

Chapter 6

Elected Women Members in the Union Parishad

6.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters, the roles of different State, societal, and international actors in the process of the enactment of the Act of 1997 have been discussed. The main concern of this chapter is to assess the impact of the 1997 reform on women's political participation in the UP level in Bangladesh. The 'impact' of reform in this book refers to an assessment of the changes that are observed with respect to the two stated objectives of the 1997 Act: namely an enhanced avenue for women to participate in politics, and especially through participation in the UP elections, and an enhanced role played by women in the UP decision making. More specifically, an attempt is made to look into the improvements among women with regard to their involvement in the decision-making process in the UP. Along with ascertaining the role of the reform on women's involvement in political decision making, the progress of women in their economic choices and societal freedom is also important to discuss, since they receive honoraria and are required to be involved in societal affairs, as part of their capacity as representatives of the people. The analysis in this chapter is based on interviews with a sample of 107 elected women members from 36 UPs of 9 *upazilas* in Rajshahi district. Moreover, the views of 72 male members and chairmen of 36 UPs have also been considered to substantiate the arguments of the women members regarding their male counterparts.

6.2 Impact of the 1997 Reform on Women's Political Participation

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important aims of this research is to analyze the impact of the reform of 1997 on women's political participation in the local government in Bangladesh. Since economic and societal freedom is related

to the political participation of women in the UP, this section will explore the economic sovereignty of the women members and discuss their societal freedom and involvement in the decision-making process in the UP.

6.2.1 Economic Sovereignty or Freedom

Elected women members of the UP receive an honorarium of BDTK 1,500 (equivalent to US\$ 18.29 in an exchange rate of 1US\$ equals to BDTK 82) each month. Since the majority of women members (about 62.29 %) in the study area belonged to the lower-income group, whose monthly income was within the range of BDTK 3,000 to BDTK 4,999, the honorarium worth BDTK 1,500 could make a significant impact on the families of the women members. Thus, the impact of the 1997 Act on the economic sovereignty of the women members is explored from two perspectives: freedom in spending money and their role in family decision making. The first perspective deals with the exploration of the purpose the income (amount of money the women members earn from their capacity as an elected member) is spent and who spends it. Simply put, did the women members spend their income according to their own choice or was it spent by other members of the family?¹ The second perspective deals with the evaluation of the role of the women members in family decision making.

6.2.1.1 Freedom in Spending Money

In practice, the income of the women members was spent for the maintenance of their family, which included expenses for food, schooling of children, and others.² Although money was spent for the family, women members did not reserve the freedom to spend their income on their own accord.³ Therefore, one may ask: who spent the money? In fact, the husbands of the married women members usually decided how and for what purpose the money would be spent, while it was the male heads of the family (usually the father, elder brother, or young sons) who decided for the unmarried, divorced, and widowed women members. Such finding is corroborated by the finding of Chowdhury (2009)'s study where it was found that despite having belongingness to the upper class, a group women parliamentarians did not have control over their own earnings. Thus, they failed to spend money for political purposes. It does not necessarily mean that none of the women members enjoyed the freedom of spending. Of course there is a group of women members, who came from

¹ Other members mean the father, brother, husband, son, and others.

² All respondents expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

³ More than half (61.88 %) of the respondents expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

economically well-off families, who enjoyed freedom of spending.⁴ This is an indication of the fact that there is a close relationship between economic condition and freedom of spending. Such reality demonstrates that the reform of 1997 has, to some extent, failed to ensure the women's choice of how to spend their money, if such spending decisions is strictly controlled by the male heads of their families.

6.2.1.2 Role in Family Decisions

In a country like Bangladesh, on many occasions, financial status determines the extent of power and authority exercised by an individual in family matters. For instance, in the societal setting of a joint family, decision making tends to be dominated by those who provide more money for the maintenance of the family. Since the income of the women members was spent for the family, it was expected that the women's voice would be heard in the decision-making process.

The importance of women in the family decision-making process has increased to certain level. In such cases, prestige, power, and importance in decision making depends to a large extent on the money they earn, since these women were totally kept away from the decision-making process before being elected as members of UPs.⁵ However, there is still a large group of women members whose positions in their family's decision making have remained unchanged, even though they earn the same amount of money.⁶

Now a pertinent question is: to what extent the importance of women members has increased in family decision making? In fact, the extent of their importance has been described into three categories: "role of a decision maker," "role of an information provider," and "role of a spectator."⁷ However, it is very difficult to describe the status of women members in these criteria. Although some women respondents played the role of "a decision maker,"⁸ a majority either played the role of "an information provider" or of "a spectator."⁹

This situation indicates the low level of self-esteem of the women members, since the opportunity to provide information to the male members, or to sit in a meeting where decisions are made, was conceived as an increase in their importance in family matters. These situations signify women member's lower levels of expectation, indicating that they highly appreciate any kind of respect shown to

⁴ Less than half (38.32 %) of the respondents expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

⁵ More than half (52.34 %) of the respondents expressed such a view; author's interviews, 2007.

⁶ About half (47.66 %) of the respondents expressed such view; author's interviews, 2007.

⁷ The first category suggested that women members played the most dominant role in the family decision making process, while the role of women in the second category was to supply information when required. The third category suggested that they could sit in the decision-making process without any power to express their opinion.

⁸ About a third (33.33 %) of the respondents expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

⁹ About a third (29.41 and 37.25 %) expressed these view respectively, author's interviews, 2007.

them. However, despite having an increase in the importance of women members in family matters, the intensity of importance is not strong enough to conclude that a substantial change has been made in women's status at the family level. It also confirms the domination of patriarchy in the Bangladeshi society, where decisions in the family are made by the males in most cases. In the case of a married woman's family, the final authority in making decisions is the husband or the father-in-law, while the father or the elder brother dominates the decision making in the family of an unmarried woman member. Similarly, in the case of a divorced or widowed woman member, the decisions in family matters are made by the adult males of the family or the male heads of the family.

6.2.2 *Societal Freedom of the Women Members*

In a patriarchal state with male-dominated societal structures, women's free movements are not accepted. Moreover, Islamic values restrict women's participation in the public arena. However, the Act of 1997 has offered women an avenue to make them involved in local government politics and dedicate themselves to the well-being of the local community. Since the membership of women in the UPs demands greater mobility and interaction with community people, it deserves exploration of the extent to which elected women members have gained societal liberty as part of their capacity as the people's representatives. Societal liberty of women members has been explored using different variables like (i) societal acceptance, (ii) constraints from religion and fundamentalism, (iii) use of purdah, (iv) freedom of movement, (v) access of general people to women members, (vi) incidents of *fatwa*, (vii) education and access to information, (viii) participation in nonfamily group activities and NGO activity, and (ix) changes in attitude.

6.2.2.1 Societal Acceptance

Levels of acceptance of the women members by the society vary significantly. As a matter of fact, society has not yet accepted women as their representatives. A large group of people did not accept women members as their representatives, while another group accepted them with reservation, since they did not have any alternative choice but to accept them. Only a small group of respondents accepted them wholeheartedly, which is not representative of the total population due to its small number.¹⁰

Now one may wonder: who were those people who accepted women members wholeheartedly? One possible explanation is that these people belonged to the progressive sections of the society, who uphold the spirit of secularism and equal

¹⁰ Over half (53.27 %), over a third (34.58 %), and just over a tenth (12.15 %) of the respondents expressed these views respectively; author's interviews, 2007.

rights for all, but their number in the society is very small. Thus, it can be asserted that patriarchy still dominates the Bangladeshi society, which is not ready to accept women taking part in the public arena. The synthesis of opinion of the majority of women members are as follows¹¹:

The male members of the society did not accept women who took part in the political process. They teased us and showed a neglecting attitude during our election campaign. Sometimes, they prevented us from carrying out election campaigns and organized public meetings, and issued “*fatwa*” saying that taking part in activities outside the home was a violation of Islamic rules. At the same time, it is important to note that we found some people who were women friendly, but their number was too few to counter the other group.

