Perceptions and Major Challenges of Women Leaders in the Lowest Level Local Government in Bangladesh: Unheard Voices and Realities from the Grassroots

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Abstract

This paper is about perceptions and challenges of the women leaders (WLs) in the grassroots based local government in Bangladesh, i.e. Union Parishad (UP). Local government of Bangladesh has a history of 144 years but women's representation is ensured just only 2 decades ago. Within the span of 2 decades, WLs are yet to ensure their effective participation and still they are to struggle a lot due to some built-in problems of the UP. Against such a context, the paper is aimed at unraveling the research questions: i) How women leaders perceived their roles and participation in the UP affairs? ii) Do they face challenges in ensuring their perceived roles and responsibilities in the UP and if so, what are those challenges? and to fulfill research objectives: i) To tap perceptions of the WLs in identifying their roles and responsibilities in the UP affairs; ii) To identify the major challenges of the WLs encountered in ensuring their role and participation in the UP. The paper is based on phenomenological approach which was supported by FGDs, case study, content analysis and observation methods. The findings of the paper reveal that women leaders have internalized their role and participation rightly in the UP. The WLs perceived participation as taking part in areas of important decision-making and upholding their voices and choices for the interest of their constituents. The WLs identified major challenges towards playing their role and participation in the UP such as i) patriarchy or male domination, ii) corruption and iii) faulty legal provision imposed upon them. All these problems are in general governance problems of Bangladesh society. Solution might be changing the legal and structural arrangements in the UP. More affirmative action such as education facilities should be expanded in the society to enhance women's participation and to modify value system as traditional values help perpetuate patriarchy and other social ills.

Keyword: Women leaders, roles and challenges, local government, Bangladesh

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การรับรู้และประเด็นท้าทายของผู้นำสตรีในหน่วยการปกครองท้องถิ่นระดับเล็กที่สุดของประเทศบังคลาเทศ: เสียงที่ไม่เคยได้ยินและความเป็นจริงจากชนชั้นรากหญ้า

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีเนื้อหาเกี่ยวกับความสามารถในการรับรู้และประเด็นท้าทายของผู้นำสตรีใน ระดับรากหญ้าของรัฐบาลท้องถิ่นในประเทศบังคลาเทศ อาทิ สภาชุมชน ซึ่งเป็นรัฐบาลท้องถิ่นของ บังคลาเทศที่มีประวัติยาวนานมา 144 ปี แต่เพิ่งจะมีตัวแทนของผู้หญิงเพียงสองทศวรรษที่ผ่านมา เท่านั้น โดยยังไม่ได้มีส่วนร่วมมากนักและยังต้องเผชิญกับปัญหาภายในมากมาย จากสภาพการณ์ ดังกล่าว บทความนี้จึงมีเป้าหมายเพื่อตอบคำถามที่ว่า 1) ผู้นำสตรีรับรู้เกี่ยวกับบทบาทของตนเอง รวมทั้งมีส่วนร่วมในสภาชุมชนอย่างไรบ้าง 2) พวกเขาเหล่านั้นเผชิญกับประเด็นท้าทายในเรื่อง การรับรู้บทบาทตนเองและความรับผิดชอบในสภาชุมชนหรือไม่อย่างไร เพื่อให้เข้าใจถึงการรับรู้ ของผู้นำสตรี หน้าที่ความรับผิดชอบของตนเอง รวมทั้งประเด็นท้าทายที่ส่งเสริมบทบาทและ การมีส่วนร่วมในสภาชุมชน การศึกษาครั้งนี้อยู่บนพื้นฐานของแนวทางเชิงปรากฏการณ์ โดยใช้วิธี การสัมมนากลุ่ม กรณีศึกษา การวิเคราะห์เนื้อหา และการสังเกตการณ์ ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ผู้นำสตรี ความเข้าใจในบทบาทและการมีส่วนร่วมของตนเองที่ถูกต้องในสภาชุมชน โดยรับรู้ว่าเป็นส่วนหนึ่ง ในการตัดสินใจและเป็นกระบอกเสียงเพื่อผลประโยชน์ของสภา สำหรับปัจจัยหลักที่มีต่อบทบาทและ การมีส่วนร่วมในสภาชุมชน ประกอบด้วย การปกครองซึ่งครอบงำโดยมีผู้ชาย ปัญหาการคอร์รัปชั่น และการละเมิดกฎเสียเอง ซึ่งปัญหาทั้งหมดนี้เป็นปัญหาทั่วไปเกี่ยวกับธรรมาภิบาลในสังคมบังคลาเทศ การแก้ไขควรต้องปรับปรุงกฎหมายและการจัดระเบียบในสภาชุมชนเสียใหม่ รวมทั้งการดำเนินการอื่นๆ เช่น การเพิ่มสิ่งอำนวยความสะดวกในการศึกษาเพื่อส่งเสริมการมีส่วนร่วมของผู้หญิง การปรับค่านิยม ดั้งเดิมที่เน้นบทบาทของชาย รวมทั้งความบกพร่องประเด็นอื่นๆ ของสังคม

คำสำคัญ: ผู้นำสตรี บทบาทและความท้าทาย องค์กรปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่น บังคลาเทศ

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1. Research Context and the Problematic

The Union Parishad (thereafter UP) is the lowest unit of local government (LG) in Bangladesh that began functioning in 1870 during the British colonial rule. Since the colonial era until 1976 there was no provision for women representation in the UP in Bangladesh. In a real sense, women's representation in the UP was ensured in the LG Ordinance of 1997, which made a provision of reservation of one-third seats for women members. During the prolonged 144 (1870 to 2014) years of LG history, the most memorable period for women's representation was this 17 years that spanned from 1997 to 2014. However within these 2 decades women leaders (thereafter WLs) tried to ensure their rights and shares for coexisting with their male counterparts in the UP. To establish enshrined rights and enjoy exact role of the WLs in the UP will largely depends on their proper understanding of the roles and perceptions of participation. Based on this rationale, an attempt was made to know the perception of participation from the perspective of WLs in the UP. Moreover, it was assumed that in enjoying their roles and rights WLs have to face challenges in the UP affairs. Against such a backdrop this paper aimed at tapping the perception of role and participation of WLs perceived by them and to record grim realities in facing the major challenges towards playing their role and ensuring participation in the UP affairs in Bangladesh.

2. Research Questions and Objectives

The article poses the following research questions to be answered:

i) How women leaders perceived their roles and participation in the UP affairs?

ii) Do they face challenges in ensuring their perceived roles and responsibilities in UP and if so, what are those challenges?

The objectives of the paper are:

i) To tap perceptions of the women leaders in identifying their roles and responsibilities in the UP.

ii) To identify the major challenges of women leaders encountered in ensuring their role and participation in the UP affairs.

3. Methodology Followed

This paper is based on qualitative method as it is a bottom up method, which is naturalistic, holistic, views social phenomena from the perspectives of participants and it helps to obtain a "legitimate mode of social and human science exploration" (Creswell, 2013). The main purpose of qualitative research is to describe and understand social phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. The basic feature of qualitative data lies with their "richness and holism", with strong potential for revealing complexity, such data provide "thick description" that are vivid, are nested in a real context, and have a ring of truth that has a strong impact on the readers (Greertz, 1973). For better understanding, an interpretive approach was adopted, which aims to study social reality in natural settings and attempts to make sense of phenomena from the perspectives of research participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 3).

The rationale for using qualitative method is to tap knowledge of perception of participation perceived by the WLs and to identify the challenges of participation of WLs in the UP as experienced by them. It was deemed that by using qualitative methods, lived and rich experiences, multiple realities, diverse dimensions and dynamics of challenges of participation of WLs could be explored. Qualitative methods will help explore and analyze participants' own experiences, understandings and commonalities of their lives (Clisby, Holdsworth, Fairbank, & Miles, 2007: 8). Likewise, the very nature of my inquiry calls for using qualitative method as it is deemed that it can rightly help explore the research questions and objectives properly, surely, which cannot be obtained otherwise.

