

Exploring Factors Affecting Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh: A Study on Urban Local Government Institution

Rifat Mahmud

*Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Barishal,
Barishal 8200, Bangladesh
Email id: rifat.89@hotmail.com*

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to critically appraise the extent of women's participation in politics in a urban local government institution in Bangladesh, Barishal City Corporation. What is the present state of women's political participation at the Barisal City Corporation? What factors affect women's participation in the political arena in Barisal City Corporation? The study seeks to answer these questions and focuses on the issue of women's participation in the local government institution, i.e. City Corporation. Methodologically, a quantitative research strategy has been adopted in this study complemented by appropriate qualitative methods. This study reveals that the majority of respondents find that inadequate education is a barrier to women's political participation in the City Corporation. The study also sees that the patriarchal system along with institutional barriers has a negative influence on women's political participation in the City Corporation.

Keywords: Women, Political participation, City corporation, Patriarchy, Standard operating procedure

INTRODUCTION

Local government, it is hoped, will provide women from the most marginalized communities with the chance to engage politically- to vote, lobby, and run for election (O' Connell, 2010). The prevalence of gender discrimination is entrenched in all aspects of social life and has significantly affected the lives of women everywhere. Women in Bangladesh like many other third-world countries lag in the economic, social, political, and other aspects of the community. There has been great disparity concerning representation in politics, public service, and in almost every sector of public life between males and females in most Third World countries (UN, 1989; UNDP, 1995). In a male dominated and patriarchal society, Bangladeshi women find it difficult to get involved in politics (Halder, 2004; Chowdhury, 2009). The gradual incorporation of women into the mainstream development process has steadily increased their role in public life.

Like other countries of the world, the issue of women's participation in politics in Bangladesh is a significant one (Panday, 2013). Ensuring the participation of women in local government institutions equally with that of male counterparts is an essential requirement for Third World countries like Bangladesh where the voice of women remains unheard in the policymaking process. It has been realized that real development will not be possible if women are kept away from the policymaking process, particularly as they comprise half of the total population (Panday, 2013). Women's interests should be represented in policy implementing institutions such as in City Corporations and policy processes as equal to men to ensure good governance and the rule of law in any country (Lister, 1997). Women's political participation in large numbers is required in Bangladesh, since the sustainability of their social and economic empowerment highly depends on their involvement in political decision making (Husain and Siddiqi, 2002).

Bangladesh is divided into eight (8) administrative divisions. Each administrative division (each division has an administrative office) is divided into several districts (each district has a district administrative office) and each district is then divided into several Upazilas (sub-districts), where each Upazila has an administrative office. There are two streams in the local government structure of Bangladesh, one urban local government and the second rural local government. The rural local government stream has a hierarchical system involving three tiers: one, *union parishad* (4538); second, *upazila parishad* (495) and third, *zila parishad* (64). The urban local government also involves a hierarchical system involving two tiers: one, *city corporations* (12) and second, *pourashavas* (318). The urban local government institutions are involved in the formulation and implementation of infrastructural and developmental policies in urban areas (Jamil & Panday, 2012). Drawing evidence from Barishal City Corporation, this study tries to analyze the factors affecting women's participation in the political arena. This study restricts to women's urban political-institutional attitude and perception.

OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE KEY CONCEPT: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation is described as one of the basic conditions of functioning democracy (Verba *et al.*, 1995; Norris, 2002) and the quality of democracy and its ability to connect citizens with political leaders has become an important political issue today (Vrablikova, 2010). Generally, political participation has come to mean the direct involvement of citizens in the process of administrative decision-making, policy formulation, and policy implementation (Panday, 2013). Dewey (1970) stated that people must socialize with the various political organization which assists in developing a democratic attitude and this socialization process makes way for active political participation. According to Johnson (2008), "Political participation may be described as any voluntary act to influence elections or public policy. It may be simple as casting a ballot or it may mean running for office; it may be intended to influence the broad outlines of policy, or it may be very specific e.g. seeking benefits for an individual". Wiener (1979) stated that in developing

countries, political participation is not confined to a relatively limited set of acts such as campaigning or participation through very formal institutions but it certainly has a wider context which refers to “any voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized, episodic or continuous, employing legitimate or illegitimate methods, intended in influencing the choice of the public policies, or the administration of public affairs or the choice of the political leaders”. Munroe (2002) defined political participation in terms of the degree to which citizens are exercising their right to engage in political activities. Ensuring that the needs of various groups are ensured in the public sphere may pave way for political participation.

