

# Decentralization And Women Empowerment In Bangladesh: Union Parishad Perspectives

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to explore the status of women's empowerment through reserved seats at the lower level of decentralized body, especially Union Parishad (here after UP) in Bangladesh. The paper also tries to find out major challenges towards women empowerment in UP. At the same time, there will be an attempt to provide some suggestions to overcome those challenges. The study is based on secondary literature including books, journal's articles and conference papers. The study revealed that women are not empowered socially through reserved seats although the successive governments have implemented reserved seats through decentralization process over the years.

**Key Words:** Decentralization, Reserved Seats, Women Empowerment, Union Parishad and Bangladesh

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is considered as one of the most recent and powerful discourse to women in development. It has several dimensions where political participation is one of them. Women can be empowered through taking part in political activities both at the national and local level politics. Political presence and empowerment has good legacy policy making and policy formulation. Women can influence on policy formulation process by practicing in political power structure. In that case, decentralization can provide better opportunity to women as they can play significant role in the political activities. Women can have easy access to local political functions in the decentralized area (Khan, 2011). Bangladesh is a developing country where the society is dominated by patriarchal norms. The status of women is relatively low in comparison to men in every sphere of life. Women's individual freedom and mobility is hardly prohibited by their male counterparts. They cannot go outside without taking permission of their male counterparts. They cannot go outside without taking permission of their male partners and family members (Panday, 2010). The majority of Bangladeshi women are in subordinate position which is illustrated by the attitudes of men derived from socially and culturally norms that determined the stereotype concepts of gender role which prevent women from self depended. Women are placed in bottom line positions in the job market and offered low pay and status. They are expected to wives and mothers who would engage to perform their household activities like child birth and child rearing, cooking, cleaning, and looking after the household (Murshid). Women are designated with domestic life while politics is seen as male dominated public activity. Thus, women's political presence in national politics is very tough in the context of present situation.

However, women have better opportunity to enter in political arena in local level politics, especially in Union Parishad (hence UP), a lower level of decentralized body of the local government in Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh has brought the provision for reserved seats for women in UP through the Local Government Act of 1997. The Act of 1997 is considered as a land mark in the history of Bangladesh politics as it has unique feature to promote women empowerment socially. Women were given a greater opportunity to come forward to the center of the local development and develop their leadership skills in the grass-root levels. The provision for reserved seats for women has open up new space for women to come forward and to participate in the political decision making process. The role of women in decision making process is one of the most indispensable phenomenon's which are considered in the movement for their empowerment (Khan and Ara, 2006).

## 2 Decentralization and Its Form

### 2.1 What is decentralization?

Although decentralization is an ancient phenomenon, it has received popularity in the last two decades. In 1980s, decentralization emerged as an important development agenda with a view to focusing on governance and human-centered approaches to human development. It is really difficult to provide an integrate definition of decentralization for better understanding. Decentralization refers to different meanings to different people depending on different aspects and uses of this term. The definition has diverse meanings based on the type and forms of decentralization (Work, 2002). The term decentralization incorporates diverse view of concepts which indicates careful analysis of any particular issue in any country (The World Bank Group, 2002). Decentralization may be applied to address easy access to education and technology, poverty, healthcare, gender inequality and environment issues (Work, 2002). The term coined 'a system or process of transferring authority and responsibility with a view to performing public functions from central government to local government institutions or quasi-independent body or private organizations' (Neven). Rondineli refers to decentralization as "the transfer of responsibility for planning, management and resource raising and allocation from the central government and its agencies to: (a) the field units of central government ministries or agencies, (b)

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subordinate units or levels of government, (c) semi-autonomous public authorities or corporations, (d) area wide, regional or functional authorities, or (e) non-governmental private or voluntary organizations" (Rondineli, 1981a; cited in Khan,). Decentralization can be defined as the process of transferring power from central to lower level of local government institutions. This process can comprise responsibility for planning and management for public functions, as well as raising resources and of its allocation (Rao and Scott, 2011).