To know the perceptions of the WLs about their roles and participation, and the major challenges faced by them phenomenological approach was adopted as "phenomenological study describes the common meaning of several individuals or their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon. Phenomenology tends to look at data thematically to extract essence and essentials of participants' meaning" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014: 8). Phenomenology was substantiated by case study and FGDs methods to cross check and validate the findings obtained from interview. Author's own observation gained through his prolonged (more or less about 100 hours) field work has also been incorporated to prepare this paper.

There are 4498 Union Parishads in Bangladesh. To make the study credible and authentic, primary data were collected from 19 UPs from different socio-cultural zones[1] of Bangladesh. The WLs were interviewed separately so that they can share their experiences and realities properly, whereas in few cases some male members were also interviewed for having their perceptions and better understanding the problematic. The whole discussion was recorded with the informed consent of the participants and afterwards transcription was prepared into English from Bengali. In line with the research questions and objectives, data were then organized in to different thematic areas and thereafter reducing data from 21 themes, 4 themes were finalized through a rigorous process. For analyzing the essence or meaning of the textual descriptions obtained from the participants, content analysis method was adopted using the relevant literatures from research reports, books, journal articles and so on through a heuristic search from NIDA library and online both.

4. Women's Representation in the Local Government in Bangladesh

Local government (LG) in this sub-continent has its deep roots in the past. The foundation of today's UP was laid down during the British colonial rule with the Village Chowkidary Act of 1870. The ending of British rule in India gave birth of two different states such as India and Pakistan in 1947. Afterwards, Bangladesh achieved its independence from the internal colonialism[2] of Pakistan in 1971 and inherited LG systems from Pakistan with some modifications in its structure and composition. Since from 1870 the functionaries of local government[3] were always in the hands of males (Chowdhury et. al., 1994: 6) and rights to vote in the local bodies were dependent on

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[1] There are 7 divisions and 64 districts in Bangladesh. The sampled 19 UPs were selected from covering 5 divisions and 7 districts of Bangladesh i.e. Chittagong, Comilla, Faridpur, Sylhet, Barisal, Bogra and Gaibandha districts.

[2] The term internal colonialism was used by Rawnak Jahan (1972) in her book Pakistan: Failure in National Integration. USA: Columbia University.

[3] Here in this paper local government connotes rural local government, more specifically Union Parishad, the oldest rural local government body in Bangladesh. Till 1983, the only local government in Bangladesh was Union Parishad. In the last 144 years that spanned from 1870 till 2014, UP never loses it representative character and election was continued every 5 years alternate in UP unlike many ups and downs in Bangladesh society.

the educational qualification, possession of property and tax payment etc. (Smock, 1977: 117; Women for Women, 1992). However, women's representation in the political community was allowed through the Government of India Act in 1935 (Forbes, 2002) but women for the first time took part in election to the rural local bodies in 1956 on the basis of universal adult franchise (Rashiduzzaman, 1968; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2000). In its wake only one female candidate was elected in the UP election of 1956 and 1969 during the Pakistan regime.

In the first UP election of 1973 in the Bangladesh period out of 4352 UPs, only one woman from Rangpur district was elected as the UP Chairman (Alam & Begum, 1974: 38-51). Afterwards, women's representation to the UP was enshrined by two presidential ordinances namely through Local Government Ordinance of 1976 and Municipal Ordinance of 1977, which for the first time in Bangladesh provided a provision of nomination of 2 women members in the UP. Regarding women's representation in LG remarkable development took place during the Ershad regime[4] through the passage of the Local Government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Administration Reorganization) Ordinance of 1982 and the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance of 1983. According to the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 1983, a provision of nomination of three women members was introduced apart from the provision of nine male members and Chairman (Haque, 2003a; Khan, 2011; Khan & Ara, 2006). In 1993, nomination procedure was changed and three women members were elected by the 9 elected male members and the Chairman. A major breakthrough in the representation style of women members in the UP was made in 1997, which provided a reservation of one third of the total seat for women members. According to the legal provision of 1997, in each Union three seats are reserved for women dividing nine wards into three units and accordingly one woman is elected from three wards, whereas one

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[4] Hussain Muhammad Ershad was one of the military rulers in Bangladesh. While he was the Chief of Army Staff of the Bangladesh Army, he declared Martial Law following a bloodless coup and became Chief Martial Law Administrator in 1982. Afterwards he became the President of Bangladesh from 1983 to 1990. During Ershad regime, following the suggestions of National Executive Committee for Administrative Reform and Reorganization (NICARR), he undertook substantive reform measures in the sphere of civil administration and local government system in Bangladesh.

male member is elected from one ward through direct adult franchise in the UP. In later days women representation in the UP has been expanded to different standing and project committees of UP following an office order by the concerned ministry.

5. Literature Review

Bangladesh being predominantly Muslim and with a high degree of religiosity, is one of the world's most impoverished countries with more than half of its population living below the poverty line and more than a third (35%) living in extreme poverty (Chowdhury, 2005: 22). Rural women in Bangladesh, remain the poorest of the poor; faring worse than men on almost every measure (Alam & Karim, 2007; Mahtab, 2007; Naz, 2006; Hasmi, 2000). Empirical data across developing countries show that households below the poverty line are suggestively higher for female-headed families in Bangladesh (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2001a). Women wage earners in poor households consume on average of 1.3 meals a day as compared to 2.4 meals eaten by men (Mahtab, 2007). Women are less educated, having a 48% literacy rate compared with 59% for males (United Nations, 2007). Women's medical expenditure in the typical household is 45% compared with 55% of men (Stalker, 1995). Only 45% of women in Bangladesh own a second set of clothes, a pair of shoes or some warm clothing (Hamid, 1996: 86). Furthermore, Bangladesh is one of the few countries in the world where women on average die younger than men (Mahtab, 2007). Although half of the population in Bangladesh is women, on an average they do two-thirds of the total works including household works and received only one-tenth of the world income (Huq, 1995; Hussain, 2002). Participation of women in higher professional and mana-gerial position is very limited. Education for girls is considered as an economically less useful investment (Islam, 1998). In general, girls are viewed as potential mothers and homemakers, thus priority is given to their training in domestic chores rather than their right to education (ADB, 2001a). Moreover, having same level of education, women receive lower wage rate than men particularly in garments industry Viewing the rate of women's progress into decision-making positions slow, UN has estimated that, based on the current rate of change, women would have to wait until the year 2490 to reach equal representation with men in the higher echelons of power (Seager, 1997: 70).

Multiple factors have contributed to women's inferior situation and one of the most important factors that have affected the non-participation of women in the decision-making and governance is the gender stereotypes associated with women and men. Gender relations and the patriarchal structures and attitudes prevailing in both private and public domain contribute to women's subordinate status and their inability to participate in governance (Mukhopadhyay, 2005). There are three reasons for non-participation of women in politics: 1) difference in socialization; 2) less education; 3) low esteem resulting from traditional thought and superstition. Women do not participate in politics because they are family centered, vote as their husband/relatives desire, are drawn to authoritarian figures of politically motivated leaders and thereby their activities are limited in family matters and child welfare (Bambewala, 1983: 2, quoted in Chowdhury et al., 1994). Critics argue that women's non-participation in political space is a consequence of a number of factors, including women's responsibilities for family and children, the negative attitudes and discrimination of political parties, conservative religious and cultural doctrines, discriminatory socio-economic conditions, electoral systems, the nature of the regime and financial barriers (Rule, 1994a, 1994b; Liswood, 1999; Harris, 2001). Although it is deemed that with recent social and cultural changes there is now greater acceptance that more opportunities are available to women than bearing and rearing children (Hall, 1992: 28). Nevertheless, women still take more responsibilities in caring for children and families. Haines (1992: 189) argues that mothering is a very under-rated occupation.

Based on the cross-national data Moore and Shackman (1996), Paxton (1997), Matland (1998), and Kenworthy & Malami (1999) found that while most researches have pointed out that political, socio-economic and cultural factors play inhibiting role for gender equality in political representation but culture remains the most influential factor. Bangladesh being a South Asian nation, where a patriarchal system reinforces women's dependency on men and men have strong reservations regarding women in leadership and management positions (Halder, 2004). Religion is well recognized as playing a major role in sanctioning many cultural norms and practices that underpin women's subordinate status, which includes the patrilineal organization of households, patrilineal inheritance systems, dowry and early marriage (Kabeer, 2002; Hamid, 1996; Mahtab, 2007).