Female political representation in local government was invisible both during the British and Pakistan period (Khan and Ara, 2006). After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the constitution of Bangladesh was adopted in late 1972, where Article 59 provided for elected local government institutions at all levels. Under the provision of Local Government Ordinance (1976), the government created a scope for participation of women in formal decision making process (Islam and Islam, 2012). It was the ever first ordinance regarding the local government system in the history of independent Bangladesh. In this ordinance the structure of the local government system underwent changes and the provision was made to select two women members in local government. Consequently various laws have been formulated by various governments.

RATIONALE FOR WOMEN’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS IN BANGLADESH

The issue of women’s participation and representation in local government bears paramount importance in protecting their interests and in incorporating their issues in the decision-making process. The opportunity for all citizens to participate in the decision-making process either directly or through their representatives is the central aspect of democracy. However, in a patriarchal society, Bangladeshi women find it difficult to get involved in politics especially at the local level. A democratic local government exists when it is participatory, accountable, and responsive to local interests. It has been widely advocated in various international symposia, that women should participate in political decision-making to ensure equality, democracy, and legitimacy (Panday, 2013). Women’s political participation and empowerment are closely related (Panday, 2013). Friedmann (1992) asserted that women empowerment brings social mobilization, brings changes in the state of the mind of women, and helps in gaining access to the bases of social power. Local government tiers such as city corporations must be an arena whereby both men and women equally participate in the decision-making process.

Urban local government institutions such as city corporations in Bangladesh constitute the major local government bodies in urban areas. Over 25 percent (43 million) of the total population resides in urban areas in Bangladesh (Local Government Division, Bangladesh). Having women’s

active involvement in the decision-making process ushers the way for ensuring their rights and status in society. According to Chowdhury (1994) there are various rationales for women's representation and participation in the political process, which are: i) the need for democracy and equality as well as civil rights, which makes the demand for proportional representation of women in politics unavoidable; (ii) women's insignificant presence in politics raises questions about the legitimacy of the democratic process and decision-making authorities; (iii) women are well informed and experienced about their basic problems and needs, but they will be deprived of an equal share of the output if they are not properly represented in the political process; (iv) women's increased participation in politics and decision-making bodies will facilitate the process of development and good governance; (v) finally, for efficient and maximum utilization of human resources, an increased number of women should be allowed to participate in politics (Panday, 2013). Desired development of Bangladesh is not possible, if half of the citizens are dormant from the mainstream of politics (Siddiqui, 2005). Therefore, this study tries to investigate the state of women's participation and the factors affecting their participation in Barishal City Corporation (BCC).

CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE: THE INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

The purpose of the study is to find out the essence of institutions that shapes the state of women's political participation in City Corporation. This study adopted the institutional approach in explaining the issue of the research. The term institution is used very often in studying women in politics (Panday, 2013). Formal political system features like electoral rules, ballot structures, district sizes, and the number of political parties affect political participation (Caul, 1999; Rule, 1987; Rule and Zimmerman, 1994). Institutional rules, norms, and routines are considered determinants of politics and governance (March and Olsen, 1984, 1993, 1995, 1996). Thus, women's political participation is also influenced by other institutions such as procedures, routines, conventions, norms (Panday, 2013). Putnam (1993) gave two fundamental issues of institutionalism, i) he said that rules and standard operating procedures constitute institutions that shape individuals identities, power, and strategies that affect political outcomes and behavior, and ii) institutional rules and standard operating procedures are the products of historically ingrained rules and regulation of institutions.

Women are still poorly represented in the political arena throughout the world (Kabir and Haque, 2014). Various factors such as socio-cultural issues like education, rules, and standard operating procedures along with political issues influence women's political participation in local government tiers. Studies have shown that a range of factors influences women's access to the political arena (Tremblay, 2007). The independent variables are those identified by previous research and can be grouped into three umbrellas: socio-cultural factors, educational factors, and institutional factors (Moghandam, 2010). Socio-cultural practices based on strong patriarchal traditions have

served to curtail the mobility of women in Bangladesh (Panday, 2013). Disproportionate involvement in the labor market and restrictive socio-cultural influences on education, nutrition, health, and political participation are evident among women in most South Asian countries (Rustagi, 2004). There are rural and urban variations concerning women's opportunities and access to resources in Bangladesh as they operate within fairly harsh manifestations of patriarchal structures and attitudes that diminish the political rights of women. The patriarchal nature of the society and state permeates into the policies for women's integration in various aspects of the socio-political institutions in South Asian societies such as in Bangladesh and this has adversely affected women's participation in the political system and hindered their incorporation into mainstream politics (Shamim and Nasreen, 2002). When the issue concerns women's political participation in the local government of Bangladesh, institutional rules can play an important role (Panday, 2013).

