



Research Paper

## Socio-Economic Status and Empowerment of Women Members of Municipalities: A Survey on Belkuchi Municipality of Sirajganj District.

Md. Atiqul Islam

Lecturer, Islamic Studies, Khwaja Yunus Ali University, Bangladesh.

Corresponding author: (Md. Atiqul Islam, Islamic Studies, Khwaja Yunus Ali University, Enayetpur, Sirajganj, Bangladesh.)

### Abstract

Bangladesh is a developing country in South Asia. Almost the population of this country is women. So without the development of these women, the development of the country is not possible. The government has made provisions for women's participation in local government by prioritizing the development of the country. A noteworthy addition to the development of the urban areas of Bangladesh is the municipal government. In this municipality, women members are reserved. The present study has attempted to understand the socio-economic status of women members of the municipality.

**Keywords:** Women, Municipal, Economic, Commissioner, Organization, Property, Budget.

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### I. Introduction

In the global social system, gender inequality has been around for a long time. From that beginning, all kinds of backwardness, illiteracy, exploitation, deprivation and powerlessness forced them to remain subordinate. They never got rid of this chain due to the limitation of the special boundaries of Lingayana. During the long-standing economic and social context, women were confined to the pretext of their traditional form and the process of exploitation, and their multifaceted talents were limited. This image exists not only in Bangladesh and the third world countries, but also in developed countries, multi-dimensional torture has been carried out on women in the garb of modernity. And thus he has been kept away from the power structure. In this context, from the seventies of the last century, various social reformers, political scientists, sociologists, state policy makers and various non-governmental organizations emphasized on the effective participation of women in the power structure. Based on which various national and international measures and recommendations have been adopted. And for the related reasons, the issue is very important in the case of Bangladesh. The victory of democracy in the nineties is welcomed by all. But it is easy to imagine how successful democracy will be by keeping half of the people away from the democratic process and power structure. In other words, it is not possible to ensure the institutional form of democratization. Besides, there is a foggy idea among many people about the field of women's empowerment. That is why its clear explanation should be reached to the general public to prevent the current discriminatory and subordinate relationship between men and women in the socio-economic context of Bangladesh. And we choose this matter from this responsibility. Although it has been carried out by surveying a particular city, we believe that it will be able to identify the existing problems in the empowerment of women in the economic and social context of Bangladesh and find out ways to eliminate them, and show us the correct direction of the development potential of the women nation.

### The purpose of the survey:

Bangladesh is a developing country in South Asia. Ensuring the participation of women at the grass root level is essential for the overall development of this country. To this end, since 1997, women have been directly elected to municipalities, the lowest level of local government. To understand the socio-economic status of these selected women members, the topic needs to be explored. To determine the extent to which the development of

their overall quality of life, recognition and opportunities are being created in the society. To achieve the objectives of the present study the following topics are explored-

- Age status of women municipal commissioners;
- Educational status of women municipal commissioners;
- Amount of Property Owned by Women Municipal Commissioners;
- Share of female municipal commissioners in family property;
- Family Type of Female Municipal Commissioners;
- Occupation of husbands of female municipal commissioners;
- Involvement with Social Welfare Organizations;
- Municipal Responsibilities and Duties;
- Training related to work and responsibility;
- Attendance and Decision Making in General Meeting;
- Role in municipal budget formulation;
- Relationship with Chairman and Male Commissioners;
- Implementation of women's rights.

**Survey time:**

The survey was conducted between January 2020 and December 2022. The data of Belkuchi municipality of Sirajganj district pertaining to the financial year 2020-2022 has been used as the main material of the study. Moreover, field specific data of 2018-2019 and 2020-2021 have also been used as research material.

**Limitations of the survey:**

The current survey has several limitations. Currently, the number of municipalities in Bangladesh is about 250. It is very difficult to know the details of women's empowerment and effectiveness in municipalities in Bangladesh by collecting data from only two municipalities. To research such a large topic, it was necessary to collect data from a large number of municipalities. Moreover, various complications have arisen with the interview of six elected women members from two municipalities. For example, since the respondents' houses are far away, I have to spend a lot of time travelling. Many a time the presence of the respondent's husband spoiled the pleasant atmosphere of the interview. Besides, many important answers have been glossed over, which has created complications in data collection.

