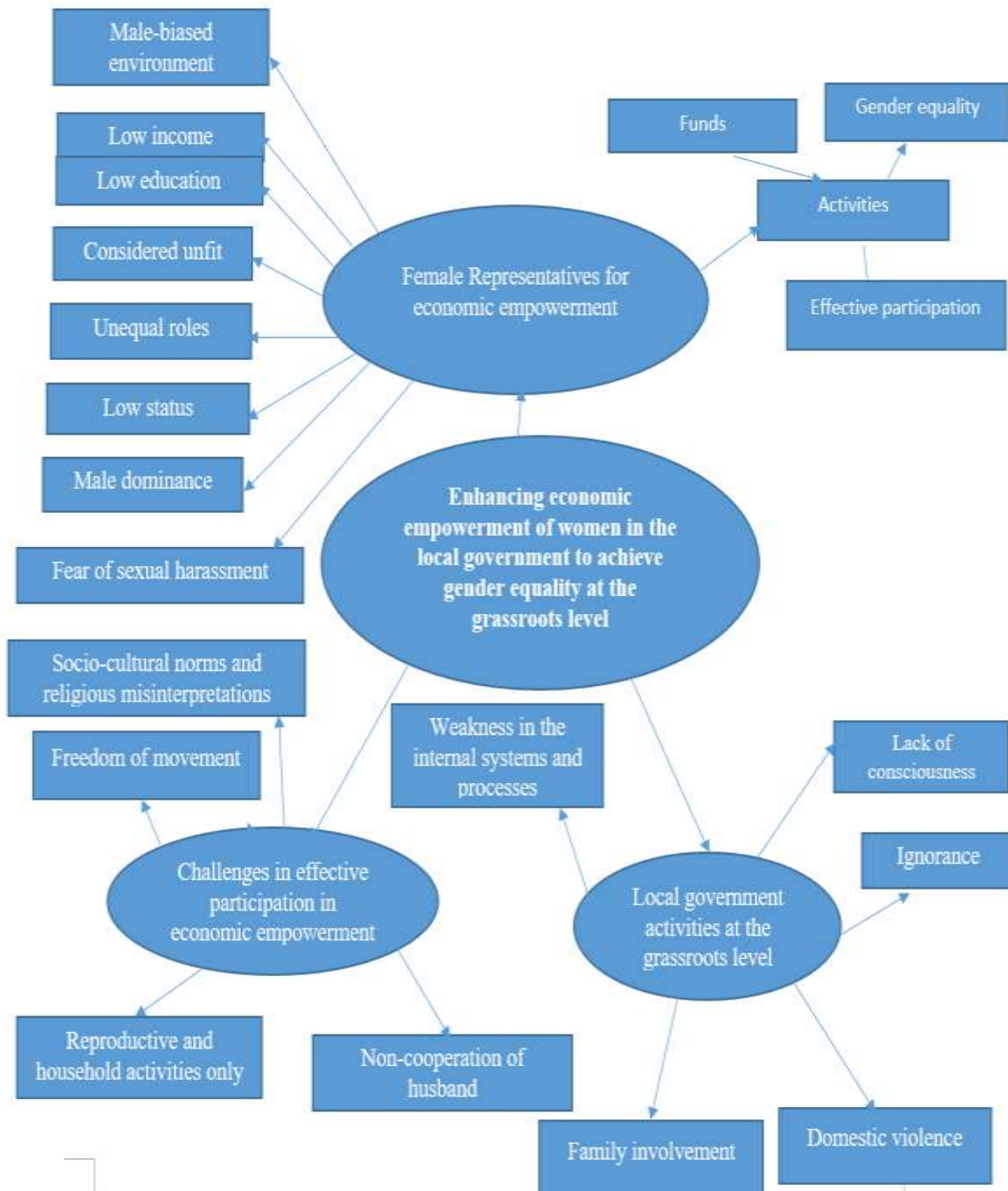
step. Empowering women representatives. (pp. 592-593). Rahman (2015) focuses on the contribution of women's participation in local government in Bangladesh. Her paper aimed to discuss the major challenges and contributions of women leaders in governance and their role and participation in UP affairs (p. 56). Haque (2016) studied the participation of women in the local government of Bangladesh. This study was conducted in four UPs of Ramu Upazila in Cox's Bazar District located on the south coast of Bangladesh. He concludes that the participation of women representatives has a positive impact on governance standards. A legitimate place in rural political institutions has been achieved even though they require lower political status than men which exacerbates their marginal position. However, they are still a minority in Bangladesh (p. 177). Imdadul and others. (2018) Analyze gender differences in the effective participation of elected representatives in UP, Bangladesh. Their study reveals that despite recent legislation, women's political participation in Bangladesh still needs to be improved (pp. 252-253). Uddin (2019) conducted a study on empowerment through participation and decision-making in local governance or UP in Bangladesh using a broad interpretive and analytical approach. He observes that participation and decision-making not only help UP to take advantage of people's feedback on service delivery but also refresh local democratic processes through genuine rather than symbolic empowerment.