Since elected women members were not accepted by the majority of the population in their locality, it is important to analyze whether this nonacceptance created any hindrance on the part of the elected UP members, in terms of carrying out their responsibilities. As a matter of fact, starting from the elections to fulfilling their responsibilities in the UPs, the elected women members suffered from different types of hindrances.

Resistance first started from their families, when it was made public that they wanted to run in the UPs election. It was perceived by the family members that their participation in the local government politics would reduce their prestige in the society, since Bangladeshi society does not accept women's participation in activities outside the home. Thus, the male members of the family used all sort of mechanisms to prevent them from running in the election. After failing to restrict the women from running in the election, family members imposed restrictions on their movement. In most cases, they canvassed and asked for votes for their women. Even after the election, the women members' movements outside the home were restricted by their families. However, some women members received encouragement from their family members as well. These families were relatively educated and had a progressive and secular, political ideology.¹² However, their number was found too small to be representative of the total population.

Aside from resistance from their families, women faced serious impediments from cultural norms and fundamentalists as well. Sometimes, mullahs¹³ issued fatwas against women who intended to contest in elections. In most cases, secular forces are too weak to resist the fatwas.

Moreover, the husbands' of women members were found to attend meetings of the UPs on behalf of their wives, suggesting to many that the wives were ignorant about politics at the local level.¹⁴ This is an indication of the subordinate status of

¹¹ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

¹² Author's interviews, 2007.

¹³ Mullah is a term used for someone who is known or believed to be learned in religious matters.

¹⁴ This case substantiates the subordinate state of women in Bangladesh, where they are perceived as needing the help of their husbands to be capable to do anything except taking care of their families.

women in Bangladesh, where they are perceived to be capable of doing nothing except taking care of their families. Mukhopadhyay and Meer (2004), who found same findings in their research, stated:

Husbands of the women representatives were of the view that their wives had come into political office on the basis of their (the husbands') position in society and not on the basis of any attributes of the women themselves. Husbands informed the gathering that since their wives had domestic responsibilities and it was not the correct thing for a woman to be out of the home at night, they (the husbands) officiated at public functions for their wives. That these men could appropriate their wives' political office was possible because of deeply ingrained ideas that women are not autonomous agents but rather the property of men (ibid.: 96).

Of course, there are some women members who did not encounter problems, either during the election or when fulfilling their duties once elected. Therefore, it is imperative to find out underlying causes of a smooth entry of this group into the political process. The truth is that these women belonged to the group with higher power, prestige, and education, who had made advancements in every sphere of the society. Aside from this group, women from political families also faced less problems than the other groups. Sometimes, the political image of their family members (i.e., husband, father, father-in-law, or other members of the family) helped them to win in the election. Thus, the possibility of winning the election was found higher for women candidates coming from political families having wider support in the locality.¹⁵

6.2.2.2 Religious Constraints

Bangladesh is close to being 90 % Muslim, and its state religion is Islam.¹⁶ Patriarchic domination is seen in Islamic practices when it concerns the sexual division of labor and responsibility. They, in effect, sanctify male dominance. According to these practices, the man is the earner, and the woman is the server of a man. As the server of the man, the woman should remain within the house. Restriction has been imposed, by religion, on the movement of women outside the house (Murshid 2004). Mukhopadhyay (2003, p. 34) pointed out that “as one husband said, this is a Muslim country; she (a women member) is a woman so she could not go out in the evening. He (the husband) sees his wife’s responsibility as caring for the children.” Women are instructed to wear the purdah while they go outside their homes, so they can hide themselves from others. Huque and Akhter

¹⁵ It does not mean that all women candidates from political families who ran in the election won. It still depends on how popular their family members are. However, candidates from political families have some advantages since they are more mobile than the others and have a broad network in the society.

¹⁶ Muslims constitute 89.5 % of the population of Bangladesh. Among the rest of the population, Hindus constitutes 9.6 %, while Buddhists and Christians constitute 0.7 and 0.3 %, respectively (Religion in Bangladesh, available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Bangladesh, accessed on February 25, 2013).

(1987) asserted that, in Bangladeshi society, religious orientation starts in the family, even before the child is born. They described the process of a child's socialization in religious values as:

During pregnancy, mothers, especially in the rural areas, are found to devote more time than usual to religious duties. It is believed that such activities will help in making the child a religious and honest person. Formal attempts at socializing a child in the values of Islam start from the moment of birth. A male member of the family recites the Azan (call for prayer) as soon as a child is born. If the newborn is a male, the Azan is recited loudly. For a female child, it is whispered in her ear. The purpose is to put the names of Allah and the prophet in the child's ear immediately after birth. In selecting a name for the child, the parents are very cautious in deciding on an Islamic name for the child (usually with Arabic or Persian roots) with the right meaning. The teachers at madrasas (religious schools), imams (people who lead prayers in mosques), and other religious leaders are generally consulted.... (Huque and Akhter 1987, p. 209).

In this kind of religious environment, it is important to explore whether the women members face religious constraints or not. In fact, the women members faced different kinds of religious problems such as "restriction on mobility," purdah, fatwa, and others. It was asserted by the women members that religion imposed a ban on their movements, forcing them to wear the purdah. Moreover, religion did not allow them to sit with a man and move freely with them.

However, some women members did not face any religious difficulties while fulfilling their responsibilities as members of the UP.¹⁷ Now one may wonder why this section of women members did not face any religious problems, while the majority suffered from different religious restrictions. Indeed, this group of women was religious minded and abided by the rules of the religion. Thus, nobody asked them in the name of religion to follow religious rules.

Aside from religious constraints, the elected women members were the victims of fundamentalists as well. As a matter of fact, the fundamentalists tried hard to prevent the women's involvement in the public arena by imposing a ban on their movement, forcing them to wear purdah, and so on.¹⁸ Once women violate these restrictions, through participating in politics, fundamentalists sometimes organize public meetings to fatwa against them. Apart from these mechanisms, the fundamentalists also create pressure on the husbands of the women members to divorce them. Halder expressed almost similar views by pointing out that: "Muslim women generally face tremendous opposition, and are often criticized by religious fundamentalists, on the ground that there is no provision for women to be State leaders under Islam" (Halder 2004, p. 32).

With this perspective, it is important to explore what happens to women members from other religions. It is evident that non-Muslim women members faced less religious restrictions in the process of taking part in the political process, since their movement outside the home and their participation in the public arena are not severely restricted in religions like Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism. Again,

¹⁷ Author's interviews, 2007.

¹⁸ Authors interviews with the majority of the women members, 2007.

the number of elected women members from other religions in the study area was too small to leave any positive impact on the community.¹⁹ Such findings corroborated with those of Mukhopadhyay's study, in which it was claimed that "Hinduism neither precludes nor deems it unnatural for women to participate in politics and to exercise legitimate power" (Mukhopadhyay 1982, p. 23).

It is important to mention here that the majority of the women members did not have the courage to raise their voice against fundamentalists, even if they had been victimized by them on many occasions. One may ask why. One possible explanation lies in the fear of having fatwas issued against them. Aside from this fear, they did not receive support from their male colleagues in the UP to face the challenges of fundamentalism.

