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Challenges and Coping Strategies of Women Leaders at the Local Level in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This research aims at uncovering the struggle and coping strategies adopted by the women leaders in Bangladesh at the grassroots-based local government namely, Union Council. Although the local government in Bangladesh is 145 years old, women's representation began only about two decades ago. Since their entry into the Union Council in 1997, the women leaders have been struggling to ensure their full participation in all sorts of activities and decision making processes. Against this backdrop, this research focused on the major threats and challenges against women's participation in the Union Council and the ways women leaders cope with the challenges for ensuring their participation. By collecting in-depth data from twenty-three women leaders from five administrative divisions of the country through using interpretive qualitative research approach, it was found that the women leaders in Bangladesh usually face three major challenges towards ensuring their participation which include male domination, corruption and faulty legal provision. On the other hand, women leaders adopted various coping strategies in order to overcome the threats of participation which include debates, arguments in meetings, participation in vote of no confidence, seeking help from local administration and other legal means and using various means of social capital to ventilate their grievances and deprivations. Finally, some interventions, such as democratization of the Union

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Council structure and making it more inclusive, were suggested so that women leaders can participate in the overall governance of the Union Council.

Keywords: union council, participation, women leaders, struggle, coping strategies, Bangladesh.

1. Background

The British colonial rulers laid down the basic structure of rural local government of Bangladesh in the then undivided Indian subcontinent in 1870. Since the colonial era until 1997 women's representation was non-existent in the lowest rural local government body of today's Bangladesh such as Union Council (UC). The UC is the lowest local government unit of Bangladesh that covers an area of approximately 10-12 sq. km. In every five years alternate, UC representatives are elected by direct voting. A UC consists of an elected body comprising a Chairman and twelve members, and each representative/member represents villagers ranging from 10,000 to 30,000. According to the Local government Union Council (Second Amendment) Act 1997, among twelve positions of the UC members, three positions are exclusively reserved for women members in each UC and they are elected by direct election on the basis of adult franchise. Such reserved seat position does not prevent women to be elected in any of the nine general seats (GoB, 1997), and also as the Chairperson. The activities performed by the UC cover a wide range of community services such as maintenance and development of law and order, physical infrastructure, public property related activities, birth and death registration, promotion of cottage industries and family planning, lighting of public streets and places, issuance of certificates and license, settlement of petty disputes, excavation of derelict ponds for pisciculture, regulating community behaviour, improving environment, social forestry and disaster mitigations (GoB, 2010).

The percentage of women being elected to rural councils across Asia and the Pacific shows that where countries have quotas (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), they have much higher rates of women's political representation (UNDP, 2010). Even though, women's leadership efforts still frequently encounter major barriers at formal and informal levels (Wakefield, 2017). On the other hand, the exercise of political rights is limited for women in Bangladesh. Women's participation in both the political process and the decision-making structure is inadequate in spite of various measures undertaken to increase their participation (Aminuzzaman, 2011). Local government in Bangladesh is an important formal legal institution at the grass root level which provides opportunities for women to raise their voices, to

control over resources and to have choice over decision making (Khan, 2014). Nonetheless, even having a greater political representation at the local level various studies reported that women leaders or women elected to these reserved seats encounter lots of challenges and structural and attitudinal barriers for coexisting with their male counterparts in the grassroots-based local government in Bangladesh (Hassan, 1999; Frankl, 2004; Panday, 2008). As a matter of fact, in Bangladesh, women's political participation and exercise of political rights are directly or indirectly linked to patriarchal values embedded in the socio-cultural pattern reflecting systematic subordination and inequality of women (Rahman, Sultana, 2005; Aminuzzaman, 2011; Khan, 2014). Such situation reinforces women's dependency on men who bear strong reservations towards women's leadership and management positions (Halder, 2004). In line with the above, lack of cooperation by men in the local government also stands as a critical drawback to women's effectiveness in proving their leadership by taking appropriate decisions (Huq, 2016).

