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CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY OF ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES: A STUDY OF QUOTA SEATS AS AN AFFIRMATIVE MEASURE

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the capacity, capability, and achievements of women members elected to reserved seats in Union Parishads. In particular, it explores the dynamics of capacity building and gender mainstreaming in the local government institutions in northern Bangladesh through the lens of the Capability Approach. The study utilized primary data, employing surveys and in-depth interviews with elected women members from Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, and Kurigram districts. The Findings show a strong patriarchal presence in a society where marital status sets the norm to be a good girl or a bad girl. A divorcee or an unmarried woman is not seen as representing society, and hence it is difficult for them to contest elections and win in this patriarchal setting. The study findings also document that women in the survey area are lagging in terms of their productive role with economic return. This also limits women's ability to live a life of their choice, with dignity, bodily integrity, and a sense of pride, as emphasized by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (1999, 2000) in the Capability Approach. Our findings also document that elections in Bangladesh are very expensive, which essentially puts unwealthy families at odds in the election race. However, confirm that with the election in the quota seats, women can participate and play a role in organizations, form and maintain social relationships, and they can interact with people and connect with them, as emphasized by Nussbaum (2011) as a key feature of the Central Human Capability.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Women are excluded from political positions and office-bearing roles across the world, especially in developing countries, with a common myth that women are not brave and tough enough to take such challenging and demanding jobs. In a conservative society like Bangladesh, this is not an exception. Women's position in the country's decision-making bodies, including in government jobs, in the national parliament, or ministerial portfolios, has never reached more than 10 percent (Fasano et al., 2024). Patriarchal barriers and norms are benchmarked as social norms, and the public-private divide is in place where women are traditionally seen as housekeepers (Jamil, 2021). Women are lagging behind

men in all spheres of life, including education and employment (Wu & Ye, 2016). Researchers argue that women's position in society cannot be improved without their meaningful participation in development activities, including participation in the local and national government bodies (Orisadare, 2019).

Women are half of the population, and without their participation in the government, their rights and well-being cannot be ensured (Bayeh, 2016). Democracy and the rule of law cannot work when women, who are half of the population, are denied access to political representation (Kinowska-Mazaraki, 2021). In democratic rule, all are equal irrespective of gender, caste, and creed (Guragain, 2024). However, statistics show that women are disproportionately lagging behind men all over the world in holding government offices and executive jobs. Though the Beijing Declaration 1995 is endorsed by most countries to recognize women's contribution and importance, equality for women remains elusive. Women's representation in the national parliaments is still hovering around one-fifth only across the world (Fraenkel, 2024).

All over the world, women are categorically excluded from the ranks and files in party leadership. This is evident no matter whether a country is rich or poor, secular or conservative, Muslim or Non-Muslim (Tanyas, 2024). Women activists across the globe urge for reserved seats for women to promote political representation of women and equity, and gender justice (Youssef, 2022). Feminist activists and scholars urge women's representation at the local government bodies, particularly important as local governments are best placed to serve the gender needs and women's interests (Koengkan et al., 2024). In a developing country such as Bangladesh, this is obvious, where women are largely excluded from outside activities due to a conservative social structure, poverty, and income inequality.

Bangladesh introduced reserved seats for women in the national parliament shortly after its independence. The country is a signatory to the Beijing Declaration that calls for progressive measures and milestones for women's agency and empowerment in the decision-making process. In line with the commitment of the Beijing Declaration, the country initiated a milestone step empowering women, in which one-third of the general seats in the local government bodies are reserved for women, with the provision of direct election in a universal adult franchise. Before the introduction of the direct election in the reserved seats for women in 1997, there were scopes in the paper for women to contest in the general seats. But in a conservative society like Bangladesh, where women are confined to their domestic chores and hardly engaged in income-generating activities, only a negligible number of women could dare to do so (Khan et al., 2023). The statistics show that in the 1988 and 1992 Union Parishad elections, women candidates were less than 1%. But the women's candidature saw a tide soon after the introduction of reserved seats with the provision of universal election. In 1997, there were 44,134 women candidates against 14,029 quota seats. In 2003, the enthusiasm was a little less but still featured 39,419 women contestants, followed by 43,426 women contestants in 2010 and a further 41,764 women candidates in 2016. There is a surge in women candidates contesting local government elections after the enactment of the 1997 Act. However, participation is the first step for women's path to freedom and empowerment. The ultimate question remains how they perform their roles and responsibilities, the context and institutional mechanisms that exist, and the challenges they encounter while performing their duties. This research, in this context, attempts to explore the capacity, capability, and achievement of the women representatives in the local government institutions in Bangladesh, and how they are exercising agency, choice, and decision-making, in line with the Capability Approach.