A review of the related literature in the country and abroad shows that some research work has been done on women's political empowerment at the national and grassroots levels. Moreover, few types of studies were conducted on women's economic empowerment etc. at the national level. As far as we know, there has been no research on women's economic empowerment to ensure equality at the grassroots level in Bangladesh. No in-depth study has yet been done on possible measures to ensure equal representation of women at the grassroots level in Bangladesh. Hence, there is a research gap and as such, this study will try to fill this gap by equalizing power between male members and female members through the economic empowerment of women at the grassroots level in Bangladesh. Therefore, this study is very different from previous studies. All previous studies mainly focused on women's participation and political empowerment. They did not research the economic empowerment of women representatives at the grassroots level to achieve gender equality. They selected some specific areas of their research on different upazilas of Bangladesh and the number of respondents also differed from each other. However, this study will focus on the economic empowerment of women representatives at the grassroots level to achieve gender equality. We developed an analytical framework for this study in an inductive way.

Analytical Framework of the study:-

The analytical framework of this study is designed to help the authors structure their thinking and systematically think logically. This analytical framework is a model that guides and facilitates sense-making and understanding of research. To conduct a good analysis and go through all the steps in the analysis spectrum, the researcher is encouraged to use an analytical framework. This framework ensures that the data is structured in such a way that the analysis yields tangible results. The researcher decides which variables are most important and informative, thus reducing the amount of data collected and analyzed. The analysis conducted using the framework is focused on the research questions, systematic, comprehensive, transparent and minimizes the effects of selection and process bias. The analytical framework of this study (Figure 1) consists of three variables to ascertain the economic empowerment of women representatives in UP. Political empowerment is not considered in this analytical framework. They are a. Women Representative for Economic Empowerment; b. Economic activities of local government at the grassroots level; c. Challenges in effective participation for economic empowerment (Figure 1).

Figure 1:- Analytical Framework



Source: Prepared by the Authors.

Methodology:-

This study aims to analyze the participation and economic empowerment of women representatives of UP at the grass root level. The target population is women representatives of Bangladesh and UP chairmen and some government officials of respective upazilas. They are the supervising and supervising officers of UP activities. Although the male members of Uttar Pradesh are highly influential in the decision-making process, they are not considered as the target population in this study. Male members may not respond positively or consider themselves as dominant factors. The family members of women representatives especially their husbands are not considered as the target population of this study as they do not have the opportunity to participate in the coordination

meetings nor do they have any influential role in the decision-making process. Central government officials do not have an active role in decision making also. Henceforth, Central Government officials will not be considered as target population. There are eight divisions in Bangladesh. It has been conducted on a random basis in twelve upazilas (upazilas) of eleven districts from eight divisions. From large divisions like Dhaka and Chittagong, as well as Sylhet as a remote division, two or more upazilas are considered as the research sample. For data collection, two types of questionnaires are used. One question paper was for grassroots level women representatives and another question paper was for upazila government officials or UP chairmen. To balance the survey, 150 women representatives and 50 chairmen/government officials were selected for data collection from different 12 localities. Thus, the study area represents the whole of Bangladesh. Two types of samples were used for analysis. In the first case women UP members elected from reserved seats are interviewed. In the study area, there were no women members elected from general seats. The researcher selected the participants who were available and accessible at that time. In the second case, the UP chairman and government officials were interviewed using a research questionnaire, face-to-face conversations, Zoom meetings or social media. The author used a convenience sampling technique for the research purpose. For one questionnaire women representatives of different UPs of twelve upazilas are the respondents and for another questionnaire the government officials of twelve upazilas and chairmen of different UPs of twelve upazilas are the respondents. Moreover, 26 UP chairmen and 24 government officials were interviewed from the selected upazilas. A total of 12 upazila executive officers were interviewed. Structured and open-ended questionnaires were developed for the interviews. Two different types of questionnaires (Questionnaire-1 and 2) were developed for two different groups of samples. Both open and closed questions are included. Questionnaire-1 was used for women UP members and Questionnaire-2 for key informants (government officials) and UP chairmen. The questionnaire was translated into Bengali language for the understanding of the respondents. Primary data was collected through face-to-face interviews and questionnaires. Secondary Data Information was collected from local and foreign authors books and articles from print and electronic media and internet. Apart from this, the local government system of Bangladesh was also discussed.