Women's access to political structure is deemed exigent because politicians hold power over other social institutions and thus, they are able to create new laws and modify existing legislations, conventions and practices (Martin, 2004). Women's participation and involvement in political affairs has affirmative and democratic impacts on communities, legislatures, political parties, and citizens' lives, and it also helps democracy to deliver to the citizens (NDI, 2010). Further to argue that being the nearest government, the local government has the prerogative to render various services such as education, health care facilities, safe drinking water, poverty-reduction programs and the like which have a direct bearing on women's lives and helps to groom them as local politicians (IULA, 1998). Moreover, women's inclusive roles have been advocated in many of the policy documents such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the Millennium Development Goals, and the Five Year Plans of Bangladesh. In a pluralistic society qualitative, meaningful and equal political participation of both men and women is deemed the *sine-qua-non* for achieving social justice, ensuring women's empowerment, delivering developmental goals, and strengthening the process of democratic governance (UNDP, 2013).

Nonetheless, despite having a 50% female population in Bangladesh, without a solid integration and role-making of women into the country's political structure, without taking women's needs and interests into account, without creating opportunity for them to participate in decision-making, the overall development of the country in general and women in particular will be thwarted and minuscule (Huq, 2016). Against this backdrop, this study is an attempt to examine critically the state of women leaders' exercise of their political rights at the local level. It specifically answers two (research)

questions. Firstly, i) what are the major challenges women leaders face at the UC? Secondly, how do women leaders cope with the challenges for ensuring their participation in the UC? The rationale of the study is further strengthened by the fact that there is still limited research on the complex dynamics between women's activism and leadership in both informal and formal domains and the extent of interaction between male and female leadership (Domingo, Holmes, O'Neil, Jones, Bird, Larson, Presler-Marshall, Valters, 2015). It is expected that the suggestions derived from the study will strengthen the local government in discharging better services to the citizens.

2. Research Process

This paper is based on qualitative research approach. In-depth interview was the principal method for collecting data. Adopting qualitative research approach helped to explore lived experiences, multiple realities, diverse dimensions, dynamics and problems of participation and coping patterns of the women leaders from their own perspectives. It further helped to appropriately unearth the research questions. A prolonged field work was employed in this study. As the principal participants were the women leaders, it was necessary to maintain a pre-fixed time so that they could understand the sincerity of the researchers and feel a sense of obligation to respond to queries. Then on meeting them, maximum efforts were paid to establish a good rapport and trust with them so that they could mentally turn on to share their lived experience without hesitation. Efforts were also made to engage them in sharing their experiences relating to their participation in the UC affairs. Besides, data were also collected on socio-demographic, economic and political profiles of the participants. The study was conducted during July-December, 2013. Before each interview, informed consent was obtained from the participants. Interviews were conducted in local language *Bangla*; afterwards, these were transcribed into English. A purposive random sampling was adopted while selecting women leaders from five administrative divisions of Bangladesh namely; Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Sylhet and Rajshahi.

In total, twenty-three directly elected women representatives were interviewed in this study. Amongst the participants, six were directly elected UC Chairpersons, and the rest were UC Members. Seventy-two (72%) percent of the women members belonged to the 30-39 age group, and 19% belonged to the 40-49 age group and the rest belonged to the 50 plus age group. Ninety-five (95%) percent of the women members in the UC were married and currently living with their husbands, and the rest were divorced. Six women leaders (4 Chairpersons and 2 members) directly came to politics using their

family legacy, and they also belonged to the relatively upper landed class. On the other hand, 8% of the women members had a bachelor level of education, 19% of them had a higher secondary level education and the rest could not even attain secondary level education. Five women leaders (2 Chairpersons and 3 members) had political affiliations from their student life, and the rest had no prior political affiliation.

In the process of analyzing data, thematic analytical approach was employed. Huge data were synchronized into different thematic areas keeping the research questions of the study in mind. For analyzing the essence or meaning of the textual descriptions obtained from the participants, content analysis method was also adopted using the relevant literature. While reporting to the participants only pseudonyms were used which helped to maintain confidentiality of expression of the participants. In addition, relevant and important ethical issues were strictly maintained.

3. Case Studies on Women's Challenges and Coping Strategies in the Affairs of UC

The following few cases were developed to express the challenges faced by women leaders and the coping mechanism adopted by them to address the challenges.