Now a pertinent question is: what is the role of the families of the women members in this regard? In reality, the families of the women members do not want to engage in any kind of confrontation with the fundamentalists. Thus, they always discourage their women from going against the fundamentalists, in order to avoid any confrontation with them.

However, a portion of women have challenged the fundamentalists. Probably, this group of women members came from families with a strong power base in the locality. The fundamentalists even considered their background before issuing any fatwa against them. However, this group is not in a position to represent the total number of women members, since the number is well below that of those who did not go against the fundamentalists.

6.2.2.3 Use of Purdah

According to stringent Islamic rule, women should use the purdah to hide themselves from others. Prevalence of a strong Islamic culture in the Bangladeshi society has been found since the majority of women members wear purdah.²⁰ However, diversification was also found in the mode of use of purdah. A larger group of women was found wearing it while going outside their home and the rest was found wearing it all the time.²¹ This situation signifies that women are somehow obligated to use it due religious values.

Under such conditions, one may wonder about the reasons for wearing purdah by women councilors while going outside their homes. In fact, some women use it for personal reasons, meaning that these women grew up in religious families and have upheld religious values from the very beginning of their childhood.²² Others

¹⁹ Among the 107 elected women members in the study area, only three were Hindus, while the rest of the 104 women were Muslims.

²⁰ More than half (62.63 %) expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

²¹ A little above half (55 %) and below half (45 %) responded respectively; author's interviews, 2007.

²² 35 % responded in this way; author's interviews, 2007.

either use it for religious reasons or due to pressure from their families.²³ This situation also signifies that the women members' personal choices are overridden by religious restrictions, which is indicative of the existence of strong Islamic values in Bangladeshi society.

Now, we must consider the channels of fundamentalists' interaction with the women who do not wear the purdah. In fact, women members who do not use purdah encounter severe criticism from fundamentalists. Crossing the boundaries of criticisms, the fundamentalists sometimes declare women as non-Muslim²⁴ due to their unwillingness to put on the purdah.

6.2.2.4 Freedom of Movement

In the rural areas of Bangladesh, women's freedom of movement is restricted by their families. Women are not allowed to go outside alone, especially in the evening. Even at day time, they need to be accompanied by male members of the family. However, it does not mean that this is the case all over the country. In the cities, women are seen coming out of their homes alone, even in the evening.

In this kind of social system, it is important to explore whether the women members of the present study are allowed to move freely in their localities or not. In fact, the majority of the women members did not have the freedom to move freely in their localities, while a smaller group of women did have this freedom.²⁵

What types of resistance did women members face while moving alone? To be honest, the family acted as the main obstacle in the way of mobility of women. It is due to the fact that incidents of verbal harassment, physical assault, and rape are very common in Bangladeshi society, when women move about alone. Such occurrences forced their family members to be less flexible in allowing them to enjoy the freedom of movement. This situation exemplified two important characteristics of the Bangladeshi society: (i) lack of security for women in the society, and (ii) women are still perceived to be objects of sexual amusement.

It is interesting to note that, despite being a member of the UP, the majority of the women members still need permission from the heads of their families before departing from their homes at night. This indicates the dependence of the women members on the males. In fact, their choices and freedom are restricted and controlled by the male members of their family. However, there is a group of women (34.58 %) who do not need prior permission before they leave home. This only happens when the women are educated and come from politically conscious and high-class families.

Under this circumstance, it is important to ask whether women showed the courage to go outside, breaking their shackles. In fact, the great majority of them

²³ 30 and 35 % responded respectively; author's interviews, 2007.

²⁴ People who do not believe in Islamic values or do not abide by the rules of Islam are called non-Muslims in Bangladeshi society. Sometimes, people from other religions are called non-Muslims as well.

²⁵ Author's interviews, 2007.

(82.86 %) did not have the fortitude to go against their male family members. Given the societal setting of Bangladesh, it is common that women members would not want to create trouble in their family life by breaking family rules. Sometimes, when they show the courage to break free, they are subjected to mental and physical torture. However, only a small number of women, having higher education and financial dependence, sometimes try to break free. In such cases, it is education and economic solvency encouraged them to show such resilience.²⁶

Under the above circumstances, it is reasonable to ask: how did women members fulfill their responsibilities? One possible explanation lies in the fact that women members are required to be accompanied by one of their family members when they go outside.²⁷ It does not necessarily mean that none of the women members moved freely alone. Of course, there is a group who enjoy the right of free movement. However, they feel insecure when they go off on their own.²⁸ This situation indicates that the ordinary women in Bangladesh do not enjoy their individual mobility. Of course, one may wonder why did these women suffer from such insecurity? In fact, a number of factors have contributed to have such a feeling. First, the majority of the women in Bangladesh (with some exception) are not used to individual mobility. Thus, it will take a few years for them to get used to it. Second, the women are treated as objects of sexual amusement in the society. When a woman moves alone, there is a great possibility of being insulted by males. Moreover, the existence of criminal elements is frequently presented in every society. If young women move on their own, there is a possibility that they may be raped. Thus, the movement of women on their own is always risky.

Of course, there is another group of women members who enjoy the freedom to move independently outside their homes. This group of women members belongs to the upper class of the society with more power, prestige, and money than those in the middle and lower class. Thus, they are likely to be safe from teasing and harm, since the bad elements are well aware of the fact that they will be in great danger if they do anything to them. However, it does not mean that these women are not subjected to insults, teasing, and disturbance. It is just that the number of such cases is very few.

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that mobility of women members has been significantly affected by their membership in the UP, which means that the extent of their individual movement outside their homes increased sharply after they got elected to the UP.²⁹ According to the women members³⁰:

Nowadays, some people convey their regards when we go outside. However, this is not true in every case. We are still neglected by a large group of people, who are against

²⁶ Author's interviews, 2007.

²⁷ 60.75 % respondents expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

²⁸ 39.25 % respondents expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

²⁹ 54.21 % women members expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

³⁰ Summary of views expressed by women members; author's interviews, 2007.

women's political participation. This is just the beginning of our involvement in politics. In the future, people will, of course, receive us cordially. We are very much optimistic about this.

The above statement reflects the optimism of the women members regarding their future. The progress has started in the last few years. If it continues for a few more years, the women will show their courage to break the shackles imposed upon them by patriarchal and male-dominated societal values, and only then will women be socially accepted.

6.2.2.5 Access of the General Public to Women Members

Once elected, a woman member becomes the representative of the population of her constituency, since she is elected based on a universal adult franchise. Thus, every citizen of that locality deserves the cooperation of the women members. To get the cooperation of the woman member, the citizens should have easy access to her. As a matter of fact, the citizens of the women members' constituencies have easy access to their women members whenever required.³¹ A few women members expressed experiences similar to the following³²:

Of course they (people) come to us, but only after exploring all other avenues. In fact, a man finds it morally defeating if he goes to a woman for the solution of a problem. Indeed, a man who has deep patriarchal values always finds it difficult to come out from such a mental setup.

The above statement signifies that the general public use go to the women members, but how many of them are men and how many are women? In fact, more females than males use to meet the women members for assistance. Despite continuous encouragement from the women members, not many males usually meet with them for assistance.³³ This attitude of the women members signifies their eagerness to provide services to the community. Moreover, a vast majority of the women members consider offering their assistance to those in need as part of their responsibilities as the people's representatives. Although enthusiasm is there among the women members to offer help to the people in their locality; there was a question about the attitude of the family members in allowing people in any time.³⁴ If we go into more detail, it is found that families of the majority of the

³¹ 81.31 % women members expressed such view; author's interviews, 2007.