Results:-

This study provides two types of results based on separate two types of questionnaires.

Data Analysis for UP Members

Data analysis for UP members is shown chronologically according to the questionnaire.

Educational Qualification of the Female UP Members

In the study area, the researcher tried to find out the educational level of local government representatives (women members of UP). From Table 1, we found the information that among our respondents 22% of respondents have educational qualifications less than fifth class and 31.33% of respondents have educational qualifications up to eighth class. In total, about 53.33% (22+31.33) of UP members attend school only up to 8th standard. Only 2.66% (1.33+1.33) of the respondents have completed undergraduate and graduate-level degrees. All of the government officials interviewed noted that the educational qualification of most of the female representatives was below the 10th standard. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) Population and Housing Census 2022 revealed that the literacy rate in 2022 is 74.66% which was only 51.77% in the previous census conducted in 2011. According to this preliminary report by BBS, the literacy rate is 81.28% in urban areas and 71.56% in rural areas. The rate is higher in the male population which is 76.56%, while in the female population is 72.82%. Hence, there is a disparity in literacy rates between urban versus rural and male versus female. Therefore, the level of education of local women politicians is not satisfactory. This is because the average education rate in Bangladesh is not high, especially for women. High school and college dropout rates are high. The second reason behind this is that educated or highly educated women are not going to local government at the grassroots level.

Table 1:- Educational Qualification of the Female UP Members.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Within class five	33	22
Within class eight	47	31.33
Class ten or Secondary School Certificate	61	40.67
Below class twelve or Higher Secondary School Certificate	5	3.34
Honor's degree	2	1.33

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Master's degree	2	1.33
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Main Occupation of the Female UP Members

Table 2 displays the percentage of significant occupations or sources of income of female UP members in the study area. From the data, we can see that the majority of women participating in local-level politics are housewives (81.33%). They have no source of income or experience of any kind of service or job. 13.33% of the respondents depend on agriculture as their main occupation, 2.67% on business and 2.67% on others (teaching).

Table 2:- Main Occupation of the Female UP Members.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Housewife	122	81.33
Agriculture	20	13.33
Business	4	2.67
Other	4	2.67
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Main Earnings Person in the Family

Table 3 shows the percentage of main income earners in the household of female members of UP in the study area. The table shows that 16.67% of female representatives are the main earners in their family and in 72% of cases husbands are the main earners. On the other hand (6.67%+4.67%) in 11.34% of cases depend on the income of their father and others (brother, son). From this analysis, it is very clear that the female representatives are still dependent on the income of the husband and others.

Table 3:- Main Earnings Person in the Family.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
You	25	16.66
Your Husband	108	72
Your father	10	6.67
Other	7	4.67
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Decision Maker in the Family

Table 4 shows the percentage of main decision makers in households of female UP members of UP in the study area. People with low educational qualifications cannot participate in decision-making. Among those with low education, the participation rate in decision-making is very low, only 16% and the remaining 84% are influenced by their husbands and fathers and others (brothers, sons). Among them, the husband is the most dominant (72.66%).

Table 4:- Decision maker in the family.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
You	24	16
Your Husband	109	72.66
Your father	10	6.67
Other	7	4.67
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Factors for Moving into Politics

Table 5 shows the percentage of reasons for women members of UP to join politics in the study area. When asked about the reasons why women representatives came into politics, 23.34% of the respondents said that they came into politics for their own sake, 20% for the sake of their family members, 37.33% to serve the people, 33.33% to exercise power and 2% other (encourage women about politics).

Table 5:- Factors for Moving into Politics (Multiple answers).

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Own interest	36	23.34
Interest of your family member	30	20
To serve the people	56	37.33
To exercise power	50	33.33
Other	3	2

Source: Questionnaire

Coordination Meetings were held in UP

Table 6 shows the percentage of coordination meetings held in UP from July 2020 to June 2021 in the study area. As per the Act, there is a provision to hold 12 coordination meetings per financial year for each UP where 84.67% of the respondents mentioned that 10-12 meetings were held every year. On the other hand, 4.67% opted for 4-6 meetings.