## 2.2 Forms of Decentralization

The forms of decentralization (political, administrative, fiscal and market decentralization) mainly depend on the political and administrative structure of any particular country (Neven). Forms of decentralization can be classified into four categories like deconcentration, delegation, devolution and privatization (Rondineli, 1983a). Manor (1999) argues that decentralization should be categorized into three aspects such as deconcentration or administrative decentralization, fiscal decentralization and devolution or democratic decentralization. It is really important to make a clear distinction between these aspects for bringing smooth coordination among the different dimensions of the successful decentralization. Major types of decentralization are shortly discussed below shortly.

### 2.2.1 Political Decentralization

Political decentralization can be defined as the process of transferring political power and authority from central government to sub-national level of government. The notion of political empowerment is derived from village councils through direct election which accedes to central level bodies. Political decentralization is one of the most transparent and accountable form of decentralization. The idea of ensuring transparency and accountability of political decentralization depends on a constitutional, legal and regulatory framework. It is also associated with institutional reforms and developing linkages with universal participation, civil society, new approaches to community institutions, private sector and societal capital (Work, 2002). Political decentralization indicates few groups at central, meso and local level governments those are empowered to take decisions related to what effects them (Gregersen, Contreras-Hermosilla, White and Philips, 2000). Its main objective is to provide more power to citizens or their elected representatives in public decision making process. Although political decentralization is allied with pluralistic politics and representative government, it also supports democratization by providing citizens or their representatives to make more influence in the policy formulation and implementation. It also refers to distribution of power among elected authorities. It is easily understood that local representatives of local power formulate detailed decisions, even though central government provides guidelines and manage financial resources (Robertson, 1993).

### 2.2.2 Administrative Decentralization

Administrative decentralization means transferring specific administrative responsibilities to lower levels within the central government ministries and agencies (Rondineli, 1981a). It is associated with the redistribution of authority, responsibilities

and financial resources for giving public services between diverse levels of government. It works with shifting power including planning, financial and managerial powers of assured public functions from central government within its agencies to field units of government agencies, sub-ordinate levels of government, semi-autonomies public corporations or area-wide, regional or functional authorities. It is obvious characteristics of self sufficiency of the territorial systems of administrative decentralization. More interestingly, subsidiary is one of the basic pre requisite of administrative decentralization (Holtman, 2000; Cited in Neven). Manor depicts that it is the distribution of agents to lower-level governments form higher level authorities and give emphasis on deconcentration and democratization which occur at the same time. It is mainly and mostly trained in less developed and developing countries (Manor, 1999).

#### 2.2.2.1 Types of Administrative Decentralization

Administrative Decentralization can be divided into major three categories – deconcentration, delegation and devolution.

##### 2.2.2.1.1 Deconcentration

Deconcentration aims to redistribute authority and responsibility among different level of central government. It is considered as first to improve service delivery in a newly decentralizing government (Work, 2002). It is practiced in less unitary states and also considered as one of the weakest forms of decentralization. It seeks to divide its decision making power, financial and managerial responsibilities among different levels of central government. Deconcentration can make strong local level administration or field administration under the auspice of central government ministries through transferring its responsibility from the capital to those carrying out their duties in the regions, provinces or districts (Neven). The general people usually are excluded from state affairs in less developed nations for a variety of reasons including lack of higher level of literacy, poor communication systems and livelihood patterns. To mitigate the barriers the officials of decentralized offices have the power to take all kinds of decisions. In that case, decentralized offices do not face the demand and pressure from local people and central government's demand always gets top most priority (Mawhood, 1983).

##### 2.2.2.1.2 Delegation

Delegation seeks to redistribute authority and responsibility from central governments to local level of governments or agencies where the volume of accountability remains to central agencies (Work, 2002). The term 'delegation' can be described the way of transferring public functions from the regular political-administrative structure to lower units of governments, public corporations or semi autonomous bodies or any other authorities with a view to accomplishing programs on behalf of the central government. Although, semi-autonomous body has the discretion power to take decision for performing specified developed functions and duties, it has to be accountable to central government. Basically, central government exercise absolute sovereign authority (Rondineli, 1981a). According to Ferguson and Chandrasekharan, delegation refers to "the transfer of managerial responsibility