³² Authors' interviews with women members, 2007.

³³ 72.90 % of the women members want people to meet them; author's interviews, 2007.

³⁴ The finding of the study identified one important cultural practice, which is the societal habit of going to a member's residence to seek help rather than to lodge a complaint or seek help at an office.

women members do not want people to come to their home at any time.³⁵ A vast majority of women members stated views thus³⁶:

Our family members become annoyed if people always come to us. They always insist us not to get seriously involved in the community as well as UP activities. They perceive that, if we get involved in so many issues, we will not be able to spend enough time on family matters. The above discussion indicates that, despite having strong resistance from their families, the elected women members of the UP demonstrate commitment and eagerness to serve the community. Moreover, they extended their support to the people in need, even if they are not wholeheartedly accepted by them. These findings are the hallmark of the egocentric character of the males in Bangladesh.

6.2.2.6 Incidents of Fatwa

Another form of oppression and violence against women in Bangladesh is the fatwa. Since 1991, the number of cases of fatwa has been increasing. A study conducted by BMP showed that a total of 66 incidences occurred in 2006 alone, and women were the victims of the fatwa in most cases (New Age 2007).³⁷

The women members of the study area have a clear understanding about the term fatwa.³⁸ One possible explanation for this lies in the fact that the area of study of this research was only the nine *upazilas* of the Rajshahi district (a divisional headquarter), which is located within a short distance from the divisional headquarters. Moreover, Rajshahi is an education city,³⁹ with a comparatively higher literacy rate than its adjacent areas.⁴⁰ This is why the dominance of fundamentalism in these localities is comparatively weaker than in other areas of Bangladesh. In fact, fundamentalists are more active in localities where the majority of the population is illiterate. On the other hand, a group of women members who have less understanding about the term fatwa can *become* the victims of exploitation by fundamentalists. A vast majority of women members consider

³⁵ 63.38 % opine such views.

³⁶ Author's interviews with women members, 2007.

³⁷ A case of fatwa in Bangladesh caught the attention of the international community when a small group of people in the name of Soldiers of Islam announced a prize of BDTK 50,000 (1 US\$ = 82 Taka) for the execution of writer Taslima Nasreen (who wrote several novels criticizing Islam) in September 1993. The fatwa was issued on the ground that her works were insulting to Islam (Shehabuddin 1999, p. 1012).

³⁸ Author's interview with the women members, 2007.

³⁹ Three important educational institutions are located in the district headquarters of Rajshahi: Rajshahi University (RU), Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (RUET), and Rajshahi Medical College (RMC).

⁴⁰ Compared with the other divisional cities in Bangladesh, literacy in Rajshahi is relatively high. The rate of literacy in the six divisional cities is 35.2 % in Dhaka, 32.2 % in Chittagong, 37.2 % in Rajshahi, 45.8 % in Khulna, 47.7 % in Barisal, and 33.6 % in Sylhet (Manzoor et al. 2003, p. 5).

fatwa a threat to society, despite a smaller group expressing opposite views.⁴¹ Women expressing negative views either have a low level of awareness on this issue or are believers in fundamentalism.

Women who consider *fatwa* as a threat to society do not usually show enthusiasm to protest against it.⁴² In fact, they either do not want to become involved in a confrontation with fundamentalist groups or they are restricted by their own Islamic values. However, there is a group of women who consider *fatwa* as a threat and sometimes raise their voices against *fatwa*.⁴³ The women members from this group said⁴⁴:

We know that the *fatwa* is very bad for mankind. It is a mechanism that fundamentalists use for exploiting women. When we hear that *fatwa* has been issued to a woman, we go there and make a formal protest. We try to build awareness among women and encourage them to raise their voice against *fatwas*.

The above statement signifies the concerns and efforts of the women members against *fatwa*. Although a majority of women understand the term *fatwa*, it is reasonable to ask to what extent they are successful in reducing the exercise of *fatwa* in their respective localities. In fact, women members have not been successful in reducing the rate of exercise of *fatwa* in their localities, since they fail to receive support from common women in their protest. Thus, their voices do not leave enough impact to reduce the use of *fatwa* in the society.⁴⁵

6.2.2.7 Education and Access to Information

Education is one of the most important means to make women knowledgeable, skilled, and self-confident in their participation in the ongoing development process of the country (Villaluz 2000). However, most Bangladeshi women are illiterate and lack information on the political process such as whom to lobby for policies, how to respond to women's interests, and even how, where, and who to vote for (Kabir 2003). The lack of adequate information makes women ignorant about their right to vote, run in the elections, and become members of political parties and social networks. Consequently, they lose interest in participating in all political activities (Vijayalakshmi 2002; cited in Mukhopadhyay 2005).

It is important to note that a vast majority of the women members consider education important for the successful implementation of duties and responsibilities of elected members of the UP. Women members who consider education important

⁴¹ Author's interviews, 2007.

⁴² Author's interviews, 2007.

⁴³ Author's interview, 2007.

⁴⁴ Opinion expressed by majority of the respondents who protested against *fatwa*; author's interviews, 2007.

⁴⁵ Author's interviews, 2007.

point out that, due to the low level of education, most of them remain ignorant about their rights and privileges as elected women members. They do not even know how decisions are made in the UP and what the criteria for distribution of projects are. Furthermore, their ignorance allows the male members and chairmen of the UP to exploit them. Thus, they perceive that they could have dominated the decision-making process of the UP had they been better educated.⁴⁶ Women members expressing positive views similar to the following⁴⁷:

If we had been educated, we could have a better understanding of our duties and responsibilities, and help out in the projects and committees. If we had been knowledgeable, it would be difficult for the chairmen and other male members to exploit us. If they tried to exploit us, we would have raised our voice. We would even complain to higher authority.

Like education, access to information is also related to the performance of the women members (i.e., newspaper, television, the Internet, and others). Thus, it is important to explore the state of women's access to various modes of information. As a matter of fact, the majority of women members do not have access to information.⁴⁸ A few important factors need explanation before discussion of the issue of the women members' lacking access to information.

First, the educational background of the respondents was very low, which means that they will not make an effort to read the newspapers.⁴⁹ Moreover, the availability of newspapers at home is related to the economic status of the families they come from.⁵⁰ Since a vast majority of the women belong to low-income group, the families of the women members cannot afford to buy newspapers and keep a television at home. Although a small group of women members have televisions in their homes, due to their low level of education, they do not have any interest in watching the news or educational programs. Thus, whenever they find the time, they remain busy in watching entertaining programs instead.

The case of obtaining information from the Internet is even more difficult, because the IT sector of Bangladesh is not as developed as that of Western

⁴⁶ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁴⁷ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁴⁸ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007. Findings suggest that only 12.15 % of women have access to newspapers, while the number having access to television and internet is 19.63 and 00 % respectively.

⁴⁹ Educational background of the women members are: Primary level: 27.10 %, secondary level (VI–X): 37.38 %, SSC: 23.63 %, HSC: 10.28 %, graduation: 1.87 %, and post-graduation: 00 %.