Table 6:- Coordination meetings were held in UP from July 2020 to June 2021.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
1 - 3	8	5.33
4 - 6	7	4.67
7 - 9	8	5.33
10 - 12	127	84.67
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Attendance at the Coordination Meeting

Table 7 shows the percentage of attendance of women UP members in coordination meetings in UP from July 2020 to June 2021 in the study area. According to this table, 84.67% of women delegates attended 10-12 meetings which is very significant in terms of sincere attendance from July 2020 to June 2021. In contrast, only 5.33% of respondents attended 1 to 3 meetings.

Table 7:- Attendance in coordination meeting from July 2020 to June 2021.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
1 - 3	8	5.33
4 - 6	7	4.67
7 - 9	8	5.33
10 - 12	127	84.67
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Opinions Given in the Meeting

Table 8 shows the percentage of propensity to give opinions in the meeting of women members of UP in the study area. This table indicates that from July 2020 to June 2021 in 47.33% of cases,

Table 8:- Number of opinions in the meeting from July 2020 to June 2021.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
0	8	5.34
1 - 5	71	47.33
6 - 10	33	22
11 - 15	17	11.33
16 - 20	9	6
21 - 25	3	2
26 - 30	3	2
31 - 35	2	1.34
36 - 40	2	1.33
>40	2	1.33
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

1 to 5 opinions were given in the meeting which was the maximum for giving opinions. Whereas 22% were given as 6-10 opinions, 11.33% as 11-15 opinions, 6% as 16-20 opinions and 5.34% as 0 opinions. It is very significant that only (2;2;1.34;1.33;1.33) 8% of views were given from July 2020 to June 2021.

Number of Opinions Accepted in the Meeting

Table 9 shows the number percentage of trends in terms of opinions taken in women members meeting of UP in the study area. According to Table 9, 1 to 5 opinions were received in 60% of cases from July 2020 to June 2021 which was the highest in receiving opinions. Whereas, 18% as 6-10 opinion, 5.33% as 11-15 opinion, 2.67% as 16-20 opinion and 8.67% as 0 opinion were accepted in the meeting. It is very significant that only (1.33; 1.34; 1.33; 1.33; 0) 5.33% of opinions were received in the same meeting.

Table 9:- Numbers of opinions accepted in the meeting from July 2020 to June 2021.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
0	13	8.67
1 - 5	90	60
6 - 10	27	18
11 - 15	8	5.33
16 - 20	4	2.67
21 - 25	2	1.33
26 - 30	2	1.34
31 - 35	2	1.33
36 - 40	2	1.33
>40	0	0
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Concern about Enhancing the Economic Empowerment of Women in the Local Government to Achieve Gender Equality at the Grassroots Level will Change the Decision-Making Process.

Economic empowerment of women in local government will transform the decision-making process to achieve gender equality at the grassroots level. Table 10 shows that the percentage of women UP members concerned about increasing women's economic empowerment in local government to achieve gender equality at the grassroots level would change the decision-making process in the study. Referring to Table 10, the respondent's answers show that in 82.67% of cases,

Table 10:- Concern about enhancing economic empowerment of women in the local government.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
As same as before	11	7.33
Positive changes	124	82.67
Negative changes	7	4.67
I don't know	8	5.33
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

female representatives have a positive change attitude. Although only 4.67% of the respondents were concerned about the negative change in attitude. In 7.33% of cases, there was no change in their attitude and 5.33% had no answer.

Positive Changes of Female UP members

Table 11 shows the percentage of positive change in female UP members in the study area. According to Table 11, 50.67% of the respondents gave their opinion that male colleagues sometimes give more importance to the opinion of female representatives as a positive motivation. Whereas, 40% of the respondents are motivated by their social standing for their positive attitude. Similarly, 41.33% of women representatives are positive about being economically empowered, 32.67% for financial benefits, 34% for increased confidence and 5.33% for other reasons (increased standard of living).

Table 11:- Positive changes in female UP members' situation and type changes (Multiple Answers).

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Male colleague gives more importance to my opinion	76	50.67
My social status has developed	60	40
I feel economically empowered	62	41.33
I have financially benefitted	49	32.67
My confidence has increased	51	34
Other	8	5.33

Source: Questionnaire

FR's Family Members Should Support in Their Work as a Local Government Representative

Table 12 shows the percentage of family support status for working as local government representatives. 84% of women representatives strongly agree with the opinion about the support of family members as local representatives, while 8% agree with this opinion. In contrast, only 4% were neutral, 2% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed with this opinion.