1.1 Research Objectives

This research investigates the capability and achievement of the women members elected in the reserved seats in Union Parishads. In particular, it explores women representatives' agency, choice, and decision-making. The research objectives are - i) To explore the dynamics of capacity building and gender mainstreaming in the local government institutions in northern Bangladesh in the lens of the Capability Approach; ii) To evaluate the challenges and loopholes of the legal and institutional provisions in capacity building of the elected women representatives; iii) To examine the efficacy of the elected women representatives in enhancing and ensuring Central Human Capabilities in the survey area.

2.0 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE CAPABILITY APPROACH

The Capability Approach focuses on people-centric development in which citizens' active participation is the key in planning, implementing, and monitoring development initiatives (Landa Oregi et al., 2025). It sees development as something that adds value to people's choice and freedom: freedom from hunger, from poverty, from malnutrition, etc., which is actively chosen by people. Accordingly, the ability to choose from the basket of choices is the key to sustainable development and for the life people consider worth living. In Sen's (1999) argument, development means the extension of people's choices in terms of work, education, shelter, health, and political views. Accordingly, at the center of development is people's enhanced capability of making choices, "the ability to satisfy certain crucially important functioning up to certain minimally adequate levels" (Upreti, 2025). Sen argues that resources are necessary means, but they cannot guarantee one's well-being, because people's choices might be limited in translating such resources to access health, education or political freedom due to lawlessness, prejudices, corruption, and oppressive rules. For example, the increasing per-capita income does not guarantee increased women's freedom or religious tolerance, and hence cannot guarantee a life with freedom and choice. In the Capability Approach, it is therefore argued that agency or people's ability to make strategic decisions is at the centre of development (Colding et al., 2024). It emphasizes people's ability to act or ability to refuse to act to pursue his/her own goals, interests, and perspectives. In this view, development has to be seen with people being active agents, contrary to passive ones with or without material development.

Nussbaum (1999, 2000, 2007, and 2011) also presented her case in favour of the Capability Approach but through the lens of human rights. To her, capabilities are closely linked to human rights. She argued that women deserve a dignified life where that has a reason to live and are enabled to perform necessary human functioning. Accordingly, conventional measures of development, such as GDP or per-capita income, failed to capture the inner meaning of life and well-being and to champion the notion of equality, justice, and development for all (Grashof, 2025). To Nussbaum, economic development without women's freedom, bodily integrity, opportunity to live without domestic violence, ability to have unencumbered mobility, etc., cannot provide a dignified life to women. Nussbaum, therefore, argues that development must focus beyond expanding GDP or per-capita income; rather, it must focus on certain capabilities and fundamental human rights. She proposes 10 such capabilities that are essential for oppressed communities like women to lead a life that has reason to valued and dignified. These central human capabilities are presented below. Nussbaum considers these capabilities as a minimum requirement to ensure equity, justice, and sustainable development.

Central Human Capabilities

- 1. Life:** Ability to enjoy life at its fullest, without being compromised or cut short due to negligence, oppression, or injustice.
- 2. Bodily health:** Ability to enjoy good health, including maternal and reproductive health, nutrition, and shelter.
- 3. Bodily integrity:** Ability to move freely without restriction, free from domestic violence, sexual harassment, and coercion over reproductive decisions.
- 4. Senses, imagination, and thought:** Ability to express own views, to access literature and music of choice, ability to write or express intelligence without fear, ability to improve skills.
- 5. Emotions:** Ability to enjoy own culture, meet with family and friends of choice, ability to keep and nurture heritage and personalized items with attachment.
- 6. Practical reason:** Ability to believe and justify own actions, ability to put reasons or seek reasons.
- 7. Affiliation:**
 - A. Ability to participate in association, form and maintain social relationships, ability to interact with other individuals and organizations.
 - B. Ability to express views peacefully and with dignity, free from discrimination, intimidation, and intolerance.
- 8. Other species:** Ability to care for the environment and other species, and nature.
- 9. Play:** Ability to enjoy freedom to play outdoors, exercise, and participate in cultural activities.
- 10. Control over one's environment:**
 - A. Political. Ability to participate in politics and government, ability to express political views free from fear, abuse, discrimination, or oppression.
 - B. Material. Ability and equal access to education, work, and wages. No discrimination in the name of race, norms, or culture. Ensure workplace safety, free from sexual harassment and bullying.