3.1 The Case of Mina, Chairperson of a UC

Mina, aged 48, was elected Chairperson in 2011. She contested for three times for this position. As a widow, she is now running her family with a monthly income of about 40,000 Bangladeshi taka (509 US\$). Both of her sons are studying at the graduate level. Mina obtained a BA (Bachelor of Arts) degree and owns some property from her husband and parents. No one in her family was directly involved in political activities in Bangladesh. Nonetheless, she maintained a good communication with the Member of Parliament (MP) of her constituency, a person who was a teacher of her late husband. Notably, being inspired by her husband, Mina quit the managerial position at the *Grameen Bank* (a specialized financial institutions dealing with poverty alleviation through micro-credit) where she had worked for thirteen years.

Mina disclosed that being the chief executive of the UC she had to face serious male domination. She lamented saying that sometimes the male members used to protest in the UCs when she distributed projects to the female members. At some point few male members even threatened her saying that they would file a fake case against her. Yet, as an honest, skilled and articulated woman with substantial managerial abilities, Mina was able to

handle the troubles quite successfully. As a Chairperson, Mina always tried to distribute project assignments to female and male members equally in line with the legal provisions. But the male members were never happy with the distribution process adopted by Mina, and often tried to impose their domination in unjust and illogical means by unnecessarily harassing the female members. For example, a male member suited a fake case against one female member of her UC. Mina could successfully handle the case. On the other hand, Mina informed that all the male members several times verbally threatened her in a number of ways. She further added that once at the time of distributing big projects to the female members, male members jointly made a false complaint against her to the higher government administrative authority.

Mina attained a good grasp of the legal aspects, rules, regulation, acts, and implementation procedures of the UC by attending few training programs. In the meantime, she got an opportunity to visit the *Gram Panchayats* (Indian Local Government System) system in Bangalore and Kerala of India in 2012. She attained a good orientation of the local government system in India. Similar to the practices of India, Mina thought that women leaders at the local level in Bangladesh should be imparted more training so that they could implement development projects successfully. As the Chief Executive of the UC, she is engaged in resource and development management in the UC. Despite serious male domination, she implemented some development projects quite successfully. She ensured safe drinking water, sanitary toilets, drainage system and increased number of safety net benefits for the poor villagers.

3.1.1 Analytical Implications of Mina's Case

- The UC structure is responsible for male domination

Holding the position of UC Chairperson Mina faced serious problems from the male members who explicitly challenged her leadership position. In fact, the structure of the UC is one of the major challenges for women leaders. People expect the very position of Chairpersonship is to be occupied by a man. Mina faced several problems of male domination while she tried to ensure gender equality in the project assignments of the UC.

- Coping Strategies of the Women Leaders

The coping strategies Mina followed to manage the challenges she faced by the male members were: following the legal provision, providing judgment for maintaining gender equality in the UC, maintaining personal honesty and integrity in the UC governance and using uncompromising attitude towards judicious discretion. When she started ensuring equal rights for women leaders in the UC, the male members warned her saying that they would file fake

cases against her. Even in such a situation Mina was able to overcome the barriers using her highest integrity. Above all, her previous managerial qualities which she obtained out of her work at the *Grameen* Bank also helped her to manage the problems in the UC. Her linkage with the concerned MP, exposure to foreign training, educational attainment and family background helped her to manage and overcome the threats and challenges posed by the male members.

3.2 The Case of Fatema, Member of a UC

Fatema was elected UC member first time in 2005 and second time in 2011. She is 38, and married. Fatema's family is composed of six members. Her monthly income is about 35,000 taka (446 US\$). Fatema's cousin, father-in-law and grandfather served as the UC Chairperson in the past. Before coming to the UC she was engaged in two NGOs: *Grameen* Bank and the Friend's in Village Development Society (FIVDS). She holds good social mobility and maintains linkages with the government administrative machinery.

Fatema demanded that after being elected for the second time her knowledge about the UC has substantially enhanced. She admitted that when she was elected for the first time she had no idea about the scope of work and her prerogatives in the UC. At the initial stage the male members could not tolerate the emerging women leaders in the UC. Such attitude still prevails in the UC. Fatema stated that the male members always frowned her saying that the women members were elected in the reserved seats so they had nothing to do with UC activities except seating with them and cooperating everything with them. She added that in most of the cases the UC Chairmen were men, so they tried to keep the women leaders subservient to the control of male domination. Fatema also informed that once the UC Chairman requested her to prepare the estimate for a small feeder road approaching to a male UC member's house. She happily prepared the estimation. She added that when she was about to finalize the project proposal, the concerned male member came to the UC and requested the Chairman to assign that project to him. He convinced the Chairman saying that if a woman member implements the project in his area, he would never be able to win in the election again. Thus, the Chairman changed his mind and shifted the project responsibilities to that male member. Due to such decision of the Chairman, she got upset as she worked very hard for preparing the project proposal. Fatema stated that women leaders should get hold of one-third share of the total projects implemented by the UC, but admitted that still women leaders face lots of problems to ensure their rights in the UC. She informed that women leaders

hardly receive their share from the UC. Fatema remarked that administrative allocation of one third project to women leaders in a particular UC is quite illogical and irrational.