Table 12:- FR's family members should support in their work as a local government representative.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree=1	3	2
Disagree=2	3	2
Neutral=3	6	4
Agree=4	12	8
Strongly Agree=5	126	84
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Female Representative Working Environment

Table 13 shows the working environment percentage status of female representatives in the study area. 80.67% of female representatives strongly agreed with the opinion about the wellness of the work environment. While 9.33% agreed with this opinion. In contrast, only 5.33% were neutral, 2.67% disagreed and only 2% strongly disagreed with this opinion. Some respondents also mentioned during the focus group discussions that they were sometimes sexually harassed by their male colleagues. Due to this, they are absent from UP meetings and regular official duties considering it as sexual harassment.

Table 13:- Female Representative working environment- needs to be sound.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree=1	3	2
Disagree=2	4	2.67
Neutral=3	8	5.33
Agree=4	14	9.33
Strongly Agree=5	121	80.67
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Decision-Making Process of Women Members from Reserved Seats in UPs Equal as Male Members in General Seats

Members of reserved constituencies in UP are equal to male members of general constituencies. Table 14 shows the percentage of female members from reserved seats participating in the decision-making process in UP as equal to male members in general seats in the study area. According to Table 14, 81.34% of female representatives strongly agreed with the views of family members as local representatives about the decision-making process compared to male members. While 9.33% agreed with this opinion. In contrast, only 5.34% were neutral, 2% agreed and 2% strongly disagreed with this opinion.

Table 14:- Women members from reserved seats should take part in the decision-making process in UPas equal as male members in general seats.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree=1	3	2
Disagree=2	3	2
Neutral=3	8	5.34
Agree=4	14	9.33
Strongly Agree=5	122	81.34
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Women's Participation in the Election of Local Government

Table 15:-Shows the electoral participation percentage of women members of UP in the study area. According to Table 15, 82.66% of female representatives strongly agreed with the opinion about the participation of family members in elections as local representatives. Whereas 8% agreed with this opinion. In contrast, only 4.67% were neutral, 2.67% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed with this opinion.

Table 15 Women have to participate in the election of local government

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree=1	3	2
Disagree=2	4	2.67
Neutral=3	7	4.67
Agree=4	12	8
Strongly Agree=5	124	82.66
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Women-Oriented Budgetary System

Table 16 shows the percentage of the existing budget system of women members of UP in the study area. According to the data provided, 82.67% of women representatives strongly agree with the opinion about women-oriented budgeting by local representatives and 8.67% agree with this opinion. In contrast, only 4% were neutral, 2% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed with this opinion. Table 16 shows the percentage of knowledge of women representatives about laws, rules, manuals and circulars related to UP or local government in the study area. This table shows that 78.67% of female representatives strongly agree with the opinion and 10.67% agree with this opinion. Whereas only 6.66% are neutral, 2% disagree and 2% strongly disagree with this opinion.

Table 16:- The existing budgetary system should be women-oriented.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree=1	3	2
Disagree=2	3	2
Neutral=3	7	4.66
Agree=4	13	8.67
Strongly Agree=5	124	82.67
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Enough Knowledge of Female Representatives about Laws, Rules, Manuals, and Circulars on UPor Local Government

Table 17 shows the percentages related to the opinion of the existing norms and laws to enhance the economic empowerment of women in UP in the study area. From the data, a total (48%) of members are of the opinion that the existing laws and regulations are sufficient to increase economic empowerment of women in UP and other (52%) members are against this opinion. However, women members who have access to training have sufficient knowledge of existing laws. Likewise, members who are untrained are more likely to have trouble gathering sufficient knowledge of existing laws, rules, and regulations.

Table 17:- Female representatives should have enough knowledge of laws, rules, manuals, and circulars on UP or local government.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Yes	24	48
No	26	52
Total	50	100

Source: Questionnaire

Enhancing the Economic Empowerment of Women in the Local Government will help to achieve Gender Equality at the Grassroots Level

Empowering women in local government will help achieve gender equality at the grassroots level. Table 18 shows the percentage of conditions for increasing women's economic empowerment in local government that will help achieve gender equality at the grassroots level in the study. Table 18 shows that 80% of women representatives strongly agreed with the opinion about enhancing economic empowerment and 10.67% agreed with this opinion. On the contrary, only 6% were neutral, 1.33% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed with this opinion.

