

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Strengthening local government through participation and leadership: Bangladesh perspective**

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**Active participation and effective leadership are two accepted substantial objects of a well-functioning local government, without those ingredients, governance of local government intuitions cannot be contented to its founding purpose. Bangladesh, an emerging South Asian economic tiger, has achieved some exemplary development within short time in many fields, is still struggling to establish a strong and vibrant local government. There are several barriers identified beyond this such as colonial legacy in the governance, extreme controlling by the central government, weak participatory mechanism, poor finance etc. With the study of union parishad, the lowest tier of rural local government, this paper aims to illustrate the actual pattern of elected representative's participation and the nature of leadership in the local government institution in Bangladesh. This is an exploratory study where multiple data collection tools are applied for collecting data from 77 elected members of 11 UPs of Kishoreganj Sadar Upazila. Major findings revealed that a significant amount of elected member does not have minimum knowledge about the laws and they do not have the proper understanding on management before entering their role. Moreover, patriarchy attitude is found as obstruction in the case of women's active participation as body member. Finally, this paper provided some policy suggestions how this problems can be resolved.**

**Key words:** Participation, leadership, strengthening local government, union parishad,

## **INTRODUCTION**

Local government in common parlance can be defined alike to Lincoln's famous quote about democracy, is a government of the local people, by the local people and for the local people. It is also seen as an organized social entity with a feeling of oneness. Today, local government become an integral part of the overall governance process of any country which means an intra-sovereign government unit within the sovereign state dealing mainly

with local affairs, administered by local authorities and subordinate to the state government and also said to be a good device for diffusion of democracy at grass root level for inclusive development (Hussain, 2003; Nasrin, 2013; Jahan, 1997). It is one of the schemes of decentralization of power for delivering government service to the door of citizen for their wellbeing. When we say strengthening local government it means proper decentralization, e-

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Governance, women, institutional and individual empowerment, effective leadership, and participation of the elected representatives (Ahmed, 2009; Yukl and Becker, 2006; Khan and Ara, 2006; Haque, 2007). Participation is a development approach, which admits the requirement to encompass different sections of the population in the planning and implementation of policies relating to their welfare. According to Pandeya 'the importance of participation towards making participatory and democratic local decisions, increasing public deliberation on community matters, enriching local planning and budgeting system, strengthening local accountability system through improving transparency, responsiveness, legitimacy and trust, and empowering citizens by developing civic skills and virtues' (Pandeya, 2015: 2). The term 'participation in local government' has two sides like a coin, participation of citizens mostly as the beneficiary and participation of elected members as the decision maker and executor by equitable and active mode. Alongside with all these, to strengthen local government must needs effective leadership. Leadership is a kind of power where one person has the ability to influence or change the values, beliefs, behavior and attitudes of another person (Ganta, and Manukonda, 2014). Effective leadership is conglomerates with mix of leadership styles which firmly assist to innovation. It is now a day defined as a diversity of different activities, manners, skills, and practices intermingling with each other to produce the best outcomes for any organization. Leadership behaviors have been identified by scholars and practitioners as the most influencing mentor for innovation. Madanchian et al. (2017) added that "The effective leader creates the situation that is best for the organization through the situation that is best for the organization through the use of skills and processes" (Madanchian et al. 2017: 1047). A person with strong leadership ability will be a good example or role model to their employees, because the leader who is able to effectively achieve some good result or achievement gains the trust and admiration of their employees, and inadvertently changes their values, beliefs, behavior and attitudes, for mimicry is the sincerest form of flattery (Lawton, 2002; Grint, 2007). The newest tendency in the emerging democratic and developing countries is to strengthen the local government system for the betterment of the local level citizens. The local government institution in Bangladesh is constituted under the legal basis of the constitution. Article 9, 10, 11, 59 and 60 of the constitution has been termed the formation, responsibility and functions of the local government institutions. However, the present scenario of local government in Bangladesh cannot fulfill the expectation of local citizens (Rahman, 2001). In the participation level, both planning and executing, the elected members of opposition party have not getting similar role compare to the government party members. On the contrary, women are still far behind from their male colleagues due to

some societal causes. Bangladesh, though the female chairpersons and members have gained enough confidence in their ability to discharge administrative duties, the discriminatory attitude of their male counterparts has been the main stumbling block (Shamim, 2002). The elected women could not play more than the role of a 'yes' person of the chairperson and members, who were predominantly men. In a traditional society like Bangladesh, women have to face some basic socio-cultural problems, which emerge from lack of education, consciousness and lack of cultural awareness.