⁵⁰ The highest number of women members (67.29 %) belongs to the lowest income group (BDTK 3,000 to BDTK 4,999), while the percentage of women members who belong to the lower-middle class (BDTK 5,000 to BDTK 7,499) and middle class (BDTK 7,500 to BDTK 9,999) income groups are 21.50 and 2.80 %, respectively. The rest of the 8.41 % of women members belongs to the relatively higher income group with a monthly income of 10,000+. It is important to mention here that there is a wide income gap between rural and urban areas in Bangladesh. A person with a household income level above TK 10,000 is considered to be in the rich class in rural areas, while a person with the same income level is considered to be in the middle class in the urban or city areas. Thus, this group of households (TK 10,000+) may comprise the richest 10 percent of the total population of rural areas.

countries. For instance, as of 30 June 2012, the penetration rate of Internet users in Bangladesh is 5 percent, while it was 83.6 percent, 78.1 percent, and 83 percent in the UK, USA, and Canada, respectively. Even the penetration rate of Internet users in Malaysia was higher than that of Bangladesh, at 60.7 percent.⁵¹ These statistics signify that the development of Internet service in the country remains at its formative stage, and has not yet extended to the rural areas. Moreover, computers are essential to access the Internet and these require a good amount of money to buy and technical skills to operate. The elected women members lack both of these requirements, and this means that operating a computer or using the Internet is more of a dream than a reality to them. However, they have a strong desire to improve from their weaknesses. It is perceived that, to be able to improve themselves, the women members need substantial government support. It is also pointed out that, if the government intends to further the issue of empowering women, they should offer technical and functional support to the women members. Otherwise, the women members would not be able to prepare themselves to face the challenges of the new millennium.

Under the above circumstances, it is reasonable to ask whether membership in the UPs has increased women members' access to different means of information. In fact, membership to the UPs does not have any impact on their access to information. However, positive impacts have been noticed, within a small group of the women members, who usually read newspapers during their stay at the UP, which eventually has turned out to become a habit.

6.2.2.8 Participation in Nonfamily Group Activities and NGOs

Local government representatives are required to take part in different nonfamily group activities, since they represent the people of their constituencies. However, it is found that a vast majority of women do not take part in nonfamily activities.

Why? In fact, resistance from their families was the main reason for nonparticipation. It does not necessarily mean that none of the women members take part in these activities. A group of women members have been found participating in the different nonfamily group activities in the form of inaugurating some of the programs organized for building social awareness and sports competitions in their constituencies, attending meetings to resolve problems between contending groups which is generally called *Salish*,⁵² and others. However, their participation remains mostly restricted to those held during the day, as they are not allowed to

⁵¹ Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics, available online at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, accessed on 05/05/2013.

⁵² *Salish* (informal adjudication) is a social practice in rural Bangladesh. Many of the local offenses or disputes are settled in the local *salish* even before they can be brought to the courts of law for adjudication. *Salish* indeed plays a very prominent role in the rural society. It helps maintain law and order as well as peace. *Salish* is normally participated in and administered by *matbars* (rural leaders) and UP chairmen and members.

go outside at any other time.⁵³ This, in fact, signifies the extent of the restrictions imposed by the families of the women members on them.

Apart from participating in nonfamily group activities, it is essential to look into the extent of the women members' involvement in the activities of NGOs, since women are the main targets of most NGOs in Bangladesh. One encouraging fact is that the majority of women members get them involved with the activities of the NGOs. Crossing the boundaries of taking part in these activities, these women remain engaged in encouraging other women to participate NGO activities. Even they extend their assistance to the officials of NGOs when they face problems in their locality.⁵⁴ Now one may wonder why do a group of women members not take part in the activities of NGOs? The possible reason is that they belong to conservative families who do not want them to take part in NGO activities. In addition, they come from relatively well-off families who do not find it necessary to participate.

6.2.2.9 Changes in Attitude

It was expected that membership in the UP would increase the women members' level of confidence, and that this would manifest in a change in their attitude. Thus, it deserves exploration whether their participation in the UP has indeed changed their attitude or not, and if it has, what are specifically these changes. In fact, women's involvement in politics has brought some changes in the attitude of the majority of the women members. Of course, there is another group of the women members, who remain under the control of their families and do not have any aspiration to exercise their rights and break free from the influence of their families.⁵⁵ Women members, expressing positive views, stated⁵⁶:

We can now talk to our male counterparts outside of our homes, which was previously restricted. Some changes have also taken place in our mobility. Before being elected as members of the UP, we were not allowed frequently to leave our homes, but now, we are sometimes allowed to go out if it is required. It is important to mention that we need to be accompanied by one male family member for security most of the time. Nevertheless, we are happy that we can go outside. Sometimes, people show us respect since we are their representatives. All these changes have brought feelings of satisfaction which were previously absent among us.

The above statement indicates the low level of expectations of the elected women members but also signifies their happiness at getting any kind of recognition. However, this attitude will not help improve their situation in the society. They will have to be demanding to achieve equal shares and ensure equality

⁵³ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁵⁴ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁵⁵ Author's interview with the women members, 2007.

⁵⁶ Summary of the opinions expressed by majority of the respondents interviewed. Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

between men and women. They will have to raise their own voice. Due to these low expectations, the women members' male colleagues deprive them from getting an equal share in projects and committees.

6.2.3 Involvement of Women Members in the Local Government Decision Making

Before discussing the involvement of the women members in local government decision making, it is necessary to find out the perception of the women members on their new roles—to answer questions like: who inspired them to run in the election?, did they face any hindrance from their family during the campaign? and did they encounter problems in acting both as a wife or a daughter in the family and as UP members?.

6.2.3.1 Perception of Women Members Regarding Their New Role

It is encouraging to note that an overwhelming majority of the women members have been found enthusiastic about being elected as members of the UP. However, some of them have found difficulty in ensuring coordination between family activities and activities of the UPs. Even a vast majority of them have experienced strong resistance from their families when they aspired to run in the election.

However, a small group of the women members, belonging to political families, have received support and cooperation from their families. In fact, male members of these families have inspired their women to run in the election, with the expectation that they would serve their interests, once they got elected through utilization of their political network.⁵⁷ Through influencing the women members to act according to their direction, they would ultimately be able to establish their control on the local government institutions.

In general, the family members of elected women members have tried to impede participation of the majority of the women members in the election. The situation is usually severe in joint families headed either by fathers-in-law or mothers-in-law. In Bangladeshi society, older people are the ones who are mostly conservative and religious minded. Since 89.70 % of the total population of the country is Muslim, the people strongly adhere to Islam. The male heads of families believe that Islamic values command the women to put on the “*purdah*” and stay home to take care of the children and family members. However, a number of women members have received wholehearted support and cooperation from their husbands, despite the strong resistance from their fathers-in-law or mothers-in-law. However, the support of the husband does not reduce the extent of resistance,

⁵⁷ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

since the families are headed by the fathers-in-law or mothers-in-law, whose decisions in family matters are final. Furthermore, the husbands of the women members do not protest the decisions of their parents, since questioning the decisions of older people is perceived as *beyadobi* (impudence) in Bangladeshi culture.

Under these circumstances, women members have struggled to participate in the local government elections. Now another concern is to explore the types of resistance the women members had to tolerate? “Threat of divorce” has been perceived by majority of the women members as one of the strongest forms of resistance, used by family members to discourage them from taking part in the election. Aside from this, the elected women members tolerate different types of physical and mental torture (beating, misbehavior, and others).

Despite the threats and torture, however, they are still contesting in the election and getting elected, which is indicative of their strong desire to be involved in local government politics. The Act of 1997 has definitely created an atmosphere in which the women are able to show their courage to take part in the local government political process, by challenging the resistance of their families.