3.2.1 Analytical Implications of Fatema's Case

- Male domination

The case depicts how women leaders are neglected by their male counterparts in the UC. It also depicts how women representatives are being deprived of their rights and how the legal provision in the UC makes the women leaders' role shaky and subservient in relation to the role of male members.

- Faulty legal practice imposed on the women in the UC

This case holds the fact that how legal provision subjugates women by depriving them of their due rights. It is irrational that legally women leaders are given only one third of the total projects while they represent an area that is three times larger than that of a male member.

- Coping strategy

Fatema's case further represents the fact that she accepted her deprivation and male domination with patience. Although she had an NGO background and elected twice as UC woman member, she encountered male domination in both of her tenures which she managed with extreme patience, honesty and sincerity.

3.3 Circulation of Elite Theory in Action: The Uniqueness of the Cases

It is important to critically analyze the background of Mina and Fatema and their development as women leaders. Both Mina and Fatema had elitist family background and occupied prestigious social position. Their family background, social position and social network had significant influence upon them for contesting in the UC election. The fact of their emergence as leaders is strongly supported by the circulation of elite theory developed by Italian Sociologist Vilfredo Pareto. According to Pareto, 'the holders of influence and political and social power tend to be the holders of great wealth', and 'these classes make up an elite, an aristocracy' (Welty, 2016). Women leaders in both the cases mentioned above are elites in theoretical and practical outlooks. They hold substantial wealth and power as manifested in their family background, social position and social network. As a matter of fact, their existing elitist position promotes their emergence as a governing elite class at the local level politics.

3.4 The Cases of Corruption in the UC

During data collection, a woman member shared a case of corruption. That woman once came to know that she was given a project of 100,000 Bangladeshi taka (1274 US\$). After getting the project approved, the Chairman advised her to sign a cheque. As soon as the cheque was cashed the Chairman took away the whole money from her giving her only 5,000 taka (64 US\$).

Another woman member informed that once the Chairman of her UC tried to pass few projects using fake signatures of women members. Having doubt about the authenticity the local administration immediately made an inquiry and found the Chairman guilty. He was caught red handed. The local administration adopted measures to suspend him from Chairmanship. Meanwhile, the alleged Chairperson had managed everything by obtaining a stay order from the High Court.

3.4.1 Analytical Implications of the Corruption Cases

In a true sense, corruption has plagued potentiality for smooth functioning of local governance which is directly affecting the participation of women leaders in the UC. The above cases unravel the nature and magnitude of corruption in the UC. These are just two symbolic presentations of corruption which indicate how the UC Chairman practices corruption and neglects the rights of women leaders.

From the above cases (Mina, Fatema, and Corruption), it is evident that there were three major problems for smooth participation of women in local level in the UC such as male domination, corruption and faulty legal provision. Due to prevalence of these problems in the arrangements of the UC, women leaders have to encounter serious impediments with regard to their proactive participation in the UC.

3.5 Coping Mechanisms Adopted by the Women Leaders in the UC to Address the Challenges

Based on empirical evidences and information received from the female members from different UCs in Bangladesh, a brief summary of the coping strategies opted by the women leaders have been described and analyzed in the following.

Coping strategies in the study were referred as the techniques, mechanism, and strategies used by the women leaders to ensure their jurisdictional and institutional rights from the male representatives. In order to cope with the prevailing situation and to overcome their constant denial and deprivations of their rights in the UC, the women members adopted various

formal and informal mechanisms and methods to fortify their position and to reinforce their rights in the UC. It is important to note that most of the participants admitted that they are aware about the rights and privileges as public representatives in the UC although in many occasions they are deliberately denied of their rights and privileges. Since they are aware of their rights it is possible for them to adopt some definite strategies to fortify their rights. For example, a woman member who had been in the UC for two terms depicted the earlier situation in the following manner:

At the first time I had to pass a very terrible time. Now-a-days, women leaders are given due importance in many areas. We never knew that among the total projects sanctioned for UC women representatives would get one-third of the share. But now we know the details about our charter in the UC from the training we received in NGOs. Women are now fully conscious and expert in the UC activities (Chapa).