The reason behind women's low representation in public office is that there are obstacles to women's full, equal participation in politics. Many of these barriers are deeply rooted in patriarchal structures and attitudes and manifested in the structures and agenda of political parties, unfair electoral voting systems, high costs of elections, and lack of access to training and education (Reyes, 2001). Ensuring women's equal political and economic rights has seemed to cause controversy, disinterested, and denial everywhere (Giele & Smock, 1977). Moreover, existing laws seem unable to protect women effectively from violence and economic deprivation. There is also very limited women participation in party hierarchical structure.

Women's participation in politics was widely discouraged and denied by the major political parties in Bangladesh. None of the major political parties of Bangladesh have emphasized women issues or promoted women's participation in public life. It is noteworthy that one fundamentalist party namely the Jamat-e-Islami did not nominate a single woman in any elections, as it has been always strongly opposed to gender equality and particularly women's participation in politics. Some **mullahs**[5] openly condemn those women pursuing public life. Shehabuddin (2003) found that women are still prevented from going to the pooling centers because of local fatwas[6] declaring that it is inappropriate for women to vote.

Against such a backdrop, women's representation in the local government institutions (LGIs) is essential from a political point of view as from the considerations of both equity and production (Qadir, 1993: 25; Qadir & Islam, 1987: 4). Women's involvement in the LGIs could help develop themselves as political resource persons and contributors or beneficiaries of the services generating from the institution. In fact, involvement of women in the LGIs creates a scope for familiarizing them with the democratic system, which acts as a training ground for political education. To develop political awareness and consciousness women should be involved in social, economic and political activities and participation of women in higher decision making bodies

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[5] Mullah refers to local religious fundamentalists who are important opinion leaders in a traditional society like Bangladesh.

[6] Fatwahs are the verdicts or opinions given by the local mullahs which have a considerable influence in the rural society of Bangladesh.

will help them deal with women's issue more successfully (Siddiqui, 1995: 271-272). In fact, the LGI is the closest and most acceptable level of government to women because it traditionally provides various social services such as electricity, waste disposal, public transport, water, schools, health clinics and other programs relating to poverty reductions and rural development. The decisions of the LGIs therefore have a direct impact on the private lives of women and therefore, women must be fully part of the local democratic system and have full access to decision making structure. Until the interests of women have been represented at the local level, the system is not fully democratic (International Union of Local Authorities (IULA,) 1998).

However women's participation is ever more marginalized at the LGIs reflecting the social realities of women's subordinate and dependent status and the consequent invisibility of women in public space (Chowdhury, 1994: 49). Women's participation in the political decision making process at local level is marginal. In fact, the problems of women's participation are more of structural than organizational. Such structural problems are embedded in wide-spread illiteracy, confinement in household work, old tradition of subordinate roles, religious and cultural factors and lack of training and motivational facilities (Ahmed & Quader, 1993).

Women are given opportunity to participate in the LGI but their role is not clearly stated by the government (Khan, 2006). On the other hand Shvedova (1998: 34) discussed the psychological barrier of women viz. lack of confidence among women. If local government is to meet the needs of both women and men, it must build on the experiences of both women and men through equal representation at all levels and in all fields of decision making, covering the wide range of responsibilities of local government (Khan & Ara, 2006). Hussain et al. (1996) found that development projects in the UP were mostly selected on the basis of personal desire of the UP Chairman, Male member, influential local leaders or the MPs which means there are merely any scope of participation of women members. Ahmed and Jahan (2002) found that in regulatory functions women's participation is almost nil. The majority of the women members felt that there did not exist any equity in sharing rights or in performing responsibilities between male and female members in the UP. The study also found that some of the male Chairmen and members expressed their reservations regarding capabilities and practicabilities of participation of women members in the UP.

Women members are excluded from important areas of participation in UP which include infrastructure, budget decisions, different Standing Committees and Project Committees on UP, social and child development, immunization and nutrition projects, education, health, agriculture, shalish[7], maintenance of law and order (Gani & Sattar, 2004; Begum, 2005; BRAC Research Report, 2007; Khan & Mohsin, 2008). Empirical research findings have testified that the male's disrespectful approach and intense disregard for women members' governance roles undermined the objectives of reservation and effectively neutralized the political empowerment envisaged by the legislation (Panday, 2008; Begum, 2007). The women members alleged that they were not taken into confidence in the working of the UP (Akhter, 2001). Begum (2007: 263-64) revealed that in performing UP functions women members were not considered credible and capable political actors and reserved seats 'were not seen as having same value as general ones'.

Moreover, women's political participation results in tangible gains for democracy, including greater responsiveness to citizen needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines and more sustainable peace (Wollack, 2010). Women's political participation has profound positive and democratic impacts on communities, legislatures, political parties and citizen's lives. As women can bring positive changes in democratic practices, therefore it is exigently essential to delve into the participatory politics of women in order to consolidate the grassroots democracy. Hasmi et al. (1997) pointed out that the participation of women in credit program of rural development organizations increased the mobility, their ability to make purchases and participate in major household decisions, their ownership of productive assets, their legal and political awareness and participation in public campaigns and protests. This means women empowerment could be achieved through involvement of different income generating activities and productive employment. Therefore, if women can effectively participate in the local government process, women leaders would help other village women to involve them in more income earning opportunities.

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[7] Salish refers to informal local arbitration council for resolution of petty disputes conducted by the UP representatives.

Against the above backdrop, it is deemed through analysis women's perception and challenges of participation in the sphere of grassroots-based local government in Bangladesh, this paper will help contribute to women's political participation in the UP, which in turn can strengthen local democracy and economy of the country.

6. Perceptions of Women Leaders about their Roles and Participation in UP Affairs

To play important role one should understand and perceive the institutional role properly. Likewise, proper perception about the role and participation of women leaders can help them play effective role in the affairs of the UP. As a concept, participation is as old as human civilization (Haque, 2003b). The concept of participation has gained momentum in the realm of development discourse in the last three decades. The scholars of social sciences have considered participation as an important strategy for flourishing local democracy and development for both developed and developing countries (Roberts, 2004; Blair, 1981; Cooper, 1983; Fagence, 1977; White, 1994; Grote & Gbikpi, 2002; Peters, 2001; Schumpeter, 1976; Meldon et. al., 2004; Rahman, 2000). According to the World Bank (2002), "participation is the process through which stakeholders' influence and share control over priority setting, policy making, resource allocation and access to public goods and services".

According to UP ordinance it was learnt that the activities performed by the Union Parishad cover a wide range of community services such as, maintenance of law and order; protection and maintenance of public property (roads, bridges, canals and culverts); maintaining, building and developing of physical infrastructure; lighting of public ways, public streets and public places; maintaining and regulating the huts and bazaars, cattle compounds; planting and preserving of trees; promoting of cottage industries and family planning; preserving the UP records and issuing of birth and death registration and various kinds of certificates and licenses; settling of pretty disputes; and excavating of derelict ponds for pisciculture; regulating community behaviour; and improving environment, forestry and disaster mitigations etc.

Now let us discuss how UP women leaders think about their role and perception in the UP. Being asked what they understood by the simple word "participation" in

the UP, one woman member from Bijoypur Maddhaam informed me that *"we mean participation by doing projects and salish in the village on behalf of Union Parishad" (Woman Member, Bijoypur Maddham UP, 22 August 2013). Regarding the same matter, one male member from Wahedpur UP also opined that "participation in UP means, doing salish and constructing road, culverts and giving reliefs to the poor". (Male Member, Wahedpur UP, Mirsarai, 30 August 2013).*

This is really interesting to note that like the other elected representatives in UP, WLs have the same opinion about participation. Carrying out development projects in the community is one of the most important functions in the UP. Most of the crucial decisions and resource disbursements are entirely concentrated to undertaking development projects at the UP level. Therefore, irrespective of Chairmen, male and female members, all are interested in undertaking such projects in the UP. In fact, by doing projects women members have been taking part in the local development process of the Union. Through such endeavour women leaders have ensured their rights and shares in the UP which have been enjoying hitherto by the male representatives. Based on the above conceptual understanding of participation it was quite evident that women leaders are taking part in sharing, controlling, priority setting, policy making and resources allocation and managing public goods and services what really affect community life in the rural setting. The intrinsic underlying meaning associated with such a perception uncover the fact that women have pragmatically and intelligently opted the right strategy to strike the right point just after stepping their entry into the public domain.