for specified functions to other public organizations outside normal central government control, whether provincial or local government or parastatal agencies" (Ferguson and Chandrasekharam;4). Delegation is a broad concept of decentralization. In that case, central government transfer administrative functions and decision making responsibility to semi-autonomous organizations. Although semi-autonomous governments are not fully accountable to central government, they have to be accountable to central government for its functions and activities. When new governmental agencies (i.e. public corporations or enterprise, transportation and housing authorities, special service activities, regional development corporations, semi-autonomous school districts and project implementation units etc.) are created, the central government tends to delegate its responsibilities. In general, these types of autonomous bodies enjoy a great deal of decision making power (Neven).

### 2.2.2.1.3 Devolution

Devolution is the process of delegating powers and resources to lower level of authorities from center agencies. Representatives of local bodies enjoy extensive decision making power and also have to be accountable for its activities to the local populations. The central government has little or no control upon local authorities and lower levels are fully independent (Manor, 1999). One of the most important features of devolution is election. The local people elect their representatives through secret ballots. Direct and indirect election can be held to elect candidates (Manor 1997). According to Ferguson and Chandrasekharam, devolution refers to "the transfer of governance responsibility for specified functions to sub-national levels, either publicly or privately owned, that is largely outside the direct control of the central government" (Ferguson and Chandrasekharam, pg, 4). The local government institutions are independent and autonomous and they have legal status by which they are totally different from central government. However, they are controlled indirectly by the supervisory way of central government (Rondelini, 1981a). The government agencies delegate responsibility for decision making, finance and management to independent lower levels of local government with corporate status when they entrust their public functions and activities. Public functions and responsibilities are redistributed to municipalities for better services by raising their own resources and making investment decisions. Moreover, geography boundary is basic requisite for devolution where local governments can perform their public functions explicitly (Neven).

## 3 Women's Empowerment

### 3.1 Empowerment

Empowerment is considered as one of the strong instrument to reach positive development outcomes as well as well being of life (Tripathi, 2011). The notion of empowerment is related to the word of power that develops and is acquired. In most of the cases, people try to capture more control over their lives with the help of others or by themselves. It has associated with the process and outcome which attempts to achieve a relative degree of ability to make an influence in the world (Staples,

1990). It eliminates some factors which are responsible for making powerlessness. It is also used to focus on an extensive variety of concepts and to depict an explosion of outcomes. To analyze a certain numbers of policies and investment strategies empowerment tends to advocate for them, as United Nations demonstrated a number of documents (UNDAW 2001; UNICEF 1999). The most famous and widely accepted definition of empowerment is given by Kabeer. She defines empowerment as "the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where the ability was previously denied to them" (Kabeer, 2001). The term is also describes as an increase of assets and capacity building of different individuals and groups for engaging, influencing and holding accountable with the institutions which affect them (Bennett, 2002).

### 3.2 Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is a universal issue. The term refers to the improvement of women conditions in every sphere of life. However, it indicates over all development of drawback classes of society to bring them in an advanced situation, almost at the same level (Khan and Ara, 2006). It has also been used to make women capable to organize themselves for enhancing their self-reliance, affirming their self-determining right for comprising choices and charging resources. These capabilities will help to take challenge and to break their own subordination position in the society (Keller and Mbwewe, 1991). Women's empowerment may be described as the process of women's taking part in decision making issues, enhancing economic self-reliance, ensuring their legal rights to bring equality, inheritance and safeguard against all forms of discrimination. Indeed, it is often used to shatter various barriers to have easy access to resources like as education and information (Kishore, 2008). The term can be defined as a systematic process which include carious essentials such as choices/alternatives, awareness/consciousness, voice, resources, agency and participation. This systematic dimension of women's empowerment has a close relation with the ability of women that can help them to make their own choices over the areas in their lives (Charmus and Wieringa, 2003).