**Rationale of Survey:**

Bangladesh is a rural country with about 76 percent of its population. The only representative body of this village is the municipality. It is important to study the socio-economic status and nature of women members of this municipality. Conducting a survey on such issues would reveal on the one hand the scope and limitations of women's empowerment and its implementation at the local level, while on the other hand it would be possible to realize the extent to which authority exercised over the attitudes of male members of the municipality. Therefore, this survey will be considered as a logical, comprehensive and timely survey in an effort to accelerate the socio-economic status of the women members of the municipality for the benefit of the rural people by making the local autonomy more effective.

**Data collection:**

The survey was conducted in Belkuchi municipality of Sirajganj district. Methods of observation, survey, case study etc. have been used for data collection. Moreover, judgments and decisions of women members in various arbitrations held in villages and municipalities have been recorded. During the interviews an attempt was made to gain a deeper understanding of the public discourse on the various events taking place in the streets and shops of the municipality and to collect primary data in the space of general discussion. Research generally collects data from two sources,

1. Primary sources
2. Secondary sources

We collected data through direct participation in the study area as a primary source. And as a secondary source, I collected information from books, magazines and related articles published in journals.

### **Historical context of the formation of municipalities in Bangladesh:**

Bangladesh has a long history of local government. In ancient India, according to information from Kautilya's Arthashastra, an informal body called the Gramsabha managed all the affairs of the village. During the Gupta period the empire was divided into Bhukti, Sihe, Mandal, Bithi and Grama. At every level they used the king to buy and sell land and collect taxes. During the Mughal period, the lowest level of local government was the Mahal, similar to today's Union Parishad. The main function of the palace was revenue collection. At the local level, the village panchayats collected taxes imposed by the government from the common people. Gram panchayats used to collect taxes from the local level for the central government. After the British East India Company came to power in India, many changes were made in this local government. After independence, on 1 January 1972, the Union Parishad and Municipal Council were dissolved by Presidential Order No. 7. The new constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh came into force on 16 December 1972. The constitution emphasizes the importance of strong local government. In 1973, the President by Order No. 22 (A, 1984) changed the name of Union Panchayats to Union Parishads and created powerful local governments in urban areas called Municipalities for urban development.

### **Socio-Economic Status and Empowerment of Women Members of Municipalities**

According to the current structure of the local government of the Bangladesh government, provision is made for direct competition in the reserved seats for women in Union Parishads and Municipalities. In the first municipal election of this structure held in 2018, 14 women competed for 3 reserved female commissioner seats in Belkuchi municipality. Among them, 5 women contested in Ward No. 1, 3 women in Ward No. 2 and 6 women contested in Ward No. 3. At this stage we conducted research on the 3 winning women. In addition to knowing their socio-economic status, their empowerment process and their role in the decision-making process at the municipal structure and family level, whether it is different from the previous situation, and whether there is any problem in their empowerment will be discussed at this stage.

### **Age status of women municipal commissioners**

All 3 women commissioners of Belkuchi municipality are between 30-35. Therefore, it can be seen that women who are physically fit in terms of age have more chances to be selected. In the case of Bangladesh, women below the age of 35 years are considered capable of performing daily activities. Here the female commissioners are also able to perform the duties and responsibilities of the municipality properly as they are capable in terms of age.

### **Educational status of women municipal commissioners**

Women commissioners of Belkuchi municipality are not backward in terms of education. In Bangladesh where the female signature rate is 20.03%. There education rate of female commissioners is 100.0%. Among them 1 (33.33%) graduate, 1 (33.33%) higher secondary, 1 (33.33%) studied up to secondary level.

### **Amount of Property Owned by Women Municipal Commissioners**

The amount of property owned by a person indicates his power and wealth. In this social system, whoever has the most property can easily influence others for that property and is at the center of the power structure of the society. They are the ones who take decisions in any work of the society. That is, everything in the state of the society is in their hands. Analyzing the data obtained in this study, it can be seen that the family assets of all Commissioners are close to crore of Taka. It proves that the elected women commissioners are representative of well-to-do families. From this data, it can be said that in modern democratic states, personal 'image' or reputation, prestige acts as an influencing factor in winning elections, but female commissioners are elected based on their family and property status. Here too, the traditional practice of the social structure of Bangladesh is that the family is the one that builds the social status, so it is completely correct. Women leadership of urban local government structure could not come out of this fact.