Likewise salish is another popular way to recourse to the welfare politics at the grassroots. Through salish women leaders have been providing community services by establishing social justice and becoming popular face in the community. Being born and brought up in an entirely male dominated patriarchal social constructs, where they found that male are deciding all important decisions that govern the whole society. From their whole life experiences they found that dynasty after dynasty, kings after kings, rulers after rulers, through such an informal, unstructured quasi-judicial role the influential rural elites played crucial role to exert their control over social matters and thus they maintain and mediate the interests of the unholy alliances of those

powerful luminaries through an in-built mechanism of patron-client relationship. Now time has come to take part in the governance of the society for women. Salish in fact appeared as a symbolic platform where women have aptly and tactfully integrated themselves to uphold their voices and choices on the society. Therefore, extracting meaning and essence from the above quotation, it can be said that women leaders have the perfect attitude and perception towards participation in local governance where they can exert their voice and preferences for giving justice and welfare to the community people.

Again being asked a woman member from Gunabati UP mentioned her perception of participation stating that:

"In every day we need not do work everything. We generally do some works in UP such as birth registration; do village salish; help health and family planning; serve in school managing committee; attend school meeting; implement development projects; distribute VGD and VGF cards; provide 40 days work to the poor people and so on etc. But I do not know about land related problem so I never attend such meetings". (Woman Member, Gunabati UP, Choddagram Upazila, Comilla District, 9 September 2013).

The essence of the above mentioned statement unravels the fact that women leaders have understood their roles and perception of participation properly as they are taking part in deciding, sharing and controlling many social services that directly affect the lives at local level. Evidence also suggests that women's participation in the abovementioned areas are found to have positive impacts on women's life and wellbeing in local community.

Analysis of Perception of WLs in UP

Based on the analysis of the above perceptions perceived by the women leaders in UP it was deemed that WLs tried to instill a sense in heart of the rural people and thus women leaders emerged as a truly "change agent" to the community. WLs' understanding of participation can be explained as follows:

Wls are Bringing Local Development and Controlling Local Resources: Women's perceptions about participation in the affairs of UP are quite interesting. They perceived perceptions of participation as involving themselves in few major activities performed

by all the elected representatives at UP. Through taking part in undertaking local development projects women members have ensured their rights in one of the most important areas of decision-making. Important decision-making and disbursement of resources in UP are carried out for undertaking development projects. This is how they have become a part and parcel of UP governance through which they have ensured their visible and vibrant presence in sharing, influencing and controlling resources in order to bring about a qualitative change and transformation of poor people's life at local level.

WLs are Ensuring Social Justice through Conducting Salish: Women's perceptions about salish also represent another important area through which they could ensure their voices and choices on the rural community, which hitherto fully occupied by the males since historical period.

WLs are Distributing Social Safety Nets for the Community People: Moreover, by viewing distribution of social safety nets programs such as VGD card, VGF acrd, old age pension/allowance, maternal allowance, 40 days work, allowance for destitute women etc. to the community people, they decisively perceived participation in the right direction as well because by involving such activities women leaders can bring transformative change in women's life through such interventions at the community level to the best possible ways.

7. Major Challenges of the Women Leaders in the UP

Women members identified three major challenges towards participation such as male domination, corruption and faulty legal provision that imposed on women members in the UP. Due to these in-built or built-in problems imposed by the systemic arrangements of the UP, women members are to encounter serious impediments that blocked their fullest, robust and spontaneous participation in the UP, which are elucidated beneath one by one incorporating relevant evidences from other studies.

7.1 Women Members Encountering Difficulties: An Extremely Male Dominated Atmosphere in the UP

There is no denying the fact that the entire structure of the UP represents the major cause of male domination whereas out of 9 male members, there are only

3 women members and the Chairman being male, also promotes the cause of male hegemony in the UP. At the initial stage, the existence of women member were never been accepted by the male members but through constant fighting of the women members about their rights and privileges, now women members to some extent was able to establish their rights but still they are to face a constant male domination in every UP in Bangladesh.

The number one challenge toward women's participation in UP is male domination, which can be other way pronounced as "patriarchy". The male domination can be explained in many different ways but common terms include "gender stratification, gender inequality, female disadvantage, sexism, and patriarchy" (Chafetz, 1990). Paxton and Hughes (2007: 24) states that "patriarchy is a term used to describe the social system of male domination over female, where male domination is built into social, political and economic institutions of society. Patriarchal societies are characterized by male control of economic resources, male domination of political processes and positions of authority, and male entitlement of sexual services. According to the feminist perspectives, though some societies are more patriarchal than others, all modern societies have a patriarchal structure."

Male members never accept women as their colleagues rather being obsessed with the patriarchal beliefs and tenet; they always judge women perpetually subjugated to males' wishes and demand, which is vividly reflected in the words of a male member. While discussing with women members of South Durgapur UP, an old male member, being seriously annoyed with me, observing that my entire discussion was going on with women members, told at the top his voice that:

"It is the male members who brought you here and gave some rights. He warned the women members that they should not claim their rights and opined that if they bother for their rights much, we would take away your rights from you again". (Male Member, South Durgapur UP, Comilla Sadar, Comilla District, 26 August 2013).

The above is an extreme opinion enunciated by an old UP male member. When he saw that the entire discussion was going on with the women member, who

were telling some important problems of the UP and in one point he made this sweeping but bold utterance, which in fact reflected the attitude of male towards female members. It was observed that "across the region, older, less educated, politically conservative, and Muslim citizens were less supportive of women in politics than their younger, more educated, more liberal, and Christian counterparts" (Wilcox, Stark, & Thomas, 2003).

When men members cannot win in depriving of due rights of women members in the UP, they try to create problems using different means. Being brought up with the patriarchal values male members' mental make-up is entirely textured and composed with the supremacy of domination over female, these male members never ready to relinquish an iota of power and authority for female members, which they were enjoying from the colonial days till date. In the early history examples of such male domination are galore which began even before state formation. Unfortunately the structural domination of male over female has been continuing hitherto without having any change in its forms and styles. Drawing evidence from the early days it was found that Aristotle was the first politician who offered a comprehensive theoretical account of the supremacy of men's virtue, reason, and status (Gardner, 2006). In Aristotle's theory, "women were seen a deformed or inferior version of men, what influenced political thinkers around the whole world" (Ahmed, 1992: 29; Okin, 1979). Ideas about women's inferiority carried through the Middle Age, a period that transmitted an image of woman as "lacking judgment and reason; as vain, duplicitous, capricious, seductive, weak-minded, generally inferior and often as downright evil" (Coole, 1988: 70). In a recent world-wide survey of female politicians, 76% of those interviewed claimed that prevailing values about gender roles limit the participation of women in politics (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2000). According to one of the female politicians from the Central America, it was learnt that "the patriarchal ideology prevailing in the society is the biggest stumbling block towards participation of women" (Inter- Parliamentary Union, 2000: 61). Same is the case in point in the UP in Bangladesh. This is evident from the example of a woman member in Bethkapa UP, where being a woman, their Chairperson tried to distribute projects to female and male members equally but the male members did not accept that and therefore male members tried to impose

their domination in unjust, cruel and illogical means, which was vividly reflected in the following quotations from a female member, who stated that *"when the male members could not defeat or deprive us of our rights, then they tried to suit fake cases against us so that they could dominate over us"*. (Female Member, Bethkapa UP, 7 November 2013).