It cannot be denied that the present leadership nature and mode of local government in Bangladesh is far behindhand of above mentioned ingredients of effective leadership due to low academic qualification, strong partisan feelings, poor communication and managerial skills with little concern on innovation. It is also factual that most representatives do not have the proper understanding on management before entering their role. It is needless to say that the local government of Bangladesh is the weakest among the government organs in terms of both power and independence. Everyone is emphasizing on the hour need of a strengthened local government but it is not being materialized yet. Therefore, Local Government development through reform is an acknowledged fact among concerned parties in Bangladesh. It is noted that a number of significant studies are available entitled to citizen's participation towards local government but on participation of elected members and leadership quality have found rarely. This study is administered on elected members of UP and it is a small endeavor to find out the current state of leadership and participation patterns of elected representatives at local government. Moreover, it is also tried to explore the level of participation of elected representatives of UPs in decision making process, planning, monitoring and implementation.

### **Local government in Bangladesh: An overview**

The history of local government in our country dates back to 1870 (Khan, 2012). It has a long history with a great legacy. Bangladesh was colonized for a long period of time by the British Raj and it continued with slightest lenient form under Pakistani rule. The tradition of local government system in Bangladesh has a long history in its present form; its origin can be traced to the demand for self-government in British India (Khan, 2012). None of these foreign rulers made efforts to make local government institutions decentralized and delegate authority to the rural level (Huque, 1988). Local government in Bangladesh has traditionally been dependent on central government for most of its activities (Noor, 1996). By the time the British had to leave India (1947) both the tiers of local government (the union and the District Boards) had become fully elective (Hussain,

2003). After Independence of Bangladesh in 1971, it was expected that the above deformation of local government institution would be corrected. Indeed the constitution of Bangladesh (effective from 16<sup>th</sup> December 1972) provided in article 59 (GOB, 1990) that Local Governments in every administrative unit of the Republic is entrusted to bodies composed of person in accordance with law. Everybody such as is referred to in clause (i) shall subject to this constitution and in other law, perform with in the appropriate administrative unit, such functions shall be prescribed by Act of Parliament which may include functions relating to administration and work of public officers, maintenance of public order, the preparation and implementation of plans relating to public services and economic development. In article 59 and 60 the constitution provided administrative power to the local government bodies so that it can impose taxes for local purpose to prepare their budgets and maintain funds (GOB, 1990). Today there are two layers of local government institutions exists in Bangladesh: one for rural areas and the other one for urban areas. The local government in rural areas consisting of three tiers: Union Parishad, Upazilla Parishad, and Zilla Parishad respectively for village, Upazila and district level, while the urban local government comprises of Pourashavas for small city areas and Municipal Corporation for big cities. Meaningful Local Governments refers a system of vibrant local democracy through elected local government at each administrative unit. These bodies must be autonomous, transparent, responsive, inclusive and accountable to the people (Zahur, 2011). Even the NGO could not take the initiatives or a firm stance to this end because the local government bodies see NGOs as their rival (Rahman, 2003). Therefore, Local Government development through reform is an acknowledged fact among concerned parties in Bangladesh. Today it is attested that the effective strong local government system is one of the indispensable prerequisites for ensuring good governance. Again, economic progress and development requires good governance with accountability delivery mechanisms as much as it needs sound and pragmatic development policies. Adequately empowered and accountable local government institutions are essential vehicles for ensuring formulation and implementation of such policies (Khan, 1999). Historically, Local government bodies have been facing strong control by the interference of central government in various issues which reflects the absence of autonomy. In addition to that local political intervention rose as an obstacle of local bodies to perform their activities.

Last but not least, insufficient manpower, low budgetary support and improper management are significant barrier of the existing local bodies.