The underlying assumption of the above quotation testifies to the fact that male members just tried to ignore the woman members' presence in the UC. The women leaders in every UC in Bangladesh were looked down upon by the male members during their first term (1997-2003) and they were kept ignorant of their jurisdictional rights. Nonetheless, gradually, women leaders started exerting their rights and shares and raised their voices about their roles and responsibilities in the UC. In fact, stipulating such rights in the legal framework provided a massive impulse to the women leaders in the UC. Earlier, it was quite difficult for the women leaders to enjoy those rights. Such fact was reflected in the utterance of another woman member:

When I was elected first time as a woman member in the UC, my presence could not make any differences because I always got very limited information of the on-going activities of the UC. For example, I was hardly informed of the meeting held in the UC. Chairman and male members never informed me about the meeting date in the UC. Many times, I used to attend the meeting knowing from others (Jaba).

Principally, such was the case happening with almost all the women leaders in the UC under the study. As long as they came to know the UC functions and activities, they began to bargain for their rights and prerogatives with their male counterparts. Information and knowledge have universal power. Previously, when the women leaders were denied their due rights, they could not do or say anything because the male members just used subterfuge and bluffed the women leaders saying that there was no provision of their duties and rights in the local government act. Eventually, when government

strongly specified some jurisdictional rights, the male members could not but comply with them. Even though, in some cases, their full jurisdictional rights were not recognized. It was only after repeated claims some of the women leaders were granted some project assignments with their male counterparts. Thus, after a sustained and ceaseless struggle, the Chairman and male members were bound to oblige to the rights of women leaders already declared by the local government act.

In the following, some of the formal means which the women leaders sought to exert their rights and cope with the challenges faced in the UC are depicted.

3.6 Argumentation in favour of their rights

Arguments were the usual mechanism through which the women members tried to address their challenges of deprivations by the male members in the UC. Having been obtained knowledge of the rules and regulations, some intelligent and assertive women were able to gain access to some of the important areas in the UC through their constant struggle with their rights. One woman member informed;

I came to this stage through ceaseless fighting with the male counterparts. Now I realize that the prestige and importance of women members had increased immensely since the initial day (Afrin).

It was evident that, over the years, there occurred some changes regarding the female UC members' motivation to become involved in social activities, to participate in the decision-making process, and to raise their voice regarding the UC affairs (Islam and Islam, 2012).

3.6.1 Protests in meetings

Protesting in the meetings was another *modus operandi* used to ventilate the grievances of women members in the UC. This was a widely-used coping strategy adopted by the women leaders. In the regular monthly or during any special meeting, being informed about their rights and privileges, women leaders became extremely vociferous when they experienced deprivation and discrimination by their male counterparts, and through their constant struggle, the Chairman was ultimately forced to comply with many of the demands of the women leaders in the UC and the women were provided with a few project assignments. Thus, using meetings as a platform for addressing their grievances, the women leaders gradually began to enjoy their rights in the UC. One woman member shared her experiences in the following manner.

Initially, I used to control myself in the meeting. I just wanted to see what is happening around and how far they could go, but after a few meetings, I gradually started raising my voice. This is how I gave a message to them. I do not let my rights waste away so cheaply (Pervin).

3.6.2 Seeking assistance from the local administration

The local administration serves as the controlling authority of the UC and in general, the government funds flow to the UC through the local administration. Therefore, being failed to get remedies of malpractices, corruptions and deprivations in the UC, most of the women leaders resorted to assistance from the local administration. In most of the cases, such incidents ended with compromising or sharing some sort of benefits with the women leaders. Thus, the women leaders instilled their position and roles in the UC. One woman member reacted in the following manner:

At first, I protested in the meeting. When the Chairman did not pay heed to my opinion, I immediately went to the Sub-district Executive Officer and informed him of the matter. He took some proactive measures and I was given some space to work (Tanni).

Sometimes rather than formal means, women also used some informal means. In the following, some of the examples of informal means adopted by women leaders when they faced deprivation and injustice by the Chairman and his allied male members in the UC are depicted.