Anywhere in the world, men's power and authority is ubiquitous and no way they can accept equality to women and that is why from time immemorial, it was found that the state was structured from its inception to benefit men and that it has a continuing interest in the maintenance of male domination, both in Western counties and Non-Western Countries

In another case it was found that due to struggling with huge male domination these women members were questioning the affirmative action of the government. During the discussion with the women members of Garidaha UP a female member mentioned that some male members thought that there were no need of woman members in the UP and she stated that *"government had created a problem for us by incorporating us in the parishad rather it was much better if government did not bring us here". (Female Member, Garidaha UP, Sherpur Upazila, Bogra, 8 November 2013).*

Being frustrated for struggling with her rights in the UP, she made the above utterance as she has nothing to judge whether government has blessed them an opportunity rather being failure to establish their minimum rights and shares in the UP she judge their existence in the UP as a "problem". In fact, female leaders have to face additional problem because they must serve two roles at a time: their role as a leader and their role as a woman. The two sets of expectations can be very different and, in fact, conflict with each other. This puts a female leader in a difficult position (Paxton & Hughes, 2007: 91). Sometimes leadership requires exhibiting "masculine" behavior, such as aggressiveness and dominance. If female leaders choose the second path, research demonstrates that they will be negatively evaluated. In a review of research, Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky (1992) found that people evaluate autocratic behavior by women more negatively than the same behavior by men.

Ensuring women's equal political and economic rights has seemed to cause controversy, disinterested, and denial everywhere (Giele & Smock, 1977). The situation in Bangladesh is not at all different. Despite having women leaders at the top, women remain highly excluded from government, politics and subjected to oppression and discrimination in Bangladesh. Male members hardly care about the legal provision rather they are not mentally ready to share anything with the women members and they would like to continue the age-old male domination over women. All over Bangladesh, there is perhaps no UP, where such male domination is non-existent rather it is ubiquitous everywhere, which has been explicitly reflected through the utterance of a woman member from the Suvapur UP, who noted that:

> *"Always problems occurred particularly with the male members. In Bangladesh there were hardly any UP where such problems were not prevailed. We want our share and we will never give up our due share in UP". (Woman Member, Suvapur UP, Chuddagram UP, Comilla, 9 September 2013).*

Bangladesh in general is still considered as one of the countries with the highest level of gender discrimination and patriarchal structures embedded in all levels of society. Women suffer from gender-specific discriminations, such as early marriage practices, gender-based violence, biased inheritance and property laws, restriction of mobility and access to services, participation in public spaces etc. (Sikder et al., 2011). Inequality of women representation in politics is also a consequence of a number of factors, including women's responsibilities for family and children, the negative attitudes and discrimination of political parties, conservative religious and cultural doctrines, discriminatory socio-economic conditions, electoral systems, the nature of a regime and financial barriers (Rule, 1994a, 1994b; Liswood, 1999; Harris, 2001).

There is nothing to be exaggerated about the problem of male domination in UP. One woman member from the Gunabati UP mentioned that *"you know every time problem occurs with VGD card distribution. I told the male members that the villagers for whom I have prepared the list, they will come to you if I could not give them VGD cards"*. Furthermore, she also added that:

"In fact, the root cause of all problems in UP are the male members, the Chairman did not create much problems but the main culprits are the male members. We are 3 female members but they are 9 male members, so here lies the problem". (Woman Member, Gunabati UP, Chuddagram Uazila, Comilla District, 9 September 2013).

In a highly traditional socio-cultural structure and belief system, ideally women's proper behavior involved four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Clearly none of these virtues suggested that women should engage in public political participation or try to run for office. Instead, women were encouraged to assist the church, a task that did not threaten to take women away from their proper sphere or make less domestic or submissive. If any woman wanted more than the four virtues, she was thought to be tampering with society, undermining civilization, and untrust-worthy (Welter, 1966; cited in Paxton & Hughes, 2007: 26). Under such a patriarchal value system, women may still lack of control over important decisions regarding how resources should be allocated within the home, but the private sphere is generally considered a female domain. According to this perspectives, women should be focused on their family and children and making their husband happy (Paxton & Hughes, 2007: 24).

In most cases the elected women members are systematically discriminated by male, verbally abused, always assigned to a specific development committee, and excluded from arbitration committee etc. (ADB, 2001; quoted in Gani and Sattar, 2004). Due to male domination women leaders were excluded from many important decisions in the UP such as budget, infrastructure projects, financial management etc, based on the assumptions that only men are capable of dealing with it (Khan, 2009: 9). Women representatives at the local level do not have specific responsibilities, their opinions are not heard during decision-making, and male colleagues behave negatively toward them (Shamim & Nasreen, 2002: 52). Khan (2008) also found that the women members of the reserved seats blamed non-cooperative behavior of their male counterparts, inadequate training, lack of proper opportunity to participate in different matters of the UP as major constraints. Most studies and assessments have found that female

members are generally excluded from major decision-making arenas. The Chairman is placed in a relatively powerful position, and often takes decisions in conjunction with a small circle of associates, from which female members, in particular are likely to be excluded (Aminuzzaman, 2011: 200). Women's participation in the UP planning exercises is limited in some cases due to dominance of men, conservative social culture and values and lack of education and articulation. In some UPs, it was found that even women were massively maltreated by their male counterpart (The Prothom Alo, 24th April, 1999). Gani and Sattar (2004) found that UP women members are involved in various public and social activities but their involvement is mostly informal, sometimes they are kept excluded from various formal committees and even that they are involved in the committees, their position is marginal. Male members think women members have nothing to do with development of UP, which can be observed from the utterance of a woman member from Chandpur UP, who opined that *"the male members deemed that in the UP the women members do not have any rights and obligations to do anything as they are only reserved members in UP". (Woman Memebr, Chandpur UP, Boalmari, Faridpur, 31 October 2013).*

Scientifically there is no proof that on intellectual ground males are superior than females, on the other hand, it was rather seen that women are basically more creative and innovative than men. Except some physical differences, there is hardly any differences between male and female, but they are treated differently in having their project assignments in UP. Men want to have the lion's share of the cake always and the rest residual or leftovers are kept for female although, the whole meal is prepared by woman. The same scenario prevails in the UP also. While talking with the woman member of the Bijoypur Moddham UP she opined that:

"Women members were not given big projects rather they were provided with small projects and all the big projects were given to the male members, these were the general trends in most of the UP". (Woman Member, Bijoypur Moddham UP, 22 August 2013).

Male domination is omnipresent in family, society and states where women have traditionally lower position in all spheres. In family, husband or father occupy

the leading role, in society it is entirely male paradigm and state, being the highest organ has the right to make all policies, programs and plans that foster and protect the rights of men where women's role is acknowledged with some affirmative action only. Sharing grim reality and experience, one woman member from the Wahedpur UP mentioned that:

"The women members need to be elected in the husband's residential area, so most of the women members dare to protest any wrongdoings of the male members due to their prestige concern and for avoiding criticism and for saving their due respect in the bridegroom's family." (Woman Member, Wahedpur UP, Mirsharai Upazila, Chittagong, 30 August 3013).

Obviously, no one ever think of the above reality such way. Most of the woman members in Bangladesh are married. In consonance with the Bangladeshi values, and cultural standard it is considered bad when a women is bold and courageous to establish her rights and privileges in the family and society. On the other hand, women those who consumes or subsumes everything just avoiding all odds, injustice, violence, oppressions and tyranny without noticing to male, especially her husband, she is deemed as an "ideal" woman in the society of Bangladesh. Again its roots are deep in the patriarchy and paternalistic social structure. When a girl was born and brought up, she enjoys subordinate position in family, where all decisions are generally taken by her father as the head of the family. Again when that girl is married, her husband takes all decisions and in fact, she is virtually excluded in all spheres of family either father's or husband's family, society and state. The above fact quoted by the woman leader of the Wahedpur UP testified it again. Males should be remained superior against any arguable and discernible logic and rationale. Therefore some women will try to remain submissive in some cases giving up their due rights in the UP, which is not illogical and unwanted by Bangladeshi standard.