### **Conceptual framework**

With the help of theoretical discussion, the conceptual

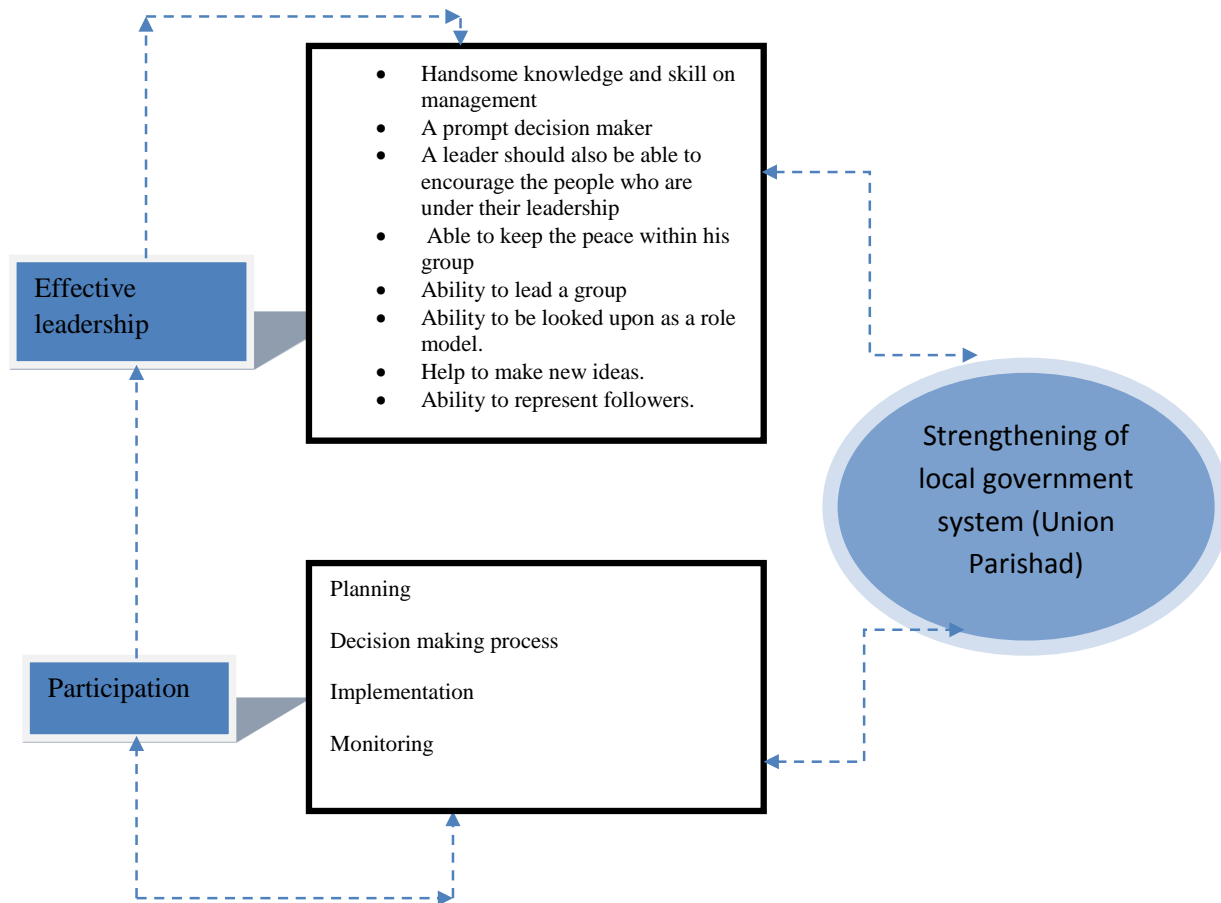
framework has been made to illustrate the association between the specific concepts that studied for the purpose to develop the research problems and as well as to the fulfillment of the research objectives (Figure 1).

### **Strengthening local government system through effective leadership and participation: Quantitative data analysis**

Effective leadership is an essential and prerequisite for the development of an organization. The effectiveness of leadership here considered on the basis of their performance in the studied area. In a statement of respondents about facing difficulty for office management, a handsome total of 22.08% respondent said that they are facing difficulty to manage offices due to lack of understanding regarding the laws, local political influences and excessive control of local administrative authority etc. However, a significant respondent (72.73%) are not facing difficulty for their office management.