3.6.3 Informing husbands and near relatives

In most cases, women leaders often discussed with their husbands and near relatives when they failed to do anything. In most cases, problems occurred with assigning development projects and the distribution of social security benefits, where male members were very reluctant to provide the due share to the women leaders. Their husbands or relatives took initiatives to solve the challenges using their usual political network or by adopting a sober approach to mitigate their deprivation a little. One woman member said;

My husband is the political leader of the ruling party. When I told my husband to do something for me using his political power, he suggested me to adjust with everything. But after my repeated instigations he brought the matter to the notice of the UC Chairman. As a result, I realized things started changing as I was given due importance in many decision-making cases of the UC (Shipra).

3.6.4 Using social capital

Being deprived of their legal rights in the UC many women leaders tried to use various social capitals to address their multifarious problems. In some cases, these women leaders successfully used their social capitals to handle their problems in the UC. Some of the coping strategies adopted by the women leaders based on social capital are portrayed below.

i) Contact with the MPs: Most of the MPs, for their own sake and self-interest, maintain linkages with local governments because officially they were given an advisory role in all local government bodies in Bangladesh. Hence, the UC representatives always try to maintain good relationships with the MPs. Most of the women leaders stated that in a bid to ensure their rights and privileges in the UC, some women leaders maintained a good network with the ruling party MPs. Thus, the women leaders sometimes were able to manage the challenges they encountered in the UC.

ii) Using the NGO network and legal aid advocacy: NGOs and legal aid groups often emerged as supporters of the women leaders. From the initial stage till hitherto the NGOs were providing various training programs to sensitize women leaders about their roles and rights. Thus the women leaders were more or less aware of the services and roles of the NGOs and the legal advocacy groups in the rural society. When the women leaders denied one-third of their rights to project assignments and other benefits enshrined in the UC ordinance, some women leaders used to approach to local NGOs authorities in order to be confirmed about their rights and privileges in the UC. These women leaders were even often found seeking advice from the local legal aid NGOs in order to redress their deprivation in the UC. For example, one woman member confirmed:

At the first time, I had to pass a very terrible time. Nowadays, women leaders are given importance. We never knew that among the total projects women would get one-third of the projects, but we now know more details about our charter in the UC from the training we received from the NGOs. Women are now fully conscious of their rights and experts in the UC activities (Shefa).

iii) Using patronage through local political parties: It was found that being deprived by the Chairman and the male members, in some cases, the women leaders sought assistance from local political parties so that they could ensure their rights and privileges in the UC. Having been informed about the Chairman's political linkage, the women leaders opted to use political leverage, using their husbands and relatives so that they could be ensured of some of

their shares from the Chairman through using a sense of fellow feeling and belonging to the same party.

iv) Ventilating grievances with the community and constituents: The women leaders were deprived of their due rights and thus could not provide social security benefits according to the demand of the poor villagers. In such a situation, being a victim of male domination and devoid of rights and privileges in the UC, some of the women leaders disclosed their grievances to the concerned constituents and community so that those villagers could understand their limitations.

v) Using the media: Nowadays the media have become one of the most powerful instruments of ensuring accountability, transparency, and good governance in Bangladesh. They have been epitomized as the greatest watchdog for ensuring justice and protecting civil and private rights for individuals, UCs, and state and non-state organizations. Likewise, women leaders are also known to use the media to expose their deplorable grievances, denials and deprivations. It was evident that some of the cases of deprivation and bewilderment of the women leaders had already been published in the news media. When the women leaders found themselves helpless to have any sort of redress from any corner, some of them resorted to informing the whole matter of their distress to the local journalists, who in turn helped to get the ideas published in the media. After being revealed in the media, some of the malpractices dwindled and the Chairmen were even suspended in some cases.

vi) Using mobile phones: In an age of globalization and technological revolution, few women leaders were found to have developed huge networks and social capital in rural society by using mobile phones. They maintained relationships with relevant nation building officials and actors. Therefore, it became very difficult to keep secret any information from the women leaders. Even in some cases, women leaders were informed about the benefits and facilities that were expected to be channelized to the UC using their network and social capital. Hence, the Chairman and male members could never hide any such information.