Table 18:- Enhancing the economic empowerment of women in the local government will help to achieve gender equality at the grassroots level.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree=1	3	2
Disagree=2	2	1.33
Neutral=3	9	6
Agree=4	16	10.67
Strongly Agree=5	120	80
Total	150	100

Source: Questionnaire

Data Analysis for UP Chairman and Government Officials

Satisfaction of UP Chairman and Government Officials Considering the Participation of the Female Members in UPs

Table 19 shows the percentage of satisfaction of UP chairmen and government officials considering the participation of women members in UP in terms of research. From Table 19, it is clearly visible that 12% of the respondents were satisfied with the participation of women members in UP activities while 88% of the respondents were not satisfied with the participation of women members in UP activities due to multiple reasons.

Table 19:- Participation of women in the post of UP member's satisfaction in UP.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Yes	6	12
No	44	88
Total	50	100

Source: Questionnaire

Educational Qualification of Women Members in UP

Table 20 shows the estimates made by the UP Chairman and government officials regarding the percentage of educational qualification of women members in UPs in the field of research. From the data, we found that 16% of our respondents have educational qualifications less than fifth class and 28% of respondents have educational qualifications up to eighth class. In total, about 44% of UP members (16+28) attend school only up to 8th standard. On the other hand, 42% of the respondents had educational qualifications up to 10th standard. Only 10% of respondents (6+4) have completed undergraduate and graduate-level degrees.

Table 20:- Educational qualification of women members in UP.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
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Within class five	8	16
Within class eight	14	28
Class ten or Secondary School Certificate	21	42
Below class twelve or Higher Secondary School Certificate	2	4
Honor's degree	3	6
Master's degree	2	4
Total	50	100

Source: Questionnaire

Main Occupation of the Women Representatives

Table 21 shows the percentage of main occupation or source of income of female members of UP in the study area. From the data, we can see that the majority of women participating in local-level politics are housewives (72%). They have no source of income or any kind of job experience. 12% of respondents depend on agricultural income as their main occupation, 6% on business, 4% on government jobs and 6% on others (private jobs like NGOs or social workers).

Table 21:- Main occupation of the women representatives.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Housewife	36	72
Agriculture	6	12
Business	3	6
Government service	2	4
Other	3	6
Total	50	100

Source: Questionnaire

Performance of Women Members in General Seats Compared to Men

Table 22 shows the performance percentage of female members in general seats compared to male members of UP in the study area. According to table 22, it is very clear that the performance of women members was 72% better than men in general seats and 6% was a very good level. While the performance of 18% was average and 4% was not satisfactory level.

Table 22:- Performance of women members in general seats compared to men.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Very good	3	6
Good	36	72
Average	9	18
Not satisfactory	2	4
Total	50	100

Source: Questionnaire

Performance of Women Members in Reserved Seats

Table 23 shows the percentage of performance of women members in reserved seats of UP in the study area. Table 23 shows that the performance of women members in reserved seats was 66% good and 8% very good level. Whereas, the performance of 22% was average and 4% was not satisfactory level.

Table 23:- Performance of women members in reserved seats.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Very good	4	8
Good	33	66
Average	11	22
Not satisfactory	2	4
Total	50	100

Source: Questionnaire

Women's Member Opinions are Accepted or Welcomed by Male Counterparts

Table 24 shows the extent to which women members' views are accepted or welcomed by UP's male counterparts in the study area. According to Table 24, 76% of the respondents gave their opinion that male colleagues sometimes give more importance to the opinion of female representatives as a positive motivation. Whereas, 4% of respondents always give importance to male colleagues. Similarly, 20% of female representatives were negative about not getting any feedback from male colleagues.

Table 24:- What extent women's member opinions are accepted or welcomed by male counterparts

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Always given importance	2	4
Sometimes given importance	38	76
Never given importance	10	20
Total	50	100

Source: Questionnaire

Budget Allocation/ Management in the UP Encourages Women's Participation

Table 25 shows the percentage of budget allocations/management in UPs that favor women's participation in UPs in the study area. From Table 25, it can be seen that 20% of the respondents were in favor of budget allocation/management in UP which is a positive sign for women's participation in the field of research. On the other hand, 80% of respondents were not in favor of budget allocation/management in UP which is a negative sign for women's participation in research. They mentioned the appropriate distribution and increase of the allocated budget. As a result, women representatives can effectively and efficiently participate in local development by implementing all women-related activities.

