Chapter 5
Women in Bangladesh Local Government: Critically Evaluating Their Participation and Empowerment

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**ABSTRACT**

The Governments of Bangladesh have announced various policies and programs to empower women. The Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act 1997 of Bangladesh is such an initiative which creates the provision of one third reserve seats for women in the local government bodies to be elected directly by the voters. This law creates new opportunities and enable women to step-in into the elective positions of grass-roots level local government and to raise their voices and influence the decisions taken in the Union Parishad. The study finds that the elected women members seriously lack material, human, and social resources required to be able or empowered enough to influence decisions at the Union Parishad.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to explore the status of women’s participation and empowerment in the decision-making deliberations of local government in Bangladesh after implementation of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Amendment Act 1997 which provides for three directly elected women in the Union Parishad (the lowest tier of rural local government in Bangladesh). The main objective of this study is to analyze whether the provision for direct election of women in the local government bodies empower women members and enhance their participation to influence the decision-making process of the Union Parishad. Efforts will also be to find the manner in and the extent to which women members participate with regard to what extent this participation matter for agenda setting and decision making. The major findings emerged from the study considering the social context of rural women and their real life experiences as elected representatives revealed that the elected women members seriously lack resources required to be able or empowered enough to influence decisions at the Union Parishad. The meager increase in numbers of women in the Union Parishad can only give a superficial treatment without considering the real causes of women subordination, especially in the rural Bangladesh context. The research ends with recommendations to carry on systematic in-depth research to equip and guide these women in the right direction.

BACKGROUND

Bangladesh, situated in South Asia has a glorious history of social and political background. It was under the British rule for about 200 years. The present day Bangladesh once was a part of the British Indian province of Bengal and Assam. In 1947 after the partition of Indian sub-continent Bangladesh became a part of Pakistan namely East-Pakistan and in 1971 through a nine month long bloody war Bangladesh emerged in the world map as an independent country. The state is run by a parliamentary form of government. For the administrative purpose, the country is divided into seven Divisions, the Divisions are subdivided into 64 Districts; The Districts are further divided into 488 Upazilas (sub-district), and next to it is the 4550 Union Parishad consisting of several villages.

There are two types of local government in Bangladesh – a three-tier rural local government and the two-tier urban local government. Bangladesh has a long tradition of local government, and the Union Parishad is its oldest component as well as the lowest tier of the local government system and over the years, this tier has earned a wide acceptability to the rural community. As a representative body of an aggregate of 10 to 15 villages (or roughly 15- 20 thousand people), it has had a recognizable form for more than a hundred years (Khan Foundation, 2004). The Union Parishad is an important area for empowering, mobilizing and transforming local people for their development. Participation of women in the local government institutions, especially at the Union Parishad is a crucial factor for women development, particularly at the grassroots level.