Education is perhaps the strongest factor that enables women to control their futures (Panday, 2013). Education plays an important role to counter the stereotype cultural norms and perceptions that there is no difference between men and women, and women should be treated fairly and equally to make sure that discrimination against women is not acceptable. Given the state of socio-cultural impediments, it is very difficult for Bangladeshi women to win an election against male candidates (Panday, 2013). The structure of local government institutions, the composition of the local government institutions (provision of quota system), the party policies in the way candidates are given nominations and the electoral rules affect women's political participation at the local level.

All these factors' cumulative effect creates the 'institutional arrangement' which determines the level of women's representation in the political arena of a country. This research tries to portray how some of the indicators such as educational level, socio-cultural dimensions, and standard operating procedures affect women's political participation at BCC.

Education Level

Women's access to education is an important indicator of women's status (Kabir & Haque, 2014). In Bangladesh women are handicapped because of lower educational achievements and the prevalence of social norms that severely restrict their freedom of movement in the public place and so they do not show interest in participating in local government activities (Khan and Ara, 2006). Given the existence of patriarchy and male-dominated societal structures (Panday, 2013) where gender division of labor is an accepted norm, women's entry into the political arena remains slim in Bangladesh. The prejudicial attitude of employers is also responsible for women's limited entry into better administrative jobs and higher political positions in Bangladesh (Kabir and Haque, 2014). Based on the logic, the hypothesis that can be asserted is:

Hypothesis 1: *Higher the level of educated women, the higher would be the women's representation in the City Corporation.*

Socio-Cultural Factors

Social institutions, such as the family, school, church, mosque, government, and media continue to promote stereotyped roles of men and women alike and such impositions eventually make women think that their role is subordinate to men's (Panday, 2013). In Bangladesh socio-cultural norms and religious misinterpretations are used frequently for challenging and reinterpreting women's rights and create insecurity for women and although women have equal political rights to participate as voters and representatives, in reality they can be actively discouraged to do so (Khan and Ara, 2006). The predominant pattern is for men to be more assertive and for women to be more nurturing, thus women are not encouraged to participate in politics rather pushed into apolitical activities (Kabir and Haque, 2014). These suppressive roles and impositions act as a barrier to women's representation in local politics. Based on the patriarchal attitude of the society, the hypothesis for the socio-cultural factors is:

Hypothesis 2: *Lower-level masculine culture (femininity) leads to higher-level women's political participation at Barishal City Corporation.*

Standard Operating Procedural Factors

Rules are the most important means for defining institutions and governing behavior within institutions (Peters, 1999). When the issue concerns women's political participation in the local government of Bangladesh, institutional rules can play an important role (Panday, 2013). History tells us about the extent and degree to which rules and standard operating procedures are institutionalized in organizations (Panday, 2013). As such, the more they are ingrained in institutions, the more that institutional behavior and performance can be explained based on these aspects. When the issue concerns women's political participation in the local government of Bangladesh, institutional rules can play an important role. Given the state of sociocultural impediments, it is very difficult for Bangladeshi women to win elections election against male candidates. Thus, some rules must be structured to create an environment where women can easily take part and be involved within the political process. Institutional rules actually specify who will do what, how, and when. According to various original local government laws of Bangladesh, the roles of elected women members have not been specified (Panday, 2013). Rules and standard operating procedures must be structured to create an environment where women can easily take part and be involved within the political process especially at the local level (Panday, 2013). Based on the logic, the hypothesis that can be asserted is:

Hypothesis 3: *The more gender-biased rules, the lower the level of women's political participation at Barishal City Corporation.*

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The study is based on empirical research where a quantitative research strategy has been adopted complemented by appropriate qualitative methods. This study adopted a descriptive and exploratory case study approach. The complexity of the issue of research along with its exploratory and descriptive nature is the main reason for choosing the qualitative method.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable of this study is the level of political participation (quantitative and qualitative) of women in a local government institution, i.e. Barishal City Corporation.