The whole social structure, power relation and mechanism through which society is governed are entirely male biased and ruled by patriarchal values and ethos. Therefore women members position themselves in such a manner that they are simply innocent consumers and receivers of injustice, oppressions, wrongdoings and massive

tyranny against them. They find no messiah to save from such a draconian and devastating social enemy, which has been profoundly engrained and engulfed by patriarchy, which is deemed quite insurmountable to the women members. According to Khan (2008), monopolization of the use of power by the Chairman prevents UP members from playing their effective and rightful role in UP development. This dictatorial tendency of the Chairman also creates problems in decision-making, project formulation and financial management. Cross-nationally, research has shown that what people think about women and women's place matters for women's ability to attain political power (Norris & Inglehart, 2001; Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). In Bangladesh, general people have the same attitude towards women as from the birth to death, a male is born and brought up in that patriarchal values, which no one can easily change but to perpetuate the male domination dynasty after dynasty, generation after generation without compromising any stake with patriarchy.

Women and local government in Bangladesh need to serve for the rural people where traditional values prevail tending to inhibit social mobility. The age-long orthodoxy in traditions and rituals dominates the outlook and aspirations of people in the villages (Solaiman, 1998). Values function as social structure (Jahangir, 1982) and provide a background to social integration by cherishing values as instrument of social cohesion preventing social disorder from growing (Mashreque & Amin, 1994a). The social order of the backward rural community in Bangladesh is characterized by kinship, factionalism and elitism (Mashreque & Amin, 1992a, 1992b, 1993a, 1993b, 1994b). In such a patrimonial social composition, the culture of women's participation cannot be thought of. In fact domination of male members is still taken for granted in the public world of politics. Moreover, these male members use their patronage networks to influence the decision-making process. The existence of "de facto politics" clearly hinders the meaningful participation of women in politics despite the introduction of quotas (Vijaylakshmi, 2002; cited in Mukhopadhyay, 2005: 31). Women's vulnerability is further intensified through the practice of early and arranged marriage, polygamy, veiling or purdah and the seclusion of women, which restrict women's mobility, public exposure and opportunity to improve their immediate condition. Women therefore, constantly face problems of their husband's polygamous marriages, divorce, dowry demand and male violence (Shamim, 2001; Shamim & Nasreen, 2002).

Evidently, culture of effective participation in formal community activities is still non-existent (Mohammed, 2010). Though NGOs have worked hard to develop some client based community groups (some form of social capital), still they are more concerned with their own group interest than visible community involvement (Sharmin & Aminuzzaman, 2006 quoted in Aminuzzaman, 2011: 201). There is no denying the fact that women participation in local government has far-reaching ramifications for social mobility acting on caste, occupation, sect, kinship and factionalism that are responsible for the process of segregation and exclusiveness. The patriarchal social system runs on the recognition of male superiority and female subordination and women are attached to low status and unequal sex relationship. The rural community in Bangladesh, therefore, is on the verge of threat of disequilibria (Amin & Akhter, 2005: 2).

Apart from the above socio-cultural factors, women participation is also nega- tively viewed from religious perspectives. There are strong arguments about women's inferiority to men, which are present across all dominant religions, and religions have long been used to exclude women from aspects of social, political or religious life across the world. Susan Moller Okin (1999: 11) described how in myths and religious stories, women's importance is undermined or denied, "The founding myths of Greek and Roman antiquity, and of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam…consists of combination of denials of women's role in reproduction, appropriations by men of the power to reproduce themselves, characterizations of women as overtly emotional, untrust- worthy, evil or sexually dangerous, and refusals to acknowledge mothers' right over the dispositions of their children."

Analysis of the Male Domination

Male hegemony and unwillingness to share resources with WLs: From the textual narratives, supported by evidences obtained through relevant literatures, it can be easily understood that how male members considered the emergence of women members in the UP. Male members are yet to mentality ready to accept the women members as their contemporary colleagues. The best example of the male hegemonic attitudes has been reflected in the utterance of the male member of South

Durgapur UP who thought that it was the male member who brought the women into the trajectory of the UP and in his utterance he also warned to withdraw the power of female members if they claim their rights and shares in the UP. The said utterance represented an extreme view of the male domination in the UP. Male members are yet to ready to share an iota of rights, benefits, resources and shares with the female members although legally government has made provisions for giving thirty per cent project responsibilities to the women members in the UP. The male members think that women members have come here to create problem for them, especially for taking away their shares. It appears that in the UP women members have emerged as a threat for the male members as they have been well accepted by the community and the general villagers through their better performance and good behaviours. It was observed that in some cases female members succeeded in obtaining some rights and shares from the UP Chairman after a serious bargaining and struggling with their due rights but being defeated to stop their due rights, some male members still bear the grudge of imposing such hegemony over women member by filing false cases against them and adopting various means of enmity with their female colleagues in the UP. More concretely the substantive fact is that women members are encountering serious male domination everywhere in Bangladesh. In a male dominated society, man never wants to accept equal rights and share for women. Women's subjugated rights are accepted by them but they never accept equal rights for women. The major cause of such a mindset lies with the concept of patriarchy and paternalistic social systems, which has been continuing since time immemorial without having any change in its form, nature and structure.

7.2 Challenges Faced: Extreme Corruption Plaguing Women's Role in the UP

The second obstacle women leaders identified in the UP is corruption. The full verbatim of the prevalence of corruption in the UP are portrayed below with the textual narratives obtained from the women leaders in Bangladesh.

Corruption is highly prevalent in most of the third world countries and Bangladesh is no exception to this case. Due to massive corruption these women

leaders have miserably failed to adjust themselves in the UP. There are evidences that corruptions are galore in the spheres of the UP in Bangladesh. Since from 1996, Bangladesh was the most corrupt countries in the world for the five consequent times as reported by the Transparency International Bangladesh Chapter (TIB). In those reports it was learnt that among many other state organizations, local government namely the UP was found severely involved in doing corrupt practices in Bangladesh, which corroborates the findings with the present study. In the following section how corruption takes place in the UP has been explained elaborately. In reply to a question that do you need to pay money when you bring a project or get a project from the Chairman, one woman member stated that:

"You know that in Bangladesh everywhere there is an established system that we have to bring project fulfilling all the shares of Ministers, MPs, DC, UNO, Upazila Engineers and Upazila Chairman, because all have their respective shares in it which is the conventional system and Union Parishad has no exception to this". (Woman Member, Khadimpara UP, Sylhet Sadar, Sylhet District, 28 September 2013).

Through the above quotation, the prevalence of corruption in the sphere of the UP has been reflected well. The underlying meaning reveals that the whole Bangladesh is unfortunately involved in such a social evil that destroys country's development to a considerable level. The above women included the entire state machinery in the realm of corruption. The legislators, the administration and the public representatives all are epitomized as the influential parties involved in corruption in Bangladesh. There are also evidences that Transparency International of Bangladesh (TIB, 2008: 2)[8] states that "Corruption in Bangladesh originates from both politics and administration. In most of the cases it takes place in the form of bribery. Besides, misuse of power, nepotism, fraud, and patron-client relationship also give rise to corruption. If the political process becomes corrupt, then naturally, administrative corruption also rises".

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[8] For details please see 'Corruption in Public Administration' TIB, www.ti-Bangladesh.org/index.php?page_id=373, accessed on 19.3.2014.

It is very interesting to note here that being the chief executive of the UP, Chairman also demands bribe from the members, which can be seen from the statement made by the women member of Khadimpara UP, who mentioned that "when we finished our projects, sometimes we share profits through mutual understandings with the Chairman". (Woman Member, Khadimpara UP, Sylhet Sadar, Sylhet District, 28 September 2013).

Evidence shows that corruption in Bangladesh has helped to shift public resources to unproductive sectors, reduces efficiency of the public administration, impedes the government from implementing good policies (Wickberg, 2012). In order to have an in-depth and sharpen understanding about the magnitude of corruption at the community level, the manager of a cooperative society was also interviewed where in wake of the discussion he opined that "no one could do work for the whole budget in UP. In most cases, 20-30% money is leaked out". (Manager, Hatigara Comprehensive Village Development Cooperative Society, Comilla, 31 August 2013).