At this point, it is reasonable to ask whether the women members encounter problems in coordinating their different roles as wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and people’s representative. It is also important to know if the families waive some of their responsibilities so they can balance their existing family responsibilities with their new ones as people’s representatives. As a matter of fact, the women members do not usually get any form of waiver from their familial responsibilities. Thus, the majority of them face the serious challenge of juggling between their multiple responsibilities. As a result, they do not find enough time to spend for the activities of the UP. They cannot even ensure their attendance in most of the UP meetings, since they need to prepare food for their families, send their children to school, and clean the house before they can leave.

6.2.3.2 Working Environment of the UP

To a large extent, the performance of an employee depends on the environment of the organization where he or she works. Thus, it is important to explore the nature of the working environment of the UP, where the elected women members interact with male members and chairmen. In fact, the working environment in the UP is not “women friendly” since a vast majority of the women members expressed their views negatively on this criterion. A small group of the women members perceive that they work in a friendly working environment. The group belongs to the relatively higher strata of the society, with political influence in the locality. But the majority of them perceive that they work either in a hierarchic or neglecting environment.⁵⁸ “Hierarchic” working environment means that the chairmen and the members from the general seats perceive their status as higher than that of the

⁵⁸ Author’s interviews with the women members, 2007.

elected women members.⁵⁹ “Neglecting” working environment means that their presence in the UP is usually ignored by their male colleagues.

Another important concern is to explore the nature of attitude of the male colleagues of the elected women members in the working environment that is not considered women friendly. As a matter of fact, the male colleagues of the women members do not usually want to accept their female colleagues. Of course, there are a very few exceptions, who are generally treated as ‘open minded’, meaning that they accept the women members cordially. Apart from this group, the males’ attitudes can be grouped into conservative, reactive, and vindictive. All these variables are indicative of negative attitudes toward the women members.⁶⁰

This situation leads us to a conclusion that women legislators work in an adverse circumstance in which the majority of the people—their peers, families, and constituents—appear to oppose them. The question is: why do the male colleagues react negatively to the women members? One possible explanation is that patriarchy, the male-dominated social structure, and a conservative mental perspective are ingrained in the males, preventing them from accepting the women members as their equals. This finding corroborates with the finding of the study conducted by Mukhopadhyay and Meer (2004), where it was found that the male colleagues of elected women members did not want them to participate actively in the activities of the UP. The following example signifies this attitude of the male colleagues to the elected women members.

Hasnehena: A Case of Dismissiveness

Hasnehena, a UP member said that “After my oath I went to the chair and asked him to assign me some work. The chair become annoyed and said that the government has brought out the women from their houses to create unnecessary trouble in the UP. [He said] ‘What will you do in the UP?’ Go upstairs and sit with my wife and spend your time. I will not find any work for you. No specific work is mentioned in the manual for women’ (Mukhopadhyay and Meer 2004; cited in Mukhopadhyay 2005, p. 33).

If we contextualize the situation of Bangladeshi women as compared to those from other South Asian countries, it is evident that the situation is almost the same. For instance, several studies made on the state of women in *panchayati raj* (local government) in India revealed that women have not been cordially accepted by their male counterparts. In addition to patriarchy, women in India are also facing the problem of the caste system. Although the 73rd Constitutional Amendment created a provision for the inclusion of lower-class women in the panchayati system, there were several instances that they (*dalit*)⁶¹ were excluded from public office by

⁵⁹ The UP is composed of a chairman, nine members from the nine general seats, and three women members from the three reserved seats for women. In most cases, the members elected from the general seats are males.

⁶⁰ Author’s interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁶¹ Dalit, literally meaning oppressed, is the name given to castes traditionally considered untouchable by upper castes.

council practice and procedures (Mukhopadhyay 2005). Goetz (2004) cites the case of Chaggibai (a Dalit woman) who was exploited by the upper class leader while fulfilling her duties as a *sarpanch*.⁶²

Chaggibai: A Story of Victimization

Chaggibai was elected as sarpanch of Rasulpura *panchayat*, Rajasthan, in 1995, a chair reserved not just for a woman, but for a dalit. Chaggibai, a member of the tiny Bhil group, part of the Dalit community there, was encouraged to run for the sarpanch position by members of the Rawat caste group, the elite caste that made up over 60 % of the residents of the area. As an independent-minded woman, she was not an obvious choice for an upper-caste proxy candidate, as she was literate, known in the area as a woman's rights activist, a participant in the national-level Mahila Samakhya program, and had worked as a school administrator. But she had long ago separated from her husband, and she was seen therefore as more easy to manipulate than a married woman would be. At the first village assembly after her election, the local Rawat strongman, who had always run the local council, Charan Singh, conducted the meeting and refused to allow Chaggibai to speak. She had assembled over 400 women and dalits from the area to attend, but Charan Singh, who was accustomed to conducting all council meetings in secret and from his own house, ordered them all to go home. Chaggibai mobilized the local dalit and female community in the subsequent months to support her efforts to change council practices. She held open meetings to discuss local development plans, initiated projects to cover local drains, repair the school building and some roads, and she completed the panchayat building to accommodate open sessions. When she led local women in demonstrations against the illegal liquor store run by the deputy sarpanch, Charan Singh and the Rawat community counter-attacked, locking the panchayat doors against her, hiding files containing illicit transactions, and attempting to assault Chaggibai. Subsequently, nine of the twelve *panchayat* members, including two women, convened a secret meeting and passed a vote of no-confidence against her. Chaggibai's case was taken up by the People's Union of Civil Liberties and by Rajasthan's women's movement, and a petition was filed against her removal in the Jaipur High Court. In the end, she did not succeed in getting reinstated. As she commented to a journalist several years later: "They simply couldn't tolerate a woman. And, above and beyond that, the panchayat is dominated by non-Dalits, so they couldn't tolerate me doubly. If I had been their puppet, as they expected me to be, none of this would have happened" (Goetz 2004, p. 197).

Just like the women in Bangladesh and India, Pakistani women in local government bodies experience the same situation. A study conducted by Reyes (2002) on Pakistani women councilors revealed that male counterparts ignored the women councilors who did not have offices, tables, and chairs in the council. Moreover, no monetary benefits were given to women to bear the expenses of their food and transportation. They were not even allowed to take part in the meetings of the council, and their projects did not receive budget allocations (Reyes 2002). These findings corroborated with the findings of another study, conducted by Rizvi (2005), who found that they (women) are grappling with a deeply patriarchal social setup that

⁶² A *sarpanch* is a democratically elected head of a village-level statutory institution of the local self-government called the *gram* (village) panchayat in India. He, together with the other elected *panches* (members), constitutes the gram panchayat. The sarpanch is the focal point of contact between government officers and the village community.

does not allow women councilors to function effectively. The list of complaints is long. To name a few: no travel allowance for women to attend council and assembly meetings; no office space where they can be contacted; contrary to the vision of the devolution of power plan, low or no representation in various committees, particularly budgetary committees; marginal employment of women in local government institutions (Rizvi 2005; cited in Mukhopadhyay 2005).