### 4 Decentralization Process and Union Parishad

The social scientists of Bangladesh have great attraction towards decentralization for various reasons. The political atmosphere of Bangladesh is strongly dominated by two political parties lead by two families such as Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Due to failure of arranging successive free and fair election and emerging of army regime, the democratic practice of Bangladesh has been disrupted several times. For those factors, administrative procedures have not been successfully enforced in the country. Moreover, general people are still far from greater participation in the state affairs. Decentralization process can include more people in participation process in local government. Thus, state can achieve certain objectives through strengthening local government institutions (Paul and Goel, 2007). In Bangladesh, decentralization process was first started in 1959 (Siddiqui, 2005). General Ayub Khan introduced a new four-tier local government system which was

mainly called Basic Democracy. In 1969, basic democracy was abolished at the end of Ayub era. After independence in 1972, three-tier of local government system was acceded where Union Council was changed and became Union Panchayet, Thana Council was named Thana Development Committee, and District Council transformed into Zila Board or District Board. Once again, Union Panchayet was changed and became UP. In 1976, the new local government system was observed where for Union a UP, for Thana a Thana Parishad and for Zila a Zila Parishad. Following the year of 1980, new local government ordinance was brought into concern and the concept of "Swanirbhar Gram Sarkar" [Self-dependend Village Government] was introduced at the village level. However, Swanirbhar Gram Sarkar was abandoned in 1982 through a Martial order law. A significant changed was observed in the history of decentralization process in Bangladesh when General Hossain Muhammad Ershad introduced a new local government system by the Upzila Parishad Ordinance Act of 1982. According to the act, chairman would lead the Upzila Parishad who was directly elected by the adult suffrage. However, the Upazila Parishad Act was abolished in 1991 by the BNP government (paul and Goel, 2007). During the period of 1996-2001, the then elected government introduced four-tier level of local government and added a new concept of "Gram Parishad" for village. The UP was legalized (Paul and Goel, 2007) through "the Local Government (Union Parishad) (Second Amendment) Act of 1997" in 1997 [Article 65 (3)]. This Act of 1997 is considered as a milestone in Bangladesh in the context of women's political participation (Panday, 2010). At present, the UP consists of a chairman and twelve members including three women members at each level. Chairman and all members of UP are directly elected by the voters (Khan and Ara, 2006).

## 5 Women's Reseration and Role of Women in Union Parishad

### 5.1 Women's Reseration

The Local Government Act of 1976 introduced the provision for reserved seats for women in UP. It was the first initiative where two seats were reserved for women in each UP. Women's reseration was increased from two to three through the Local Government Ordinance of 1983 (Shafi, 2001 and Begum, 2012). Consequently, the ordinance of 1993 and 1997 introduced the provision of direct election for women members reserved seats in UP. The UP Act of 1997 is considered as the land mark in the history of local government in Bangladesh. The Act of 1997 created an institutional framework for women which have given them greater opportunity to enhance their political skills in the political power structure (Begum, 2012). The unique different is observed with previous amendment that the local people elect their women candidates through votes (Sultana, 2000).

### 5.2 Role of Women Members in UP

The roles and responsibilities of female members of UP are very limited. As the number of women's member is only three in each UP, they can make a little influence in any decision making process. Due to discriminatory power allocation of the government, male members have greater access to power in

decision making process, whereas women members enjoy only little power in UP activities (Begum, 2012). Moreover, they have also very limited knowledge about their roles and functions of UP as they are not educated enough. However, women members play some important roles in UP. The roles and responsibilities are discussed below.

- a) The major roles are concentrated on social safety net programs like as Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) card, aging card, and so on.
- b) They play significant roles in solving various social problems such as reducing domestic violence against women and improving relation with husbands, organizing local people against eve-teasing, protect early marriage and solve dowry related problems.
- c) The women members of UP became successful to play significant role in decision making process in their family (Islam and Islam, 2012). And
- d) They organize local people to take part in NGO's activities spontaneously (Panday, 2012).

## 6 Analysis of Decentralization on Women Empowerment

Women's empowerment has several dimensions, political participation as being one of them. Women can be empowered by political participation through different ways. An equal participation in decision making process and policy formulation can bring empowerment for women in both formal and inform ways. Without political presence of women in national, regional and local level can enhance the power of men only which make them marginalized in every sphere of life. Thus, empowerment of women largely relies on political participation. It is obviously clear that empowerment is closely related to the concept of political participation. In that case, devolution or democratic decentralization can provide greater opportunity for women to be empowered as it is considered as good governance. People can easily participate in local level government than the national level politics. Women can be empowered through enhancing descriptive representation in local governments and formulating responsive policies (Khan, 2011).