Furthermore, when I asked who were involved in such corruption, he answered that:

"I did not know who were involved with it but the UP functionaries must have this answer to them. If the members could do work with the full amount, the quality of the work would be much better because having less amount these members(meaning both male and female members) used very low quality materials when they conducted a project". (Manager, Hatigara Comprehensive Village Development Cooperative Society, 31 August 2013).

Corruption is one of the most draconian enemies towards the development of Bangladesh society. Due to massive corruption, lion's shares of the public resources invested for development of Bangladesh are drained out otherwise. The worst victim of corruption is the poor people of Bangladesh. This was quite evident from the above utterance that due to corrupt practices, women members cannot deliver the best work for the local people and they are to suffer a lot because women tend to be honest in their activities but being compelled with the ground realities these women leaders have learnt to compromise with the practical situation.

Corruption is endemic in Bangladesh. According to National Household Survey 2007 on Corruption in Bangladesh, conducted by TIB (2008), it was found the local government was the second most corrupt sector in Bangladesh. The findings of the present study also corroborated that that corruption was galore at the UP level. Corruption takes place at the local government level due the existence of patron-client relationship in the rural milieu[9]. The UP Chairperman and some dominant members tend to maintain strong patron-client relations with a section of rural community. Unfortunately such clients are not necessarily the weaker or poorer section of the rural community. UP therefore tend to take some of its development management and distributive decision on the basis of such patron-client dependency syndrome (Aminuzzaman, 2011: 204). Corruption is prevalent in distribution of social safety net benefits also. Most of the safety net programs and some development activities are designed and managed by the political workers/leaders of the ruling party under the administrative and political support of the members of parliament. UP has been kept in sideline in managing the projects (Aminuzzaman, 2011: 206). Asian Human Rights Commission-Hunger Alert Program Bangladesh (2011) found that the VGF cards distributed by the council and committee composed of government officials or political activists have failed to reach the poorest because those cards are often distributed to the families or relatives of those councils or committees or are used for political purpose. One of the main causes is that those who distribute the cards are either public servants or politicians who practice corruption widely.

Corruption has direct effects on many aspects of development and some scholars opine that corruption is a part and parcel of development and it is concomitant and corollary of development process everywhere but anyhow it has serious adverse effects on country's overall development. Gupta, Davoodi, and Alonso-Terme (1998) found that corruption tends to increase inequality and poverty through lower economic

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[9] Findings of the study reveal that a powerful network termed as dal chokra (mediators) play important role at the local governance in Bangladesh. They play intermediary role between the villagers and the ruling party leaders and the civil servants. The study confirmed three categories of mediators. The first category includes the leaders of the ruling party and dominant opposition, student leaders and the UP chairman. The second category comprises local contactors, trade union (see Aminuzzaman, 2011).

growth; biased tax systems favoring the rich and influential; lower social spending, unequal access to education & poor targeting of social programs; interest-group lobbying that perpetuates asset inequality; and increased risk for investment decisions of the poor. Corruption is a result of weak state management and exists when individuals or organizations have monopoly power over a good or service, discretion over making decisions, limited or no accountability, and low levels of income (Klitgaard, 1998).

Example of Corruption

Here 2 cases of corruption in Chiora UP, Comilla was illustrated briefly with a view to denoting an idea of the forms and nature of corruption practiced in UP.

During my data collection from the women members in the Chiora UP, a woman member shared a case of corruption of the Chairman of Chiora UP which she experienced very recently. That woman member experienced this case of corruption when she came to know that she had given a project of one lack taka (1286 US$) which was obtained from 1% land transfer tax from Upazila Parishad. After getting the project Chairman advised her to sign a check and thereafter the check was cashed. As soon as the check was cashed Chairman took away the whole taka from her giving 5000 taka (64 US$) in her hand.

Another woman member shared a case of corruption of the Chairman of Chiora UP with the author. She told that once the Chairman tried to pass few projects by the UNO office using fake signatures of woman members and having doubt about its authenticity UNO immediately probed it and he was caught red handed because it was completely concocted and fake. At that time UNO warned the Chairman that he would be suspended from his Chairmanship but anyhow now he has managed everything by obtaining a stay order from the high court.

Analysis of Corruption Problem

Corruption Blocked WLs' Participation in the UP: Women members have become the worst victim of corruption in the UP because women are deemed relatively less corrupt and when they experienced corruption of Chairman and male member in the UP, WLs find helpless to coexist with malpractices. In true sense, corruption

has plagued potentiality for smooth functioning of local governance, which is directly affecting the participation of women leaders in the UP. The whole society is engulfed with corruption, a draconian enemy for efficacious development of Bangladesh. Ground realities revealed the whole gamut of how corrupt practices are perpetuating in the scene of local governance through a conglomerate of patron-client relationship among the UP Chairman, local administration, contractors, suppliers, local political parties and concerned MPs.

The above 2 cases unravel the nature and magnitude of corruption in UP. These are just 2 symbolic presentations of corruption where it was evidently shown that how the UP Chairman practiced corruption and neglected the rights of women members. This is how UP Chairman manipulated public resources exploiting women's trust and rights in the UP.

However, the most striking phenomenon here was that, given the structural challenges imposed by those established mechanisms coupled with cultural bottle-necks for misgovernance, women leaders were striving to bring a desirable tomorrow for Bangladesh.

7.3 Faulty Legal Provision in the Reservation System for Women Leaders in the UP

The women members identified the reservation system as one of the for-midable challenges towards ensuring their participation in UP. However, reservation system is necessary for a nascent democracy everywhere. In developing women leadership some sorts of affirmative actions are needed from the government. It was evident that the most of the developed and developing countries followed this path. Likewise, Bangladesh adopted the same strategy for bringing women into the public life. Before going to discuss about the problem of reservation system it is better to have a broad overview on it.

Being predominantly an agrarian society, the entire socio-political milieu of Bangladesh is intertwined with a cultural lack that beset with patriarchal social structure that inhibited women's role in public domain since time immemorial. There are evidences that among the political, socio-economic and cultural factors, culture remains the most influential factor toward ensuring women's political representation in public

life (Moore & Shackman, 1996; Paxton, 1997; Matland, 1998; Kenworthy & Malami, 1999). It is also observed that both in developed and developing countries, women's participation in politics at local and national levels is comparatively lower than that of men. In Bangladesh, women are comparatively in a subordinate state in all spheres of socio-cultural life however politically they are placed in a marginal state (Qadir, 1994) and historically, women's participation in formal representative politics in Bangladesh has been low (Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010). Mahtab (2007) views that due to lack of opportunities to intervene at the policy and decision making level, women have had a minimal impact in the planning, management, and implementation of policies.

In the context of above reality and socio-cultural perspectives, women's political participation in both national and local level should be promoted through some affirmative action from the government, i.e. reservation system. The core idea behind the reservation system is to recruit women into political positions in order to promote women's participation in political decision-making. Many countries adopted reservation quota for women that include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Eritrea, Jordan, Morocco, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Taiwan, Tanzania, and Uganda (Dahlerup & Nord-lund, 2004). It is evident that where reservation system has been implemented, the popular political culture has gradually become more accepting of women taking part in politics. Women's issues have been nurtured well in emerging democracies in which the governments of these countries have shown commitment to women's increased representation. In fact, enhanced political representation of women depends more on the political will of the government than on a nation's world economic standing or any other economic factor (Tripp, n.d.: 7).

Considering the importance of women's participation in decision-making, the government of Bangladesh has made provision of 33% reservation quota for women member in the UP through the local government (UP) ordinance in 1997. In fact a strong network of women's organizations and NGOs, coupled with global women's movement and active role played by the donor agencies have helped develop the discourse of gender equality, mobilizing women at the local level, and funding their support and training (Goetz, 1996, 1997; Kabeer, 1994).