Independent Variables

The independent variables of this study involve the institutional arrangements at the local government involving education level, socio-cultural factors, and standard operating procedural factors. The study tries to explore how these factors affect women's political participation at the local government.

Unit of Analysis and Location of Study

The units of analysis adopted in the study are the women individuals who participated in the last two (2) elections of Barishal City Corporation. The rationale for the selection of individual women participants is that participants from City Corporation get more exposure in the political arena as it is the highest tier at the urban local government of Bangladesh thus individual women with political affiliation are expected to be more aware of their political rights. Barishal district has been selected as the location of the study. Barishal district has been purposely selected as the literacy rate among the urban people is 75.3 percent¹ where female literacy is 72.8 percent. The percentage is comparatively higher with the overall literacy of Bangladesh, as the overall literacy of the country is 72.3 percent (Bangladesh Statistics, 2019). It is expected that women with a high literacy rate would provide more effective information regarding the institutional arrangements for women at the City Corporation level. Also, the term “manageability”, which is often used in conducting social science research (Strydom, 2014), is another reason why the Barishal district was chosen.

Data Collection

The total sample size for the study is 40, where 20 (10 from the election held in 2013 and the 10 from the election held in 2018) women who were elected from the last two (2) elections of the

¹Office of Town Planning, Barisal City Corporation

Table 1: Brief Profile of BCC

Features	
Population	328,278
Area	58 sq. km
Social indicators (income level; population density; life expectancy; literacy rate)	US \$ 42 per capita income; 6,551 per sq. km; Women 70.9 years and men 69 years; Women 72.8 % and men 78 %
Number of seats for City Corporation based on wards ²	30
Number of seats reserved for women	10 (one-third of the total seats)

Source: Office of Town Planning of Barishal City Corporation

City Corporation that were held in Barishal and other 20 who participated in the election but was not successful at winning the elections. All the 20 women who have been elected were from the reserved seats of women as City Corporation Councilor with none being able to win from the general seats. The study considered both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary information was collected directly from selected respondents in the research area.

The interview guide has been developed in the local language (Bengali), having two sections. The first section includes socio-demographic issues such as participant's age and education. Then to answer the questions about the scope of work in BCC respondents were commonly asked: *"What is the extent of the importance of education in accelerating political participation in your City Corporation?"*; *"How deep the patriarchal attitude acting as a barrier in your political involvement in the City Corporation?"*; *"Would you please describe the types of institutional hindrance you faced in participating in the election?"*; *"Would you please describe how much assistance you are getting from your colleagues in work?"* and *"What types of problem did you face in the workplace and how you are being treated?"*. Besides the structured questionnaire, other follow-up questions were asked. The study strictly maintained confidentiality and anonymity of the respondent's profile for assuring the ethical issues of social research. The interview conducted with respondents was according to interviewees' favorable time, place, and willingness.

Data Analysis

The information collected through in-depth interviews has been compiled for qualitative analysis. After conducting interviews, each was transcribed later verbatim to understand the theme of the respondent's information and experiences. The researcher conducted data analyses by organizing

²A city corporation in Bangladesh is divided into small areas known as wards. The number of wards in city corporations depends upon the number of population and is fixed through statute by the Ministry of Local Government

it into categories based on themes, concepts, or similar features, formulating conceptual definitions, and examined the relationship among concepts.

WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN THE LAST TWO CITY CORPORATION ELECTION HELD IN BARISHAL

Women must enter the decision-making process in a masculine society that of Bangladesh where only men are socialized toward assertiveness, ambition, and competition (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Women's leadership and political participation are restricted despite their proven abilities as leaders and agents of change (Markham, 2013). Women's representation in local governments has made a difference in South Asian countries like India (Panday, 2013). Bangladesh too must try to ensure that women are involved in the decision-making process in the pivotal institutions of the polity, especially at the local level. Indirect representation of their interests by others is not sufficient. Women's perspectives need to be articulated directly in the decision-making process (Schneider, 1986). The 30 general seats at BCC are to be filled by direct election by a single member in every city corporation election.

Figure 1, shows that in both of the elections very few women participated in general seats. In 2018, only 8 women participated against 131 men in general seats, and in the election of 2013, only 5 women participated against 115 men in general seats. None of the contestants that participated won the election. Only 47 women participated in the reserved seats (10 reserved seats for women) for the two city corporation elections. Thus only 10 women were elected in each election. Although the number of women participants in general seats increased from 2013 to 2018 from 5 to 8, it is very small in comparison to the number of male participants.