3.6.5 Vote of no confidence

This is an established mechanism enshrined in the local government act of 2010 which is being practiced as a controlling mechanism to address the massive corruption and injustice occurring in the UC. In a situation where extreme defalcation or deprivation occurs, sometimes the women leaders, together with the male members, resorted to a 'vote of no confidence' move against their Chairman. This was the last resort or weapon adopted by the

deprived leaders against the massive injustice, corruption, and anomalies caused by the Chairman and his unholy alliances.

3.7 Are They Always Successful?

It was found that few assertive women leaders were successful in securing their rights in the UC through constant fighting with the Chairmen and gained such a momentum which helped them to be elected for multiple terms. Nonetheless, in some cases, the efforts of women leaders were abortive and quixotic due to many factors but the major ones are as follows:

3.7.1 Lack of solidarity

From the colonial period, most of the rulers adopted one of the important strategies, *'divide et impera'* (Misra, 1981), meaning divide and rule. It was found that in some cases the UC Chairmen tried to intimidate some of the women leaders from the rebellious groups by providing some of the facilities and benefits from the UC and thus the Chairmen became successful in creating a rift in the solidarity among the deprived members' alliances. This is an extreme case of lack of solidarity amongst the women leaders in the UC. One female member narrated:

We go forward one step but come back two steps. It is very unfortunate that amongst the women members there is hardly any solidarity. We can be purchased and threatened to make us inactive. It happens quite frequently. If it is the case, how would you ensure your participation (Rahima)?

3.7.2 Unholy alliances among the local administration, Chairmen, and ruling party network

In most cases, in order to combat the resentment and dissatisfaction of the women leaders, the Chairman was found to pursue the patronage of influential rural elites. The Chairman was maintaining a very good relationship with the local administration, ruling party MPs, and other plundering groups surrounding the UC. As a matter of fact, a powerful unholy network or mediators plays an important role in the local governance in Bangladesh. Scholars have termed this situation the 'patron-client relationship' or 'clientelism' (Asaduzzaman, 2008). For example, in the case of a UC under the study area, the suspension order of the Chairman was carried out for only three weeks by the High Court, but the Chairman ultimately managed all intermediary groups where some male members and one female member joined him to sustain his misgovernance and supremacy in the UC.

The few contexts mentioned above indicate that women members apparently could not become wholly successful in their moves against a powerful and established structural arrangement at the local level of governance.

4. Discussion

This study provided some valuable information about the struggle of women leaders for ensuring participation in the UC. It also examines the extent of their coping mechanism. It was learnt that women leaders struggled for ensuring participation in the UC due to patriarchy, corruption and faulty legal bottleneck in the UC. Women leaders opted for various strategies to cope with the system and tried to ensure their legal rights in the UC. The formal means women leaders adopted were using legal rights through various channels such as debates, meeting and vote of no confidence, seeking help from local administration and the like. On the other hand, the informal coping strategies through which women leaders tried to establish their legal rights were seeking help from their family and community people, using social capital through NGO networks, political patronage and mobile phones, seeking recourse from the concerned MPs and seeking remedies using the media.

The women leaders trod a long way while enduring and digesting many odds, obstacles and challenges. In fact, the whole path they came across was full of thorns and thunderstorms. Through constant fighting with their debates, arguments and counter-arguments with their male counterparts, few women leaders were able at least to secure some of their rights and privileges in the UC, which paved the way for their role on a limited scale. It was observed that in almost all of the UCs, a conflicting situation between male and female members prevails. Such conflict occurred due to demanding of rights and benefits by the women leaders in the UC. This situation further indicates the stronghold of patriarchy at the rural level which stands as the biggest challenge for women leaders. In fact, the grasp of patriarchy is not new in Bangladesh. The social structure of Bangladesh is belonging to what has been defined as 'classic patriarchy' (Kandiyoti, 1988), and the socio-cultural environment in Bangladesh contains pervasive forms of gender discrimination; girls and women face many obstacles to their development because of the stronghold of male domination in all spheres (UNICEF, 2010). There are shreds of evidence that due to male domination women leaders are excluded from important areas of participation in the UC which include infrastructure development, budget decisions, planning exercises, committee activities and the like. Their involvement is mostly titular and women opinions

are not heard during decision-making and thus women's roles and political empowerment have been undermined and neutralized in the UC (Shamim, Nasreen, 2002; UNDP, 2003; Gani, Sattar, 2004; Begum, 2005; Begum, 2007; Khan, 2008; Khan, Mohsin, 2008; Panday, 2008).