### 6.1 Decentralization and Descriptive Representation of Women

Women are usually busy with their household works and duties like as reproduction and child rearing, cooking and cleaning etc. As they busy with family activities it is very tough for them to take part in political activities in national level. Thus, they are very well-matched with local political spheres (Khan, 2011). Regional level of government has larger political task due to scope of decentralization process of the central government. Women have easy access to political structure in regional governments for three reasons. Firstly, although women have household responsibilities, they do not have to face many problems to enter in politics as the geographical area of local government is very close to them. Secondly, the qualification of entering politics in local level is very easy in comparison to national politics. Thus, women can be engaged in local politics without any quality barriers. And thirdly, the activities of local governments usually prefer to women (Noris & Joni, 1995 and Renihart, 2001). Women are

in appropriate position to take part in political activities in local level of governments (Evertzen, 2001). Marginalized groups in society, especially women can be engaged in politics in local level of government without facing severe constraints, evidences found in many countries. Mainly, many countries have taken the affirmative action for women to enter in local level politics. In many countries, the proportion of women who enter in politics is better in local governments in comparison to national governments. Basically, these countries adopted gender quotas after completing decentralization process (Goetz, 2004). Although Akiki argued that women's participation in local government has been increased in Ghana due to the introduction of institutional and legal framework by the government, affirmative action could not alone enhance the participation of women. To increase women's participation in greater way gender norms should be changed at the local level (Akiki, 2002). Decentralization process in Indonesia did not bring good things for Women as the Indonesian society is strictly dominated by patriarchal norms. To make more effective affirmative action, comprehensive program including education, awareness on domestic violence and changing attitudes of religious leaders etc should be taken into account seriously (Siahaan, 2002).

## 6.2 Descriptive Representation and Women's Responsive Policies

Decentralization has vital role to increase descriptive representation of women both in national and local level politics. Descriptive representation gives more space to women to play role in decision process and make influence in policy formulating activities. For better understanding, descriptive representation and substantial representation are discussed frequently. Descriptive representation refers to appointment of women to positions of political authority. And substantial represents can be described as the making influence on policies by the appointed women members which can make theme benefited (Khan, 2011). Gilligan (1982) discussed the importance of descriptive representation of women through various way including political inequalities between men and women, impacts of substantive representation, legitimacy of representation and safeguard of women interest (Gilligan, 1982). However, in some cases, descriptive representation of women does not work efficiently to get benefit from policy as most of the women receive political post because of their personal connections (Hust, 2002).

## 7 Decentralization and Women Empowerment

As the government introduced the unique system of reserved seats through the Local Government (Second Amendment) (Union Parishad) Act of 1997, the number of women was increased in local level governments, especially in UP (Panday, 2008 and Bangladesh Report, 2002). The Act of 1997 brought some positive changes for women in UP including increasing individual mobility of WMs, enhancing women's participation in various meetings and cultural activities, having easy access to women members for constituency, improving quality service of WMs to community people, involving with NGO's activities and enhancement of bargaining power with husbands and family members at and

outside of home (Panday, 2010). However, women members from reserved seats have limited decision making power comparing to general seats members (Karmaker, 2006). Lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities in the manual has created further subordinate position for women members in UP (Khan and Ara, 2006). In a traditional society, women are not encouraged to join in leadership practice at the grassroots levels due to lack of consciousness and limited access to education and cultural activities (Rahman and Roy, 2004). The women members are still far away in acquiring equal status as with their male counterpart in the UP (Panday, 2008). They face discrimination in terms of project distribution and committee memberships. Their working environment is not friendly enough where their peer, families and constituents are counted as their strong opponents (Begum, 2012). Their voice in decision making in family has improved slightly as well as in the Ups. The social empowerment of women members is very slow and steady which do not refer to significant improvements in their political status/position (Islam and Islam, 2012).