6.2.3.3 Perspectives of the Males

Since the attitudes of the male colleagues of the women members have been identified as “conservative,” “reactive,” and “vindictive,” it is imperative to look into the perception of the male members and chair about their women colleagues and their participation in politics; otherwise, there is enough room for anyone to challenge the findings of this study.⁶³ In fact, the overwhelming majority of the male colleagues of the women members do not want the number of participating women to increase. It does not necessarily mean that all the males have the same feeling. A group of the males who hold positive views about increasing the numbers of the women members in the UPs have expressed their views as follows⁶⁴:

It is good that more women are coming out from their homes and getting involved in local government activities. Since women constitute half of the total population, their increased participation needs to be ensured in the decision making process. The Act of 1997 has opened a forum for women where they can express their miseries and raise their voices against any type of discrimination. Moreover, common women can also express their views through their representatives. In due time, women will be able to prepare themselves to be involved in the activities of political parties, which would develop future leadership in the women community.⁶⁵

The majority of the males expressing negative views have identified different shortcomings of the elected women members. First, since society and religion do not permit women to take part in the public arena they (women) should not involve themselves in local government politics. This view of the males lacks strong ground, and it is not reason enough to keep the women away from the political process. It only reflects the influence of patriarchal domination and religion in them. Second, women members lack proper knowledge to implement the activities of the UP. They usually do not express themselves in the UP meetings. Some of them do not even talk in front of the other members. This argument holds that, since the educational qualification of the majority of the women members was very poor, and they are not used to taking part in a public forum, they cannot be effective UP members. However, it is not true that all women lack the knowledge

⁶³ In order to explore the male members' perception, two males (chairman or member) from each of the 36 UPs were interviewed.

⁶⁴ Author's interviews with the authors, 2007.

⁶⁵ Summary of the opinions expressed by some of the males; author's interviews, 2007.

and do not speak in the meetings. There were qualified women members; only, they were very few. Third, women members do not attend the meetings and Salish of the UP regularly since they have to finish all household activities first before leaving the home. This is why they come in late most of the time. Furthermore, if emergency meetings are called at night, to resolve urgent problems, they will not be able to attend, since their mobility outside the home at night is restricted by strong familial rules. These arguments are true to some extent, since the women members' primary responsibility is to take care of the family, and taking part in the UP activities is just secondary.

The next concern is to know the male members' perception of the performance of the elected women members of the UP. Specifically, how do they evaluate the performance of the women members in the activities of the UP? In fact, male colleagues perceive the women members as inefficient and incapable of fulfilling the responsibilities of an elected member. The males believe that the women members are not capable of undertaking even half of the activities that the male members can do since they are not strong enough physically to compete with them.⁶⁶ These claims seem to be valid, as these corroborated with the findings of a study conducted by Mukhopadhyay and Meer (2004), where they found that women could not demand equal rights to public office, since they lacked the skills and interest to perform in public office efficiently.

Do the male colleagues encounter problems while working with the women members in the UP? One interesting fact is that, although the majority of the male members and Chair perceive the women to be inefficient and incapable of carrying out their assigned responsibilities in the UP, they do not face any problem while working with them. A good number of the male members and chair said something like, "we think that, since the Government brought them (women) into the UP through introduction of a provision in the Act, they should come to the UP, spend some time there, and then go home. We don't need to think much about them."⁶⁷ These comments from the males reflect their neglecting attitude toward the women members, which also signifies the strong influence of patriarchy in the society, in which the women do not receive due respect. On the other hand, there is a group of male members that encounter problems while working with the women. This group of the males is more conservative and does not believe in women's freedom and taking part in the political process.⁶⁸ Thus, the discussion above proves the perception of the women members on their male colleagues to be correct to some extent since the males think the women are inefficient and incapable of fulfilling their assigned responsibilities as elected members of the UP.

⁶⁶ Author's interviews with the male chair and members, 2007.

⁶⁷ Summary of the opinion expressed by 45 out of the 72 male members and chair who do not encounter any problem working with the women members, Author's interviews with the males, 2007.

⁶⁸ Author's interviews with the males, 2007.

6.2.3.4 Project Distribution

To develop their rural communities, the UPs implement different project-based development activities. Each year, they undertake a number of projects, to be carried out by their members. Thus, it is necessary to explore the nature of women's representation in the implementation of different projects. Specifically, do the women members receive equal share in the distribution of various projects? In fact, the projects are not distributed equally among all members of the UP. In most cases, the women's share in the project distribution remains smaller than that of the general members' (usually made up of males), despite the fact that these women members' constituencies are three times bigger than the male members'.⁶⁹ This kind of discrimination in project distribution reflects the women's subordinate status in the UP. A view expressed by a group of women members follows:

In most cases, our allotment of projects is similar to that of general members', despite the fact that our constituencies are three times bigger than theirs. If we demand extra allotment or submit additional proposals, the chairman would not consider them. In emergency situations, the projects are distributed among male members only, and we are kept in the dark.⁷⁰

However, a small group of the women members have expressed their views positively, meaning that they do receive an equal share in the project distribution. How come it happened to this group of women members and not to the others? There are instances that the elected women members who come from political families, and have a good relationship with the Chairman and other male members, usually receive an extra allocation of the projects. But the number of such cases is too few to be representative of all women members.

Since it has been established that there is discrimination in project distribution, the next concern is to find out whether the elected women members raise their voices against this kind of discrimination or not. It is really unfortunate to state that a vast majority of the women members do not show the courage to object to this kind of discrimination. Of course, there is an exception as well, since a small group of the women members are found objecting to the injustice of unequal project distribution. However, protesting against the discrimination does not mean that the UP usually considers their complaint. As a matter of fact, the protest of the women members against the discrimination in project distribution is not entertained by the chair and the male members.⁷¹

One noticeable fact is that, since the majority of the women members are first timers as members of the UP, they are not familiar with the dynamics of UP politics. Moreover, due to poor educational qualifications of the women members, the male members and chair always get the upper hand and rule over them. This

⁶⁹ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁷⁰ Summary of opinions expressed by most of the respondents; author's interviews, 2007.

⁷¹ A vast majority (78.13 %) of the women members asserted that their protests are "never considered" while only a small group of respondents replied "always considered" (6.25 %) and "sometimes" (15.63 %); author's interviews, 2007.

finding is corroborated by the findings of another, conducted by Shamim and Kumari (2002) indicating that the male members and the Chair of the UP become annoyed whenever the elected women members demand their equal share in projects or talk about any misappropriations. Whenever this happens, the male colleagues try to teach them a lesson so that they remain silent in the activities of the UP. The following case substantiates this situation:

Khadiza Khanom: Conflict with the Chair

Khadiza Khanom, an elected member from reserved seat of Chakmerpull of Cox's Bazar, came from a well-known family. Being a widow, she received normal support from her educated son. However, Khadiza gathered miserable experiences as women UP member. At the meetings the chair misbehaved with women when they talked about their rights. The chair misappropriated government allotments with the help of his muscleman. No one had the courage to protest against the chair's illegal activities for fear of being harassed by his muscleman. However, Khadiza published all the chair's illegal activities in the newspaper. The Chair became angry and published false news in the newspaper about Khadiza, to smear her image. The deputy commissioner of Cox's Bazar helped to minimize the dispute between the two and compelled the chair to apologize to Khadiza. The Chair, however, felt insulted but there was no change in his behavior toward Khadiza. Khadiza felt the necessity of the interference of the higher authority to solve the problem (Shamim and Kumari 2002, p. 51).

The analysis above signifies that the activities of the UP are mostly dominated by the male members and chairmen, in which the elected women members are only silent partners, without anything to say.

6.2.3.5 Participation of Women Members in Committees

In Chap. 3, it was noted that, in addition to the existing committees, eight implementation committees needed to be formed in each UP to implement eight projects worth BDTK⁷² 25,000 (equivalent to US\$ 305)⁷³ a year. A circular from the Local Government Department of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (LHRD&C) had made changes in the structure of the project implementation committee. The changes that were made included the following: (i) The chairman or a member should not be a chair of more than one project committee; (ii) one-third of these committees must be chaired by women members; and (iii) women members who would not be able to act as chair of the project committees (due to the reservation of one-third quota) must be a member of these committees.⁷⁴ The circular put much emphasis on the inclusion of elected women members in the committees. However, legal provisions do not ensure the

⁷² BDTK is the local currency.