Table 25:- Whether existing budget allocation/ management in the UP encourages women's participation.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Yes	10	20
No	40	80
Total	50	100

Source: Questionnaire

Opportunity of training for the UP members regarding the functions of UP

Table 26 shows the percentage of training opportunities for UP members in the study area. Table 26 shows that 16% of the respondents were in favor of training opportunities for UP members in the study area. In contrast, 84% of respondents were not in favor of training opportunities for UP members in the study area.

Table 26:- Opportunity of training for the UPmembers regarding the functions of UP.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Yes	8	16
No	42	84
Total	50	100

Source: Questionnaire

Training Program is Necessary or Not

Table 27 shows the percentage of training programs for women members of UP that are required or not in research. Table 27 reflects that 88% of the respondents were in favor of opportunities for training requirements for UP members such as capacity and skill development training, administration management and local government laws and regulations, public service-related training, ICT training, and intensive training to develop UP functions, skills and knowledge. Upgrading existing various government committees, etc. Whereas, 12% of the respondents were not in favor of opportunities and training requirements for UP members.

Table 27:- Whether a training program is necessary.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Yes	44	88
No	6	12

Total	50	100
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Source: Questionnaire

Enhancing the Economic Empowerment of Women in the Local Government Can Achieve Gender Equality at the Grassroots Level

Table 28 shows the percentages for increasing women's economic empowerment in local government that can achieve gender equality at the grassroots level. This table reflects that 94% of the respondents were in favor of increasing the economic empowerment of women in local government which can achieve gender equality at the grassroots level. Whereas, 6% of the respondents were not in favor of increasing the economic empowerment of women in local government which can achieve gender equality at the grassroots level in this study.

Table 28:- Whether you think enhancing economic empowerment of women in the local government can achieve gender equality at the grassroots level.

Response	Respondent Number	Percentage (%)
Yes	47	94
No	3	6
Total	50	100

Source: Questionnaire

Discussions:-

The main thrust of this study was to ensure women's empowerment in economic activities and to understand the existing status of economic empowerment of women representatives in local government to ensure equality at the grassroots level in Bangladesh. Another dimension was to explore the challenges of access, participation and exercise of economic empowerment of women representatives in local government activities. Additionally, the final dimension of this study was to find strategies to improve women's participation and economic empowerment in local government decision-making processes at the grassroots level. statistical tools; Percentage analysis was used to analyze the status of economic empowerment of women representatives at the grassroots level in Bangladesh. From a review of the literature and analytical framework, it appears that there is a direct need for equal participation of women in mainstream economic activities in Bangladesh. Analysis of the data shows that society needs to deconstruct the stereotype of girls by restricting them to domestic work only. All institutions (state, family and community) need to address the specific needs of women such as bridging education gaps, rethinking gender roles, gender division of labor and tackling biased attitudes. Women choose to contest reserved seats rather than general seats due to less serious competition and more available posts, resulting in a lower threshold for women candidates. Some women representatives have also indicated that they believe they need more resources or economic empowerment at their disposal as members of reserved seats compared to members of general seats (McDermott, 2015). Women have gained a legitimate place in local government which may increase their marginal position, although they are still a short group.

Unlike general seats, reserved seats in UPs do not have an elected ward but have three wards represented by the members. The reserved seat system in UP is designed in a way that results in overlapping mandates for reserved and general seat holders: wards have both a general seat (almost always male) member and an additional (female) representative. So, the representatives of the overall system can easily perform their duties independently, but the representatives of the reserved seats cannot and they keep themselves aloof. Within the study area, most of the respondents said that they face problems due to overlapping mandates with general seat holders. The role of representatives of reserved seats is not clear in the law. Voters and other stakeholders also do not fully understand or value the function of additional reserved seat members. Participation and decision-making by elected women members in governing bodies are generally negligible, as they are not given any specific responsibilities. Women delegates remain unaware of their responsibilities and duties as they do not receive proper training or workshops on their activities as UP members. In terms of research, some of the respondents said that they had received training and most of the respondents had not received minimal training for capacity development.