The second obstacle towards women's participation in the UC is corruption. Since UC is a lucrative source of corruption as many state-sponsored development interventions are passed through UC, corrupt Chairmen and members find it as an opportunity to avail materialistic benefits by deliberately denying the rights of different stakeholders. Keeping women members away from development programs is an obvious means to divert resources to their pockets. Corruption is highly prevalent in most of the third world countries. Bangladesh is not an exception. According to TIB (2008), the local government was the second most corrupt sector in Bangladesh which corroborates the findings with the present study.

The faulty legal provision imposed on women leaders in the UC was identified as the third challenge for women members. In Bangladesh, Union Council Act of 1997 has helped ensure women's equal access to political power structures (Khan, Ara, 2006). But being directly elected in the UC, women leaders found helpless as, during preliminary stage, there was the lack of legal provision and guideline about their roles and responsibilities. Thereafter, in a bid to strengthen women's role and participation in the UC the concerned Ministry made a legal provision in 2002 that allowed women leaders to enjoy few specific rights in the UC. Still, there is lack of clarity and vagueness in the legal provision regarding the roles and responsibilities of the women leaders in UC. Khan (2009) found that women are excluded from all important activities in the UC due to being elected as the 'reserve seat members'. The reservation system in the UC is designed in such a way that women leaders often become marginalized in the UC. Holding the membership for three-time wider jurisdiction than that of men, they were enjoying only one-third facilities in the UC which is tantamount to doing mockery with the rights of women in Bangladesh. This again refers to the stronghold of patriarchy and paternalistic attitudes in the case of policy making of the government machinery in Bangladesh. Such faulty legal provision also hindered women's substantial participation in the UC.

Finally, in terms of analyzing the situation through feminist leadership perspective, it was observed that women leadership in UC struggles to cope with four fundamental components of feminist leadership such as power, principles, politics and practices (Baltiwala, 2010). Theoretically, feminist leadership advocates for social justice and an end to all forms of discrimination and oppression (Antrobus, 2002; Barton, 2006; Batliwala, 2010). In the whole event of women leadership in the UC women vividly lack

in enjoying and exercising their 'power' because of the deliberate barriers created by men. Women are not allowed to apply the core feminist 'principles' in their leadership such as equality, equity, inclusion, right and entitlement for the citizens. It was further evident that women failed to prove their involvement in active 'politics' in the UC since as leaders they faced hurdles to bring agenda like gender equality in the UC. Finally, the fourth principle of feminist leadership such as 'practices' also did not have significant implication in the process of women leaders' involvement in the UC since women encountered systematic obstacles with regard to practicing managerial, resourcing, communication and relationship works.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Bangladesh is often acclaimed for its positive interventions in bringing gender equality in all spheres of lives. It was not long before when women were forcibly concentrated only in the private sphere. But due to constant struggle and bargaining of feminist scholars and women activists, the public sphere has also been opened up for women. They are now working with men neck to neck in many important public domains. The UC is one of the public spheres where women had a very little scope for participation and involvement. Nonetheless, despite having many proactive measures, women still are encountering troubles in getting entrance into many of the public spheres like the UC. Although women's full access to decision-making roles in the local political life remains limited, there has been a considerable progress in women's access to this formal political role.

In order to overcome the bottlenecks and the problems faced by women members in the UC a few policy interventions should be undertaken such as 1) the problems of patriarchy can be addressed through the expansion of education facilities and democratic governance with a view to changing the value system; 2) the UC structure should be reorganized with one woman Vice-Chairman to counter the autocratic rule of the male Chairman and members; 3) women's reservation quota in the UC can be raised from 33% to 50% which will help to combat male domination and corruption in a stringent way; 4) necessary legal provisions should be enhanced to ensure equal rights for the male and female members; 5) 60% of all of the social welfare programs at the UC level should be allocated to them to support expanding the role of women; 6) family and community support should be enhanced in the wake of developing women leadership in the UC. Above all, more efforts are needed to develop feminist leadership in the UC. Perhaps, it is the most ideal and desired stance amongst other forms of leadership which will ensure more

space for women leaders in the UC. It will further develop their capacity to dismantle the very institution of patriarchy or male domination.

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