In a question to examine the ability to take spot decision whenever needed, most of (72.73%) respondents replied that they have many experiences where they had to take decision on the spot. On the contrary, a good amount of respondent (27.27%) identified that they had not taken decision on the spot because of lack of competence, courage, and sureness. A total of 64.94% of the elected representatives thought that they have adequate ability to encourage the people who stay under their leadership. A meaningful amount (25.97%) acknowledged that they feel squat self-confident about their inspirational authority for some inadequacies like low level academic qualification; weak bargaining ability etc. A noticeable number of respondents (28.57%) recognized that they have discarded experience among their group's members while 68.92% respondents identified that they did not face any critical incidence among the group members.

People's participation includes the involvement of mass people with local development activities. Participation could assure the institutionalization of local government at the all level from rural to urban. The study has tried to explore how people's participation (representatives) contributes in strengthening local government system. It is good to caught that hundred percent respondent said, if there is no serious personal matter, they always attendant the meetings. A big number of interviewers (70.13%) accepted that they have opportunity to present their opinion in meetings but interestingly 25% said that taken decisions are always influenced by the ruling party members and the huge domination of chairmen and UNO.64.94% elected members replied that their UP meeting has been holding one for a month and 25.97% mentioned more than two for a month. The statistical data show that they are not following prescribed rules for the arrangement of UP meeting. 93.51% of the total respondents found that their concern UP arrange once or



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework.  
Source: The Author (2019).

twice meeting a month in order to approve development projects while 6.49% thought that in the approval process democratic practices are ignored. While 83.12% declared them as the performer of planning and implementation mechanism, 16.88% denied their involvement. In the course of planning and implementation of projects, 80.52% replied that UP considered citizen's opinion with high degree of integrity. Surprisingly, 12.99% believed that UP could not do anything without help of Upazila Parishad (UZP). There is a common denunciation you may hear in every corners of UPs that the decisions of UP is sharply influence by the local political leaders. When 61.04% of your total respondent confirmed that Ups are highly influenced by local political leaders and by government party for the selection and implementation of development projects, you have no choice but to admit the blame. For the inquiry of peoples interest to participate in the UP activities, a valuable amount (25.97%) representative stated that local people are reluctant in the participation of project planning and implementation activities which truly mark the failure of UP body.

As a patriarchy dominated society, study found that

women member's opinions in union parishad decision-making are generally ignored since they are a minority. In many cases, the women elected in reserved seats found themselves in a disadvantageous position, 73% women members said that female member's opinion has no value in union parishad while 73.33% of women members said that they face autocratic attitudes from their male colleagues. Furthermore, 100% respondents alleged that the existing rules and regulations of UP are not advantageous for the participation of elected members in development.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study has been followed mixed approaches to achieve research objectives. The study has been prepared by primary and secondary data. It has been conducted by interview schedule, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and Case Studies for primary data, located on elected members of Union Parishads (UP) Kishoreganj Sadar Upazila, Dhaka, Bangladesh. The sample size was 77 and it covers all UP chairmen and women members. The only 33 out of 99 general UP members were chosen randomly by using random number table. For qualitative inquiry, 2 FGD and 3 case studies had

conducted through checklist. Descriptive analysis has used for quantitative data with the help of SPSS. Qualitative data analysis has completed by thematic form. Subsequently, secondary data has been collected from different books, articles, journals (print and online), research reports and working papers and so on. Moreover, different websites and internet sources are used in the study as secondary sources.