## 8 Achievements and Challenges

### 8.1 Achievements

The significant achievements are discussed below (Panday, 2010).

1. Individual mobility of women members has increased dramatically after they were elected to the UP. Usually, the rural women of Bangladesh are not allowed to go outside without taking permission of their family members, even day time. However, after being elected as a member of UP, they have to attend various meetings and cultural activities. Thus, their freedom of movement has been increased in comparison to their previous status.
2. The citizens of the constituency have easy access to the women members whenever required. The males go to them frequently than the females in the locality. They are generally enthusiastic to offer services to the community. But, most of the families of women members did not take it easily of coming people to their house frequently. Although, there was a strong resistance of their families, the elected women members of the UP show better commitment to provide services to their community.
3. Elected women members are most successful in involving with NGOs activities. Most of the NGO's vision is to eradicate poverty through targeting women in the rural area. Thus, elected women highly encourage other poor women to participate in NGO's activities to reduce their poverty through participating income generating activities.
4. Membership to the UP and involvement with local politics have brought some positive changes in their attitudes. After being elected as member of UP, they can now discuss with their husbands and family members outside of their homes, which was strictly restricted previously.

### 8.2 Challenges

The significant issues related to challenges are discussed below.

- I. The roles and responsibilities of women members in UP are not clearly defined in the manual of local government. The constitution is only assured the reserved seats for women in local government which does not refer any specific roles and duties of women members in UP (Khan and Ara, 2006).
- II. The social acceptance of women members of UP is relatively low. The male teased and showed a neglecting behavior during the election campaigns. As Bangladeshi society is strictly dominated by the Muslim patriarchal role, women have to face severe issue like "fatwa" indicating that entering political activities outside at home as the violation of Islamic rules. Thus, they cannot organize public meetings easily. Only few of the people accept their political activities without any obligation. Usually, the people who belief in secularism, they allow political activities of women member's in the society. However, their number is very much low in Bengali society.
- III. Most of the rural women's members in Bangladesh are strictly restricted to go outside. They need to take permission of their family to go outside of the home at night. If their family members give permission, they can go in their locality. The male members of their family restrict and control their freedom of choice and movement. Most of the families of women members do not take it easily of coming people to their house frequently (Panday, 2010).
- IV. Due to lack of education, the elected members do not get their privileges and rights from the chairman. They are deprived to express their opinion in decision making process (Panday 2010). Consequently, the number of women participated in the local election in 1997, 2003 and 2011 and elected for the first time did not receive encouragement to contest for the same position again (Islam and Islam, 2012).
- V. The elected women members have very limited access to information including newspaper television and internet and others. Due to lack of technical skills and mechanism through which information can be found, women members cannot have access to information. Moreover, most of women members of UP have come from lower or lower middle income generating family. Thus, they cannot effort to buy television and computer (to use internet) or provide the cost of newspaper in monthly basis.
- VI. Due to the obligation of family, the majority of elected women members cannot participate in the different non-family group activities. Mainly, their family members create obstacle to go outside at any time to participate in non-family activities such as building social awareness, sports competitions and solving social problems (Panday, 2010).
- VII. The women members are still far away in acquiring equal status as male members in the UP. They are disadvantaged in terms of project distribution and committee memberships. In shortly, they have to work under un-friendly environment where their peer, families and constituents are counted as their strong opponents (Panday, 2008).
- VIII. Patriarchal attitude creates obstacle to women's member participation in local politics. The practice of patriarchy is widespread in rural society in Bangladesh. It is not very easy for male to accept the political role of women in a given patriarchal and male dominated atmosphere. Thus, male is counted as resistance for women to enter in political activities.
- IX. Low educational status of women members reinforced them in the lower position in local politics. However, lower educational status could not make any barriers for elected male members in UP.
- X. Male members of UP often show autocratic behavior to women members. It is considered a rigorous problem for women members to work freely. As a result, their voice in decision making process gets lower value. Usually, male members try to control power and do not show cooperative manner to women members. Their intension is to keep far the women's members participation in the UP activities (Islam and Islam, 2012).
- XI. Women member's who are elected for reserved seats do not have enough power in the decision making process in comparison to the general seats members. Due to lack of institutional status and support, they are not strongly counted in mainstream functions. (Karmaker, 2006).
- XII. Bangladesh is a typical society where socio-cultural barriers considered as a main blockage for women members. Women members are prohibited from leadership practices at grassroots levels due to lack of consciousness and limited access to education and cultural activities (Rahman and Roy, 2004).
- XIII. The quota system has given opportunity to women members to raise their voice slightly in decision making process in family. However, their opinion cannot make any influence on decision making process in UP. They are empowered in our society slowly which does not refer to significant improvements (Islam and Islam, 2012).
- XIV. Usually, Union Committee needs seven votes (out of thirteen) to take a decision in the UP including development activities. In that case, women members have little voice in decision making in the UP as their number is only three. When the question of taking decision, male members get majority easily. As their representation is very small, they have to stay far in decision making in the UP. Their minor position in the Union Committee creates obstacle to participate in development activities as well as carry out major roles in the UP (Begum, 2012).

