Gender and Urban Local Government in Bangladesh

5

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INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equality before the law to all its citizens and prohibits all forms of discrimination through articles 10, 27, 28, & 29 (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs [MOLJPA], 2010). Accordingly, the Government of Bangladesh [GOB] has adopted several initiatives for the empowerment of women. The GOB declared the first National Policy on Women's Advancement on March 08, 1997 encompassing all the different aspects of women's lives. Additionally, the GOB signed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the Convention on the Political Rights of Women for the advancement of women (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs [MOWCA], 2011).

The efforts of the government to empower women have been quite effective. The country has achieved commendable advancement regarding women's participation in the areas of education, health, employment, and income. The global gender gap report 2018 ranks Bangladesh 48 considering economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment between men and women. This country also ranks 5th considering the political empowerment of women (World Economic Forum, 2018). Nevertheless, a huge gender gap is prevalent in every sector of life including politics.

METHODOLOGY

This study tries to explore the status of women as elected representatives in urban local government and to identify the barriers to their participation as candidates and elected members. A qualitative methodological approach was employed to understand these barriers in the context of wider socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts. Primary data for the study was collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 25 elected female representatives from two City Corporations and two Pourashavas. The researcher intended to arrange an interview with participants from diverse backgrounds. Accordingly, participants were selected considering their length of service as elected representatives (both first-timer and at least with experience of serving the office for two terms), nature of constituency (general ward or reserved) and party affiliation (Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Jatiya Party or other).

Secondary data for this research was collected from published and or unpublished materials, books, journals, reports, newspapers, basic legal documents, and government policy papers relevant to the study and from the Internet. The researcher used secondary data to support and complement primary findings.

The interview questions were designed into two sections: first part intended to collect background information like age, education, and occupation of the participants while the second to extract information about their involvement in politics, party membership, experience in political office and the barriers. The whole interview sessions were audio recorded with consent from the participants. Initially, the interviews were conducted in the local language "Bangla" and afterwards were translated into English. Every participant was given a pseudonym so as not to disclose his or her identities. Responses to questions obtained from each participant were coded in the same category to enable deeper analysis of those responses. Then data was coded into analytical units. A relationship between data and variables was established by interpreting statements arranged in terms of similarities and dissimilarities. The data was analyzed by organizing it into different categories based on themes, concepts, and similarities. Results were presented through narrative text, simple computations, and analytical reasoning.

POLITICAL SYSTEM IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a South Asian Muslim-majority nation emerged as a sovereign state in 1971. Since independence, this country has been struggling to sustain democracy due to army intervention from time to time (1980-1990 & 2007-2008). A parliamentary form of government currently runs Bangladesh. The Parliament of Bangladesh is unicameral, comprising of 300 general constituencies and 50 reserved seats exclusively for women. Members are elected directly through the "first-past-the-post" system every five years (Jahan & Amundsen, 2012). The Awami League (AL), the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Jatiya Party (JP), and the Jamat-e-Islami (JI) are the major political parties. The 14th amendment of the constitution in 2004 introduced proportional distribution of women's reserved seats among the parties represented in parliament giving up the earlier practice of electing all women in reserved seats by the majority party from its own members.

Local government is enshrined in the constitution (article 59.1) of Bangladesh. The central government covers legal, operational, and financial matters as well as control and supervise local government bodies. The local government bodies enjoy a certain level of operational autonomy; however, they are in no way self-governing. A patron-client relation exists between national and local government in Bangladesh (Siddiqui, 2005). Bangladesh mainly has two types of local government: rural and urban. Urban local governments are single-tiered and include 12 City Corporations and 319 Pourashavas (municipalities) while the rural local government has three tiers: 64 Zila (districts) Parishads, 491 Upazila Parishads (sub-districts), and 4,554 Union Parishads (the lowest tier of rural local government). In addition, there are three hill districts local Parishads to serve the ethnic minorities and others living in that region. According to the existing legislation, City Corporations and Pourashavas consist of mayor and councilors elected by the voters of the concerned locality every five years. Besides, there are one-third reserved seats for women to be elected by direct voting (GOB, 2018).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

There have been many studies investigated women's participation in Bangladesh rural local government especially highlighting on Union Parishad. For example, Khan and Ara (2016) studied the impact of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act 1997 of Bangladesh on participation and empowerment of women at that level. They claimed that the law enabled women to enter into the

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