### **Share of female municipal commissioners in family property**

2 (66.67%) female commissioners have more share in family property and 1 (33.33%) female commissioner has less share than husband. From this it can be said that women commissioners have economic empowerment or their economic capacity. However, their views on property maintenance, buying and selling are largely ineffective.

### **Family Type of Female Municipal Commissioners**

2 (66.67%) of the female commissioners of Belkuchi Municipality belong to single family and the other (33.33%) belong to joint family. Most of those who contested elections but did not win had a monogamous family pattern. From this it can be said that the women of a family in Belkuchi municipal area are

more leadership conscious and want to go out of the family as public representatives. Want to get into the center of the institutional power structure.

#### **Occupation of husbands of female municipal commissioners**

All (100.0%) of female municipal commissioners of Belkuchi municipality have husbands' occupations. Most of those who could not contest and get elected, their husbands are also businessmen. From this it can be assumed that the wives of working men do not want to enter these institutional decision- making or power structures or their husbands do not want women to compete for these positions.

#### **Involvement with Social Welfare Organizations**

The question of organization comes where individual initiative leaves off. People are organized for the development of society. All the women commissioners are directly involved in various social welfare and development organizations. The women commissioners said that these organizations participated in the election campaign on their behalf on the eve of the election.

#### **Municipal Responsibilities and Duties**

Every member of the society has certain responsibilities and duties. which also has an outline or scope. It is more necessary for any institution or organization. That is, any officer or representative has to conduct activities according to a regulation. But it is a matter of great regret that even after more than 3 years of municipal elections, till now (September, 2001) no women commissioners have understood any outline, any responsibilities and duties regarding their activities. In this regard, the statement of Municipal Chairman and Municipal Secretary is that no manual has been provided by the Ministry of Local Government to perform the functions of women commissioners. As a result, they are not able to perform any specific duties and responsibilities. However, the municipal chairman, by virtue of his discretionary powers, has assigned some less important tasks to women commissioners. On the other hand, women commissioners did not claim or go to any stage to get their functions or responsibilities and rights. So it can be assumed that women commissioners have not been able to fulfill their responsibilities and duties far from fulfilling their responsibilities and duties. This acted as a major obstacle to their empowerment.

#### **Training related to work and responsibility**

The main source of the trust of the governed is taking the right steps of the administration to implement the program, taking timely steps and taking steps in a responsible manner and the sound basis of these is well-organized training. However, no training has been done so far regarding the duties and authority of the elected women commissioners. Due to lack they are not able to properly perform the duties assigned to them. Performance of developmental functions: As a local government institution, the municipality performs various functions. Such as: public health, water supply, sewage, food and drink, animal control, housing, town planning, highways and roads, public safety, posts and parks, education and Municipalities are entrusted with performing functions related to culture, social welfare and development. These works are carried out through the commissioners of the municipality and respective wards. For which there is also an administration. At this stage, women commissioners have not received any manual of responsibilities and functions, but all women commissioners have participated in the development work of the municipality (which is obtained through the discretionary power of the municipal chairman). However, this participation is limited to signing the bill collection form of the contractor selected to carry out the developmental activities of the municipality, said 2 (66.67) female commissioners.

The self- initiated activities of the women commissioners and their commitment to the advancement of women and public service, even if not supported by the municipality, are reflected in their election. Women commissioners are not behind. Almost all of them have done some developmental work on their own initiative. Most of which is for the development of women and the poor in the area. But the municipality, municipal chairman and male commissioners did not help much.

#### **Attendance and Decision Making in General Meeting**

Municipal Chairman and Commissioners meet in General Meeting at least once in every month. Where decisions are taken on various matters of the municipality. But women commissioners cannot play an effective role there. They are helpless there under the power of municipal chairman and male commissioners. Sometimes just signing the 'Resolution Book'. Female municipal commissioners said that the patriarchal social system and the patriarchal mindset of public representatives keep them away from participating in decision- making every time in the municipal general meeting.

### **Role in municipal budget formulation**

Every municipality prepares its income- expenditure budget on the eve of the beginning of the fiscal year. This budget is announced by the chairman according to the mutual decision of the municipal commissioners. A session was also convened for this purpose. The budget is finalized based on the discussion. The position of women commissioners in this budget session is also very fragile. There was no response to the project raised by them. Some project costs are included in the budget. Which is negligible compared to male commissioners.