## 9 Conclusion

Decentralization has given better opportunity to women to enter in powerful political structure. Women can be empowered more in local level rather than in national level. In Bangladesh, UP, a lower level of decentralized local unit, has given tremendous support to women for being empowered through the provision of direct election for reserved seats. The

Act of 1997 is working as a panacea to make them empowered socially. Rural women in Bangladesh have become more visible in political area in local level. However, the empowerment of women members in UP is very slow. Their social acceptance is not up to the level as well as their individual mobility is restricted. They cannot go outside at any time when needs to go outside of home. Due to lack of education, they cannot influence in policy making process in UP. As most of the women members are not educated and come from lower-middle income generating family, they cannot have access to information. Their family members create obligations to participate in non-family group activities. In UP's activities, they are not given equal responsibility in terms of project distribution and committee memberships. Male members of UP show autocratic behavior and try to control all power which reinforced women member low voice in decision making process. Moreover, socio-cultural and religious barrier is also responsible for not giving enough opportunity to be empowered socially. In spite of having these challenges, women have become powerful compare to their previous status. Mainly, decentralized government system has opened up new era for rural women in Bangladesh to make them empower socially. Women members have been successful to enhance their individual mobility through participating in local level politics. Their active involvement in local politics has brought some positive changes in male and family member's attitudes in the society. Their participation in politics is increasing other women's participation in politics as well as NGO's activities. They have become aware about their rights and responsibilities in Bengali society.

### Recommendations

Women have relatively low political status as compare to men in Bangladesh. Their unequal statuses reinforce them to low access of educational, economical and other social opportunities. They are not empowered in our society. To make them empower, political participation is the precondition. In that case, reserved seats for women in decentralized UP helps them in enhancing political participation and promoting women access to the decision making process. Although women are taking part in political activities in local level, they cannot actively participate in decision making process due to socio-cultural and religious barriers. Without meaningful participation in decision making process, it is really tough to bring them in the mainstream development process and thus empowers them. To ensure meaningful participation of women members in UP some of the measures may be considered.

1. The constitution should define clearly the roles and responsibilities of women members of UP in order to free and fair distribution of works among male and female members. Thus, women members can participate meaningfully in all the activities of UP.
2. Motivational programs can be offered by the government and non-government organization for their family members as well as the people of community to make them aware that women have equal rights to take part in political activities like men. Thus, the mobility of women members will be increased and they will be able to work more for the betterment of the community.
3. Working environment should be gender sensitive both

for men and women members in UP. Women members are usually ill treated by their male colleagues in the work place. Thus, they do not feel comfort to work together. In this case, it is really difficult for women members to give their opinion in decision making process. To make working environment gender sensitive, few specific programs can be taken for men and women members in UP.

4. Some training programs like leadership training can be arranged by the non-government organizations for women members regarding UP's activities. This program can enhance the leadership capacity of women members in political and leadership positions.
5. The government should develop a research team to find out their interest in political activities, monitoring voting behavior and participation in the political parties. Through ongoing research programs, women members can be informed their weakness regarding political activities in the local government and they will be able to strengthen their weak points based on the observation of the research teams.

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