### Qualitative data analysis

#### Case study 1

**Leadership pattern of women member in the studied area:** Mariam (Pseude name) is a women member of Binnati UP in Kishoreganj Sadar Upazila. A fifty two years lady who had a long story of struggles, strains riddles and fights against negative impacts of extreme poverty and vulnerability. After 12 years of conjugal life with vegetable vender hard core poor husband Abdul Ali, she became widow with 03 children of minor ages. After the departure of only earning member of her family, she Started handicraft on stitching local quilt is known as kantha for other by night and maid servant work in day time. Day and night work was not enough for her survival so she started tutorial services to girls' student of the village to earn. Kind and generous UP chairman provided her VGD card. These made her subsistence for survival and maintain education costs of her children. Food and Nutrition Security for ultra-poor project was extended at Binnati village in 2001. Mariam was included into the program. New route to change opened before her. She organized a group and named it Binnati Ulka Muhila Samity and was elected president of the group. The programme built in her strong leadership capacity by providing several trainings on leadership, group development and facilitation, social analysis, gender equality, advocacy processes to have access to rights and entitlements for the poor and extremely poor women and poor community people. Her leadership ascended from group resident to Union Federation president to Upazila Women Groups Federation president to District Federation president within a span of 8 years starting from 2001. She turned as public leader and elected union parishad member by the people of Binnati union. Her ability to advocacy rights and justice in local government for vulnerable poor women is recognized and praised in community and among people in power structure, Government and different duty bearers. Side by side with leadership she built her economy through utilizing micro-credit in trading, vegetable cultivation and selling, poultry rearing for income and cow fattening. But she still thinks that the women members are still less proactive in parishad due to the various hindrances such as patriarchal attitudes of all members, social acceptance of women leadership and so on. She added that less educational qualification of UP women members are deprived by male counter parts of the union parishad in various levels of participation.

#### Case study 2

**Accountability of UP members can be ensured through the following procedure:** FGD found that ensuring accountability of UP could be exercise through various ways such as budget discussion, direct asking question to elected leaders. As elected leaders, they have to inform the local people regarding their activities and it is easy to organize because, they have not come from outside and most of them are living with the local people. Local people thought that representatives cannot do anything without local people's support. UP leaders should work with the consideration of local people's opinion. On the other side, people also should go to their representatives and ask them anything directly. Local people can do criticize them whenever they do anything wrong. Another mechanism of ensuring accountability of

UP can establish through, the close interaction with mass people, question and answer regarding various things as well as conduct meeting with the local people. Only one chairman took initiative for reaching 100% sanitation in his Union by using own money and hiring young women in each ward to raise awareness and monitor the use of sanitary latrines. Members of the civil society can assured the accountability of representatives by call of various awareness programs regarding the rights of citizens. Only some of elected members mentioned that UPs should involve the community and take initiatives more regularly.

#### Case study 3

**Strengthening of local government system is related with proper and active participation of people's representatives and their effective leadership:** The Rashidabad UP Chairman Mr. Abdur Rahim (Pseude name) said that participation and leadership are inter-related and indispensable each other in order to establish strengthening of local government system particularly in his constituency area. He believed that this system could be enhanced by the individual and institutional empowerment of union parishad, ensuring involvement of local people in the development programmes and projects and with effective local leadership. Whenever these two pillars work together, then LG's institution would be reinforce. However, this study does not found the two key concepts every time and every situation in a proper state. In this context, some obstacles have been found against intensification of local government. These hindrances are lack of political will, strong voice against politicization, burden of existing rules and regulations for UPs, and lack of qualified local leadership etc.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Leadership pattern in union parishad

By FGD, this study revealed that six UP chairmen out of eleven have no basic knowledge regarding the UP ordinance 1983 and the case for other representative also found similar ratio. They do not know the rules and regulations, proclamation and so on. According to them, they have been learning through daily experiences. They informed by their UP secretary and he/she is playing an important role to teach rules and regulations. Most of the UP Chairmen informed that in most cases, they are always dictated by the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO). It is found from this study that many times chairmen do not consider general members opinion where UP chairmen are closely intimate with the UNO. Different approaches are found on the women role in the UP.

### Political pressure

FGD expressed that two third chairmen and members are nominated by Upazila and district level political leaders from both governing and non-governing national political party in the studied area. In this context, the people's representatives have to serve party interest which has been disturbing the common interest of local citizens. It is one of the vital and distinguish obstacle for the UPs.

Each and every function and distribution of reliefs, VGF, TR etc. regulate under local political pressure. Political interference in UP activities has become a de facto rule that obstructs smooth functioning of the UP.

### **Undue controller**

The UPs typically depends on the grant of the national government. Consequently, the UPs are directly or indirectly controlled by the central government's agencies. The UNO, the executive chief in the Upazila as well as secretary of the UZP play the main controlling role on UP.