Source: Nussbaum (2011: 7-9).

Nussbaum (2000: 36) considered these capabilities at the core of development:

“What this approach is after is a society in which persons are treated as each worthy of regard and in which each has been put in a position to live humanely. We say that, beneath a certain level of capability, a person has not been enabled to live in a truly human way. The capabilities are sought for every person.....The ultimate political goal is always the promotion of the capabilities of each person.”

Almost all over the world, these rights and standards are now considered the cornerstone of empowerment and development from the roots (Amin et al., 2024). Scholars also provided supporting arguments for such criteria and preconditions as a measure of women's empowerment and freedom. Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender (2002), for example, mentioned that certain norms and standards are essential in order to guarantee that women can enjoy equal value in society and enjoy equal opportunity like men do. In Bangladesh, the constitution of the country emphasizes fundamental human rights at the center of development. These rights include freedom of shelter, freedom from hunger, unimpeded access to health, education, and work, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of association, freedom of expression, and non-discrimination based on gender, race, tribe, or religion. The reserved seats for women in the local government (as well as at the national parliament) can be seen in line with the central human capabilities enabling political participation, affiliation, and the ability to act.

3.0 THE DATA AND THE STUDY AREA

This study collected primary data using a household survey in the rural areas of Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, and Kurigram districts. I interviewed 90 elected women members of the local government bodies from these districts from November 2020 to February 2021. The data were collected from 3 Districts of the Rangpur division, namely, Rangpur, Kurigram, and Lalmonirhat.

The 3 districts, Lalmonirhat, Rangpur, and Kurigram, are randomly drawn from eight districts of the Rangpur division of northern Bangladesh. From each of these three districts, I picked 2 Upazilas, giving us 6 Upazilas in total. From each of these Upazilas, I picked 5 Unions randomly, giving 30 unions in total. From each of these Unions, I have 3 elected women members elected in the reserved seats, giving a total of 90 elected women representatives as the key respondents of my survey. These 90 respondents are the key source of information for this research. In addition, I also interviewed 5 male representatives, 3 government officials, 3 NGO activists, and 2 journalists as key informants for better exploring the issues regarding women's representation in politics, holding public offices, and exercising agency and empowerment. A semi-structured questionnaire is used for the interview to collect data, followed by an in-depth interview where respondents have deep insights to share.

A purposive sampling is used for this study in selecting Unions and Upazillas. This is because to capture the rural remoteness in this study, I categorically excluded the district and Upazilla headquarters. That is, I picked Upazillas other than the district headquarters, and I excluded the Upazilla headquarters when selecting the Union. The field survey was conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. The elected women representatives were visited at their homes or the local government offices, as they felt comfortable collecting primary data. I also visited local government offices, attended meetings with permission, visited development projects led by elected women representatives, talked to local people, and community leaders.

The survey data are collected using a semi-structured questionnaire from primary respondents of this study. The questionnaire includes socio-economic data, demographic information, political involvement, husband's and in-laws background, women's participation in income generating activities, women's participation in household decision-making, role in local government bodies, electoral politics, politics before entering to election, relationships with male elected representatives, training and support available, social and institutional network, issues of dowry and violence against women, etc. The questionnaire includes both open and closed-ended questions. While close-ended questions are good at bringing respondents' responses to a clear way, open-ended questions offer them the opportunity to offer thoughtful comments and details.

I also conducted in-depth interviews with some selected respondents for a deeper understanding of this complex issue. Several case studies were also conducted for respondents with life-changing experiences and stories. The survey data are stored and analysed using MS Excel and SPSS. The quantitative data are analysed using appropriate statistical tools, including frequency distribution, pie chart, bar diagram, line chart, etc., while an ethnographic study is used to uncover the untold stories behind the quest for women's political empowerment, gender mainstreaming, and capacity building by holding political offices.