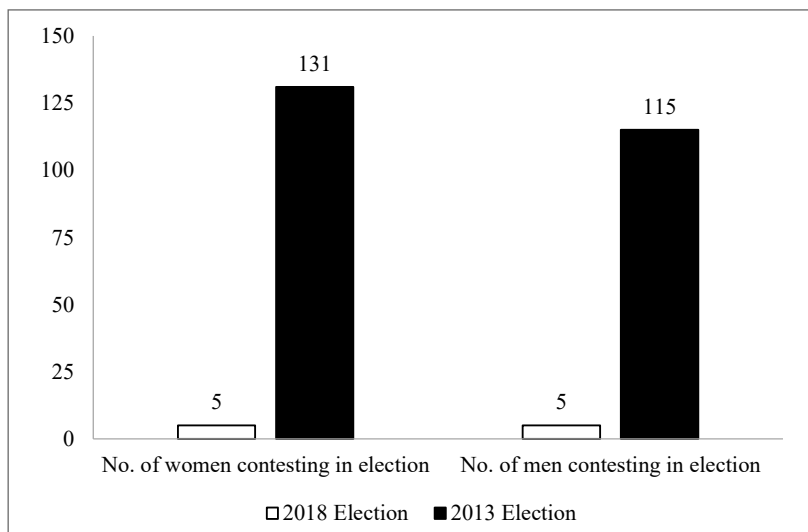


Figure 1: Comparative Analysis of the Two Elections Held in BCC

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Education Level and Women's Political Participation

Women's progress in attaining political power surely depends, at least in part, on the degree of progress they have made outside politics (Randall, 1987; Chafetz, 1991). Education is one of those important areas. Education has direct and indirect effects on political participation. Its direct effects include the acquisition of the knowledge and communication skills useful for public debate and direct training in political analysis through courses with current events content. Its indirect effects include the benefits of voluntary engagement in school government, clubs, sports, and school newspapers; these arenas provide young people with an early apprenticeship for politics, where they can exercise leadership, develop civic skills of cooperation and negotiation, and acquire bureaucratic and organizational skills useful for political activity. Education enhances other factors supporting political engagement, such as access to high-income jobs that provide the resources and contacts for political activity, and access to non-political associations such as charitable organizations or religious establishments that can be a recruitment ground for political activity (Goetz, 2003). Education availed by women will not only lead to increased household incomes and contribute towards building a more skilled labor force, but it will also make these individuals more socially vibrant. If the education sector can provide proper education to both sexes equally, men are expected to not turn to domestic violence, and women to be more likely to overcome the situation of domestic violence at home, should there be one. This will give women a sense of pride a boost, enhance their prestige, and make them happier and confident in the political arena (Amin and Nuzhat, 2016).

The study finds out that among 40 women respondents (both elected and those who participated) from the two elections, only seven (7) had a tertiary level of education, i.e. 17.5 percent of the respondents had a university degree. The finding is not satisfactory and this knowledge gap puts them in a more backward position. All the respondents strongly agreed that higher education enhances the political capacity involving making resolutions for meetings at the City Corporation and helps in raising their voice in the different decision-making processes. Both elected and those who participated agreed that higher education allows women to become more aware of their rights. Thus, it is evident that women's poor educational achievement especially at the local level depicts their poor performance and less representation in BCC. So it upholds the hypothesis that higher education of women can lead to higher political participation in the City Corporation.

Socio-cultural Factors and Women's Political Participation

The patriarchal social system and institutions of marriage and religious bindings place them in an unequal and disadvantaged position. The socialization process in the family does not encourage women to take a leading role. Women have thus remained excluded from decision-making and

effective political participation. Their potentialities largely remain unrecognized and their contributions are often overlooked. Generally, women are assigned secondary roles, because usually women's roles are assigned and their contribution is assessed and interpreted by men. Thus, social, economic, cultural, and political factors are all stacked against women through the constitution of the Republic ensures equal rights for all citizens (Sultana and Hasan, 2007). Quotas and reservations for women in national-level politics are generally enjoyed by women who have long been active in politics, have good contacts, elite family backgrounds, and differ little from elite male politicians in being highly educated and financially secure. It is in efforts to increase the numbers of women participating in local politics that we see an influx of women to politics with significantly lower endowments than men in human and social capital and material assets (Goetz, 2003).