⁷³ 1 US\$ equals to BDT. 82.

⁷⁴ See Chap. 3 for more details about the committee system.

women members' representation in the committees. As a matter of fact, the majority of the elected women members do not get the right share in the committees as prescribed by the law.⁷⁵ The majority of the women members express this view⁷⁶:

The male chairmen and members cannot bypass us in the committees that have been particularly created for women, but they do not offer us equal membership in other committees. There is always the tendency to keep us away from everything. They want us to gossip and spend time conversing with one another. They do not have faith in us. Another important thing is that they believe if we participate in the activities that were previously carried out by them; their supremacy in the society would be reduced.

The above statement confirms that elected women members do not get enough membership in the committees of the UP, which is a type of discrimination against them. Another important fact is that the male members of the UP perceive themselves to be the sole authority in local government bodies, and they do not want to share this authority with the others.

6.2.3.6 Participation of the Women Members in Party Politics

Since the main objective of the 1997 reform was to ensure the participation of women in the political process, it is also important to know the perception of the women with regard to their involvement in party politics. One encouraging fact is that the majority of the women members have been found involved in party politics in the form of either supporters or activists of the four leading political parties in Bangladesh.⁷⁷ However, despite having party affiliation, the majority of the women members do not participate in the election campaigns for the National Parliament. With regard to their mode of participation, the women members try to reach out to the voters and convince them to cast their votes in favor of their candidates. Aside from this, they sometimes participate in rallies organized by the candidates.

How successful are the women members in motivating voters? As a matter of fact, in most cases, they have not been found successful in doing so.⁷⁸ However, this claim cannot be substantiated, since it is very difficult to measure whether a voter has been persuaded by an election campaign or not. There is also no formal mechanism that can measure the extent of the women members' influence on the voters. However, there is a counterargument that women voters are sometimes more influenced by women campaigners rather than male ones. Since the majority of the women living in rural areas are illiterate, there is a possibility that they can be influenced by women representatives.

⁷⁵ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁷⁶ Summary of the opinions expressed by the respondents who expressed negative views regarding membership in the committees; Author's interviews, 2007.

⁷⁷ AL (37.38 %), BNP (23.36 %), JP (14.02 %), and BJI (6.54 %); Author's interviews, 2007.

⁷⁸ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

It is also important to mention here that, although the candidates of the Parliamentary election seek assistance of the women members, they are prioritized by them unlike the chair and male members of the UP.⁷⁹ These findings signify that the women are not yet considered equal to the male members and chair at the local level.

6.2.3.7 Participation in UP Decision Making

The principles of democracy and good governance suggest that the decision-making process must be participated in by all concerned. Like in central-level decision making, the decision-making process in the UP should also be participated in by both men and women. Since the Act of 1997 was intended to ensure the greater participation of women in the decision-making process of the UP, it is important to explore the extent to which the elected women members influence the decision-making process in the UP. This is unfortunate to state that the decision-making process is not at all influenced by the elected women members since majority of the women members have either identified the extent of influence as “lesser influence” or “no influence”. None of them have been found claiming the extent of their influence as “greater influence” or “moderate influence.” However, why did the women members respond in such a way, despite claiming themselves to be successful in the earlier question? The reason is due to the lack of understanding about their role in the UP. If any of their opinion is considered even once in a UP meeting, they perceive it as already influencing the decision making.

It is important to note that the composition of the UP has made the women members the minority in the decision-making body, as it is composed of one chair, nine elected members from the general seats (most of them are usually males), and three elected women members from the reserved seats. Thus, decisions in the UP are made based on the majority vote, which means that any decision needs seven votes from 13 members. From the position of the minority, it is very difficult to influence the decision-making process when patriarchy dominates societal values. Aside from being the minority in the UP, their identity as “women” also acts as an impediment to their opinions being accepted in meetings. Moreover, the reluctance of the chair and male members also contribute to the ignorance of the women members in the decision-making process. Thus, their role can be considered as only “ornamental.” Under this situation, the women members must tolerate different forms of harassment if they fight for their rights. Sometimes, their male colleagues spread rumors about them or try to humiliate them in the society, expecting them to feel ashamed and be passive in the UP activities in the future. The argument drawn here is corroborated by the findings of another study conducted by Shamim and Kumari (2002), where it was indicated that conjugal life of an elected woman came under serious threat when she dared to fight for her rights and argued with the chair. The following example proves this:

⁷⁹ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

Aparna Rani: Story of Smear Tactics

Aparna Rani was an elected woman UP member of Moulvibazar. Her husband, who was a Primary School Teacher, encouraged Aparna to compete in the UP election. During the early stages of her tenure in the UP, Aparna did not face any problem. But the situation changed when she started to be vocal than other women members and often argued with the chair, which took a serious turn. The chair did not support of her active participation in the meetings and tried to teach her a lesson. A friendly male colleague used to help Aparna in performing different UP activities. The chair spread rumors using Aparna's friendly relationship with her male colleague. This horrified Aparna's married life as she was almost hated in the society. Finally she had to leave the UP (Shamim and Kumari 2002, p. 55).

This case illustrates how women are treated by their male counterparts in offices. They are not only neglected but often face serious challenges in their family life that force them to lose interest in participating in politics. Thus, it is obvious that extending the scope of participation of women through the introduction of quota does not ensure their active participation in the decision-making process. To ensure their full participation in this regard, it is necessary to overcome the rigid social and cultural barriers that women face.

6.3 Conclusion

The above discussions lead us to come to the conclusion that not much improvement has been made on the economic freedom of the women members as a result of the enactment of the Act of 1997. The amount of money that the women members earn by virtue of their position is spent for the maintenance of their families, which is eventually spent by the male members of their families instead of themselves. They do not even have the freedom to determine what the money should be spent on. It does not necessarily mean that no improvement has been made in the role of the women members in the family decision making. In fact, a steady increase has been noticed in the role of the women members in the family decision-making process. Of course, they have not yet reached the level where they can dominate family decisions, but at least, they are consulted in some cases by the male members of their families and participate in the decision-making process, wherein their main responsibility is to provide information when required. When it concerns women's societal liberty, one encouraging fact is that the society has slowly started to accept women as members of the UP. There has been a slow increase in the mobility of women members outside the home. After being elected as women members, they can at least afford to go outside with the permission of the male heads of their families, but they need to be accompanied by a male family member. Another encouraging fact is that some people have started to show respect to the women members when they convene outside, and sometimes, they come to them for assistance when they need help.

With regard to the women members' involvement in the activities of the UP, no significant improvement has been pointed out. In fact, the women members work in a stubborn environment where their male colleagues perceive them as inefficient and incapable of carrying out their responsibilities. They are always treated unequally during project distribution and membership distribution in the various committees of the UP. They are even slighted by the law, since it specifies that the women members' share in the distribution of projects should be equal to that of the male members, even if they have constituencies three times bigger than that of the latter. In such a situation, the women members feel reluctant to object to discrimination because they will have to tolerate different kinds of mental torture from their male counterparts if they will protest. Furthermore, their position as a minority has made them unsuccessful in influencing the decision-making process of the UP. Last but not least, it is encouraging to note that the Act of 1997 has created enough enthusiasm among women who, despite the different setbacks, have started to come out of their homes and take part in the politics of the local government. In the course of time, they will be able to earn the right to equal share in all respects and then strive to participate in central-level politics.

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