Due to a lack of awareness and awareness about the economic empowerment situation it is very confusing for new women representatives to adapt and deal with economic empowerment issues. The study revealed that most of the women representatives in the study area do not have sufficient knowledge about existing laws, rules and regulations. Women representatives have to accept the mandate imposed on them and bear the burden of

society. They have to endure the deprivation and degraded status in silence. The patriarchal society in Bangladesh enforces norms that affect women's self-confidence, limit their access to resources and information, and thus place them in a lower position than men. The survey found that most of the women representatives depend on their husbands' income and the main decision maker in their family is their husband. Women are considered only capable and responsible for doing household chores. Unequal distribution of household work between men and women is one of the main reasons for this. Female representatives have to devote more time to housework and child care than men. Hence, it is very difficult for women representatives to devote sufficient time and attention to outside jobs apart from economic activities. Non-cooperation from family is another obstacle to their participation in official work. Women are not considered equal in society. Sometimes they are treated harshly by their peers and society. They underestimate the value of reserved seats. The lack of cooperation of male representatives in local government is a significant obstacle to the decision-making effectiveness of women representatives. Although equal rights of women representatives are guaranteed in the constitution, they are not seen as equal in practice. The role of female representatives is only closely tied to their reproductive and domestic activities. Women representatives are also considered unfit to carry out economic and social affairs. This is due to a lack of clarity in the role structure of women representatives in local government. Female members of reserved seats are sometimes considered less legitimate than those elected from general seats and may face discrimination from their male colleagues in general seats. Holding a reserved seat is less prestigious than being elected from a general seat. The survey found that most of the respondents faced some form of discrimination while working as public representatives. Survey respondents noted that if they had an opinion on something, their opinion was often given little weight and sometimes none at all by their male colleagues.

Finally, it was found that despite facing numerous problems in UP, the performance of women on qualitative and quantitative indicators is in no way inferior to that of male members. Based on the author's experience, the elected women members of UP have shown impressive performance, especially in ensuring significant changes in health, education, access to basic services and community living.

Expected outcome of this study:-

If the views and economic empowerment of women representatives are well implemented, the rural economy will change dramatically as shown in the above tables. Data analysis shows that when male colleagues give more importance to the opinions of female representatives, their social status is developed according to 50.67% and 40% of the respondents as shown in the concerned table and they feel economically empowered according to 41.33% of the respondents. They have benefited financially and their confidence level has also increased by 32.67% and 34% of the respondents also from Table 11. From the answers of the respondents, women representatives feel more encouraged to do women-friendly activities, projects and programs. As a result, rural women will have more opportunities for economic activities and they will be able to contribute to their families. In addition, they make themselves financially prosperous by engaging in income-generating activities. Economic empowerment of women representatives at the grassroots level will bring about another change that will increase the consciousness, rights and status of women. At the same time, domestic violence will decrease and family members will show a more supportive attitude towards them in all activities. Women's empowerment projects will be developed and women's employment will increase at the grassroots level as in Japan. The decision-making power of women representatives will also increase and this will bring positive change in their situation. The economic condition of rural areas will also improve and girls will also be motivated to go to school for higher education. Child marriage and violence against women will also decrease. Social and religious leaders will bring a positive attitude towards them. As a result, through the economic empowerment of women representatives, Bangladesh will see a gender-balanced society at the grassroots level.

Conclusion:-

The process of increasing women's economic empowerment in local government in Bangladesh to achieve gender equality at the grassroots level warrants further in-depth study in the future. This study is done at the micro level (only 12 upazilas) and hence, this study cannot comment on a macro level. As a result, the author does not confirm whether the micro-level economic empowerment of women representatives in Bangladesh has been carried over to the national level. No empirical research has yet been conducted on the economic empowerment of women representatives at the collective level in Bangladesh. Future researchers can also empirically examine the strong relationship between the performance of local government institutions and the economic empowerment of women representatives at the grassroots level in Bangladesh. In a developing country like Bangladesh, it is now essential to

take appropriate steps to empower or motivate women in economic activities and ensure their effective participation in all activities of UP for the development of the country. It is the main duty of government, society and individuals to come forward and take necessary steps in this regard. From previous research findings and respondents' comments, these are some of the steps that can be taken as solutions to overcome the barriers. These include ensuring education for all and enacting and implementing new laws and training or workshops to address these existing barriers. Specific recommendations are considered as those recommendations which will be implemented at the grass root level by the concerned organization or family or local government (Upzilla Parishad/UP) such as proper distribution of responsibilities, raising opinion, acceptance in meetings, proper monitoring and supervision, awareness raising, awareness programs for the society, changes in male members' attitudes and family support.

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