Scholars opine that rather than national level, women's political participation at the local level is more important for the development of rural women. The reason behind that is that local government is the most nearest to the eighty percent people of the country and it generally provides various social services such as infrastructure building (road, culvert, school, hut, bazar etc.), water supply, education, health facilities and carries out various rural development and poverty alleviating programs, which have a direct impact on the lives of women. Also local government helps to groom the local politicians those who can contribute for the development of country in future (Qadir, 1994: 5). It is deemed that until the interests of women have been represented at the local level, the local government system is not fully democratic (IULA, 1998). O'Connell (2010) also opines that it is hoped that local government will provide women from the most marginalized communities with the chance to engage politically - to vote, lobby, and run for election. Evidence shows that women in Asia have achieved better representation at local level than that of national level[10]. Goetz (2004) and Beall (2004) (quoted in Mukhopadhyay, 2005: 14) have noted that "affirmative action for enhancing the participation of women in local government elections in many countries has been taken as an extra measure, rather than considering women as credible and legitimate political actors". In Bangladesh, the Local Government (Union Parishad) Amendment Act of 1997 have helped ensure women's equal access in political power structures (Khan & Ara, 2006) but being elected in the UP in 1997, women members found helpless as there was lack of legal provision and guideline about their roles and responsibilities. During preliminary stage, women members were not involved in any activities of the UP. Thereafter, in a bid to strengthen women's role and participation in the UP the concerned Ministry made a legal provision in 2002 that empowered women members to enjoy few specific rights in UP such as: i) one thirds members of all the standing committees will be filled up by women members; ii) one thirds of the total standing committees will be chaired by the women

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[10] For details see Drage (2001) who found that in 2001, the Philippines had 16.5% women; Thailand 18.1%; China 22:1%; Nepal 24.1%; Vietnam 26.6%; India 33%; and Bangladesh 33.3% women in their respective local governments and on the other hand Sri Lanka had 2% and Japan had only 6.2% women in local government.

members; and also iii) one thirds of the total project committees will be chaired by the women members in UP (Rahman & Sultana, 2005). Still there are lack of clarity and vagueness in the legal provision regarding the roles and responsibilities of the women member in UP.

In my opinion, the cardinal problem towards enjoying women's rights in UP is not the reservation quota. It is due to the attitude of the male member, women are being deprived of their due rights in UP. Labeling women members as the reserved seat member, male members propagates that as women are elected through reserved seats so they have nothing to do with the development process in UP.

A woman member from Chadpur UP commented that *"the male members deemed that in the UP the women members do not have any rights and obligations to do anything as they are only reserved members in UP". (Woman Memebr, Chadpur UP, Boalmari, Faridpur, 31 October 2013).*

Another woman member from Alkora UP stated that:

"In fact the reservation system is problematic, if government changed this system, it would be better. That's why I wanted to contest election in the general ward. Without any bargaining we could not bring any project in UP". (Woman Member, Alkora UP, Chuddagram UP, Comilla, 9 September 2013).

The underlying assumption of the above utterance is that women are to struggle immensely for establishing their due rights in the Parishad but being occupied absolute power and authority by the male Chairman, women are time and again neglected and denied their enshrined rights and share in UP. Based on the above facts it would be easy to grasp the meaning of it. Due to the provision of direct election, women candidates in the UP election of 1997 rose to 44,969 for 12,882 seats because the provision of direct election for women has heightened their motivation immensely. It was observed that in the UP election of 1997, 85% women voted (Islam, 2000; Begum, 2002: 101). But being deprived of their rights in UP, in the next election of 2003, in total 39,419 women contested for 12,669 quota seats, which represents the fact that number of women contested in UP election declined from 44,969 in

1997 to 39,419 in 2003, which is about a quarter (12.3%) and around half of women members (47%), who were elected in 1997 did not compete in the 2003 elections (Karmaker, 2006; Steps Towards Development, 2003: 7)[11].

The reserved seats female members virtually have no power in the decision making process compared to the general seat members. They failed to obtain sufficient institutional status and support and also are denied access to mainstream activities. Khan (2009: 9) found that women are excluded from all important activities in the UP due to being elected as the "reserve seat members", which created un-clarity and vagueness in the existing law and provided scope for taking all decision by men.

Out of 4498 UPs, it was found that there are only 24 Women Chairpersons and the rest 4474 UPs are run by the male Chairmen and the UP structure is structured in such a way that it has become a one man parishad as all powers and authority is vested on the Chairman. This Chairman is the bearer of important symbol of the male domination and patriarchy supported by other 9 male members in UP. Therefore, female members are deprived of their due rights and share in UP. However, after getting the legal provision of distributing one thirds of the total projects, amidst fighting to establish their legal rights, few have become successful to get few projects. But anyhow while they implement projects, the male members of that ward sometimes creates obstacle for her. Therefore, all women members have skeptical view about the reservation system in UP.

Analysis of the Faulty Legal Provision

Reservation Has Opened Doors for the WLs: Reservation is no doubt paves the way towards positive discrimination in favour of women's cause and interest. In a highly hierarchical patrimonial social structure women's political participation should be properly guided, patronized and sponsored with the axiom of some sorts of pos-

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[11] In the 1997 UP election, 44,969 women contested in quota seats reserved for them, and of them, 13,437 women were elected. In the same year among 13,437 women members, 592 were elected unopposed and uncontested. In the 2003 UP election, 39,419 rural women contested in 12,669 quota seats in UP (see Islam, 2000: 112-13; Begum, 2002; Karmaker, 2006; Panday, 2008; Islam & Islam, 2012).

itive discriminations. In a nascent democracy reservation system is quite sinequanon to bolster the cause of women's development having the fact that a fifty per cent population belongs to women.

Need to Correct the Shortcomings but not to Through it Out: There are valid reasons why women leaders have identified an affirmative action provided by the policy framework of the government as a "problem" instead of viewing it as an "opportunity" because the Chairmen and male members being obsessed with patriarchal values are constantly imposing insurmountable barriers labeling them as "reserved seat members". Being extremely prejudiced with the primordial social structure coupled with other cultural barriers imposed by religious ideology, kingship, factionalism and patron-clientele syndrome that governed the rural society, the whole male elected functionaries are depriving and denying of women's due rights in almost all spheres of the UP governance, which led the women members to identify the reservation system as a "problem".

Wrong and Faulty Perception of the WLs' Rights Can be Withdrawn: The reservation system in UP is designed in such a way that women members have find themselves marginalized in the UP. Holding the membership for 3 times wider jurisdiction than that of men, they were enjoying just only one thirds facilities in the UP, which is tantamount to doing mockery with the rights of women in Bangladesh. This system reflects the true intension of public policy towards women in Bangladesh. This again refers to patriarchy and paternalistic attitudes in case of policy making of the government machinery in Bangladesh. Therefore, the mismatch between women's enshrined rights and their entitlement should be withdrawn without no delay.

9. Conclusion

Based on the available evidences, case studies and phenomenological analysis from textual descriptions of the women leaders in the UP it was paradoxically evident that the women leaders in the UP have rightly perceived and imbibed their due roles and participation through which they were able to involve themselves in the core areas of decision making and upholding their voices and choices and thus to serve their assigned role in the UP. However despite internalization of their role and

perception they were facing some systemic challenges in ensuring their fruitful and effective participation in the UP. The major challenges towards ensuring women leaders' efficacious role and participation are male domination or patriarchy, corruption and faulty legal provision practiced for the WLs in the UP. Unfortunately all these major problems are in fact the problems of governance of Bangladesh society as well. To redress male domination and corruption, the UP structure should be democratized and women's reservation quota should be upgraded to 50% from 33.33%. In Bangladesh, women's role in the society is conditioned by various socio-cultural impositions such as patriarchy, purdah, religious superstitions, etc., so education facilities can be expanded, which can help in the transformation of traditional restrictive attitudes and modification of cultural norms and practices embedded in the social milieu. Orthodox cultural beliefs create problems for women in terms of taking part in political space, whereas liberal values facilitate women's political participation and education is perhaps the only mechanism through which value change occurs and society develops. Therefore, progressive and liberal thinking should be promoted through expansion of education facilities and democratic governance to strengthen women leadership in the UP and Bangladesh as well.

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