### **Relationship with Chairman and Male Commissioners**

If there is not a good relationship with those who make up the structure, there is disruption in the normal functioning of the work and conflicts also arise. All the female commissioners have good relations with the local people but not so well with the male commissioners. Among them 2 (66.67%) female commissioners have fairly good and 1 (33.33%) female commissioners have poor relationship. Basically, conflict arises between them over the scope of power. The claim of women commissioners is that since they are representatives elected from 3 male wards, they will have the scope of their activities in all 3 wards. The perks will also be 3 times that of a male commissioner. But male commissioners consider themselves as sole representatives in their respective wards. Moreover, as there is no manual for the activities of women commissioners, they cannot do anything with such force. As a result, there is a conflict between them regarding the sharing of power. In many cases men win that conflict. Women commissioners (66.67%) were invited to the arbitration and socio- cultural events held for the adjudication of minor disputes in the area. But they cannot play a very effective role there. Others (33.33%) are not invited to the arbitration ceremony. From this information, the picture of empowerment of women commissioners emerges. However, women all have participation in various arbitration ceremonies and they perform judicial work according to their merit. On the other hand, all of them are invited and participate in the socio- cultural events of the area.

### **Implementation of women's rights**

Women are discriminated in one way or another in every field of education, health, employment, legal, humanitarian, civil and public life. And the measures to protect women's rights and the direct election of women in the seats reserved for women's empowerment. But they are not able to play an effective and practical role in protecting women's rights after being elected. Many of them are not aware of women's rights, far from implementing women's rights. Women commissioners have no clear idea of what basic rights women have and how they can be protected. Many of them are not aware of the laws and regulations related to women's rights. Despite this, they are working fairly to prevent women's violence and implement women's rights.

Therefore, it can be said from the above discussion that the direct election of women municipal commissioners as a significant and groundbreaking step in women empowerment has been able to generate a wide response among men and women. But later their empowerment has come to a standstill due to failure of the government to define the scope of their activities, patriarchal attitude of society and male commissioners etc.

### **Recommendation**

Bangladesh is a rural country where about 76% people live in villages. Overall development of the country is not possible without rural development. Being the only grassroots development organization of the government, the municipality is the only means of development of the city. Therefore, with the aim of sustainable development, the government has included male as well as female members of the municipality. But in reality, women members are not able to reach the desired development targets due to various complications. Therefore, in order to reach the desired development goals of women members, the following points need to be emphasized.

#### **The issues are-**

- ❖ Formulate specific policies on municipal responsibilities for women members;
- ❖ Ensure participation of women members in regular monthly meetings of the municipality;
- ❖ Women members should be aware of their rights;
- ❖ Opinions of women members should be taken into consideration in decision-making for various developmental activities of the municipality;
- ❖ Opinions of women members should be given importance in formulation and implementation of municipal budget;
- ❖ Opportunities should be created for women members to participate in arbitration and have a role in adjudication;
- ❖ Emphasis should be placed on the education and work experience of women members;



- ❖ To come out of conventional values and give opportunities to work with male members;
- ❖ Women members should be encouraged to work by organizing gender sensitive seminars at the Town level;

Family attitudes need to change; Above all, women empowerment must take into account the role of women members in urban development.

## **II. Conclusion**

The provision of direct election of women members of the municipality is a landmark step by the government to ensure the socio-economic status of this rural Bangladesh. But on the one hand the prevailing beliefs, values and customs of the patriarchal society of the male members and on the other hand the lack of knowledge of the important work of the council by the female members, this revolutionary step of the government. Achieving the desired goal. The women members of the municipality are not aware of the project acceptance and implementation process. Other persons associated with the Chairman do not feel the need to inform the women members. This lack of awareness among women members creates opportunities for monopolization by the chairman and male members. As a result, women members are unable to play any role in grassroots development. Rather it is being ignored in all cases. So it can be said that the prevailing patriarchal attitude in our society is hindering the process of women empowerment in the municipality. Empowerment of women is essential for sustainable development at the grassroots level. Sustainable development is possible only if the empowerment of municipal women is ensured.

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