### **Elected representatives and mass interaction**

Elected representative typically shows diminutive interest about mass contact particularly after they elected. Studied UP did not arrange motivation programmes to encourage local people's participation in the development programmes which is more or less a true statement for the all UPs in Bangladesh. Personal interest and partisan setting both are responsible for the detachment of people. Intra representative clashes, more narrowly the clashes between government versus non-government supported members has been found that affect the smooth running of UP.

### **New ideas on the ground of personal initiatives**

Some positive initiatives are seen in the UP those are taken by personal interest. Personal affection to their voters, getting popularity and so on are the most common reasons here. Innovative thoughts in the arena like service delivery arrangement, informal judicial system etc. has been experienced through personal enterprises.

### **Hindrances of participation**

The local government system has popularized in Bangladesh by theory of decentralization. It is the outcome of the concept of decentralization process but administrative and political power is not completely transferred from central to field level. Subsequently, the system has remained highly centralized. Consequently, local bodies are characterized by weak administrative capacity, a limited financial and personnel base and little public participation. Hence meaningful participation is not guaranteed by the decentralization. One of the woman member of an UP argued that at the decision making level, the attitude of controlling the activities of the people's representatives of the local government by the central government should be end, so that the UP can be a local government in the true sense and not a part of the

local administration of the central government. The dependency of UP on central government is an important hindrance of building its own human resource capacity as well as financial capacity. Study has found some specific hindrances for participation. These are

- (i) The study revealed that the people's representatives have limited access in the decision making process of standing committees mostly because of nonfunctional committees as well as procedural lacking.
- (ii) Most of the UP members are not aware of their duties and responsibility.
- (iii) Meeting of standing committees are not arranged regularly.
- (iv) Most of the standing committees activities are not related with monetary matters, so the members are not much interested in the activities of these committees
- (v) Finally, they have lack of awareness about their duties and responsibilities. Although, Upazila administration has been providing training to them.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The UP deals with local administrative and establishment issues, ensuring law and order services related to public welfare, and formulation and implementation of local economic and social development plans. It is impossible to realize national development goals without proper and accelerated local development. Sadly speaking, it does not have power to take decision, plan and projects independently. Moreover, lack active participation and of course, for the administrative intervention by the central government become the major obstacles of its route of success. Strengthening of UP refers to adequate allocation of resources and freedom on expenses, skilled and efficient administration; empowered UP members as well as institutionalization of UP. UP needs a leader who has educational qualification, honesty, and huge confidence on his capacity. Accountability and transparency of UP may be established, if UP get honest and educated leader. Performance of leadership has been required with effectiveness, competence and commitment to the village citizens and other hand, their proper and vibrant participation is mandatory. The government has taken a great initiative to introduce direct election for women in UP level through the system of reserved seat for the purpose of involvement of women in various social development programs at the UP level. It is a harsh reality that women members are still struggling to deliver their best credibility for the UP due to the domination of male members and chairmen. Finally, the strengthening of local government system requires proper leadership, active participation of members and citizens, adequate financial and personnel support and very much needed functional independence. However, the following suggestions can provide strengthening of

UP. These are:

- (i) Bottom-up decision making is a must require for strengthening of UP because, citizens are closely related with the bottom level personnel.
- (ii) A system of punishment can be introduced for those who regularly absent in the meeting without any prior approval to ensure the active participation of members in the body.
- (iii) Government should provide adequate training on skill development for the elected representatives especially women members as well as employees of union parishad.
- (iv) Government can develop a system of rewards for innovative ideas to encourage the representatives to do so.
- (v) Domination of chairmen and UNO (Upazilla Nirbahi officer) in the decisions of planning and implementation should be abolished and instead of that democratic practice must be installed.
- (vi) Government can take policy measures to eliminate favoritism and equal voice of all members should be the actual basis of participation.
- (vii) Chairmen and general UP members must change their patriarchal behavior and assist to perform their female UP members.
- (viii) Every form of political pressure to UP members should be perceived as a crime and government should make a proper mechanism to address this issue as a serious hindrance of strengthening local government.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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