From the survey, it has been found that all 40 women respondents think that a male-dominated social environment is very antagonistic for effective women's participation. They also opined that the attitudes of men are changing involving appreciation of women's role in politics but not at a satisfactory level. The majority of the elected reserved seat councilors from both the elections (15 out of 20) said that a strong supportive role from men can help to ensure meaningful and effective women's participation at the local level. They opined that the social taboo or family background enormously affects the male-dominated culture in our country that is also changing at a lower rate. They also added that they are now getting assistance from their male colleagues that were previously very low. So, the collected data holds hypothesis 2 true that a lower level of masculine culture may lead to higher-level women's political participation at the local government institutions.

Standard Operating Procedural Factors and Women's Political Participation

Due to discriminatory laws, institutional and cultural barriers, and disproportionate access to quality education, healthcare, and resources, women worldwide continue to be marginalized in the political arena. The path forward needs to ensure and support women's right to be involved in decision-making and political processes. The introduction of gender quotas as transitional mechanisms, promotion of women's participation in the peace-building process, including young women and women within marginalized populations, create training and leadership pathways that are gender-sensitive. This fosters inclusivity in leadership, civic engagement, and decision-making in public and private spheres and ensures political environments free from discrimination and violence, ensure recognition of women in decision-making capacities (Devoe *et al.*, 2016). Electoral quotas are the most effective positive measures, provided they are ambitious, designed in a manner that takes into account the type of electoral system in force, and coupled with effective sanctions for non-compliance. However, to ensure the impact of positive measures in the longer term, accompanying institutional measures are also necessary. The choice and

combination of positive and accompanying measures depend on the social, cultural, and political landscape of each country.

The Local Government (City Corporation) Act 2009, (Amended 2011) has some impeding provisions about women's political participation at city corporations. According to article 5(2) of the act, there is one reserved seat for a woman councilor for every three wards. Twenty-seven (27) out of forty (40) respondents perceive that it is too much pressure on a reserved seat councilor to manage three (3) wards since according to this act they are given similar responsibilities and involvement in the city corporation works. Thirty-five (35) out of forty (40) respondents stated that the cost of election for them increased as they have to cover more areas than the general seat councilors. Article 17(1) of the act mentions that there are 3 months of leave allowed for each councilor and mayor. All forty (40) respondents stated that they need more than three months of leave in case they are pregnant. Though in article 17(3) there is a provision of government consideration in case any councilor needs more than three months of leave, but all the respondents echoed that pregnancy of women councilor shouldn't be something to consider about. It should be in the act. In article 50(1) of the act, there is a list of some permanent committees for City Corporations. But there is no committee for women's development. In this era where inclusion of women in every sphere of development bears substantial importance, thirty-eight (38) out of forty (40) respondents mentioned the rationale for a permanent committee for women development for a better platform for women to participate more in politics and state matters (both for the voters and the women councilors). From the articles of the act discussed, the study finds out that there is a presence of gender-biased rules leading to lower levels of women's political participation at BCC.

CONCLUSION

Which factor weighs more for women at the local level? No one particular factor, neither of any, is solely responsible for their under-representation in local government institutions such as in BCC. Under the broad category of different factors, individual elements have a combined effect. Bangladeshi women live in a strongly patriarchal culture that determines their position relative to men. Their financial dependency on men affects all other aspects of their lives, therefore, choosing a non-traditional career, like politics, is usually a low priority for most women.

This article tries to assess and review the current status of women's political participation involving in the decision-making process in BCC. The findings suggest that women's role in the decision-making process remains low in the City Corporation. The study finds that inadequate education of women at the urban local government level acts as a barrier in preparing women to engage in political participation, i.e. decision-making process in City Corporation. The study asserts that the political arena of BCC remains largely dominated by men where patriarchal culture causes

women's fragile access to political institutions. The findings of the study corroborate with that of Pyeatt and Yanus's (2017) where institutional inclusion for reserved seats for women involving larger district magnitude is still not sufficient to eliminate gender differences in local government institutions. There is a need for further institutional changes to break down gender role stereotypes and blurring the line between the separate spheres of 'male' and 'female' in the knowledge of public affairs and participation in the electoral process in the urban local government of Bangladesh. Women's access to politics and role-playing in decision-making are still insignificant owing to various socio-cultural and ethnic forces, a diversity of religious faiths, obscure legal frameworks, and complex social and political forces.

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