4.0 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This section presents empirical findings of the study. My investigation of socio-economic profile of the elected women representatives elected in the quota seats, their political experience, support within households, interest of extended family in joining politics, role performed by elected women representatives, the relationship with male colleagues, legal provision and safeguards for role play, administrative and organizational support, awareness and capability building programs, challenges women representatives encounter, self-evaluation by women representatives including any plan, etc.

4.1 Representatives are mostly young

About 73% respondents are below 40 years old (Figure 1). The figure shows that the younger age is dominates in the age distribution of the women representatives. In particular, women in the 31-35 years range are the single most dominant age group, with 30 (33.33%) respondents coming from this age group. It is also found that a further 27 (30.00%) respondents come from the next age group of 36-40 years. About 20% of the women respondents come from the age group 41-45 years. Nine representatives (10%) belong to the youngest age group of 25-30 years. Only 6 (6.66%) respondents were coming from the 45-plus age group (46 and above). A similar study conducted by Moin (2004) revealed that in the rural areas highest number of WMs of UP came from the age group of 31-35. It is important to note that no woman member was below 25 years of age as the age bar set by the election law (Aktar, 2021a).

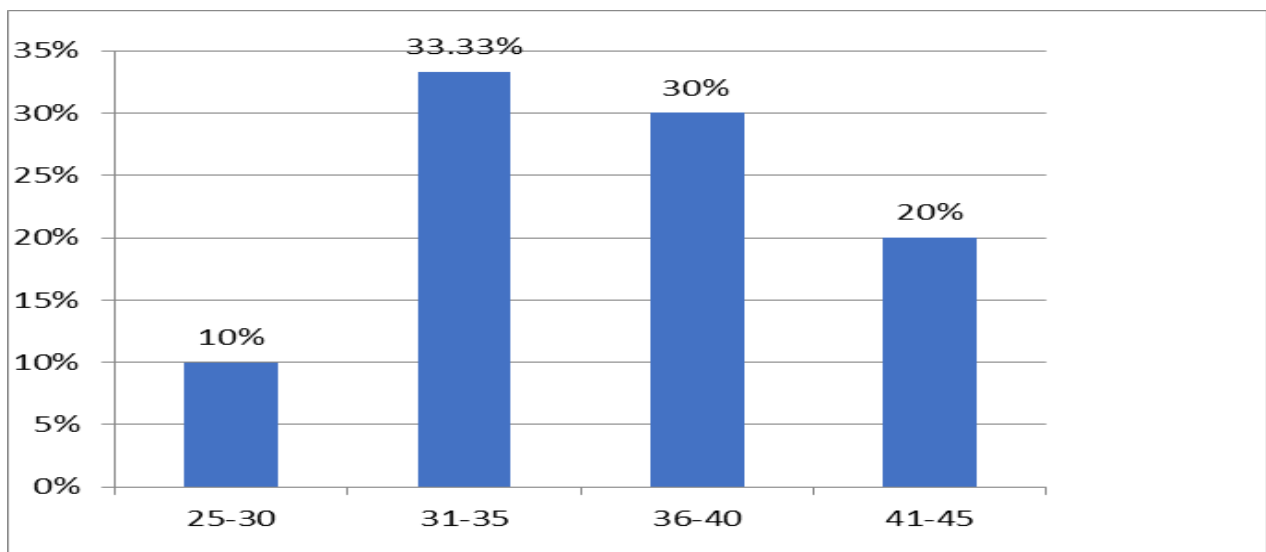


Figure 1: Women representatives are mostly young.

4.2 Women representatives are mostly married

Most of the elected representatives are married (80%), 13.33% divorced, and only 2.22% unmarried and 2.22% separated (Figure 2). About 12(13.33%) were widow whereas only 4(4.44%) were divorced. It was found interesting that 2 (2.22%) respondents were found unmarried, and another 2 (2.22%) are separated. In our tradition-bound society, women other than married had to face social problems to participate in politics (Aktar, 2021a). These figures potentially indicate patriarchal norms of the society where women's marital status is a

key factor for electability (and/or economic security).

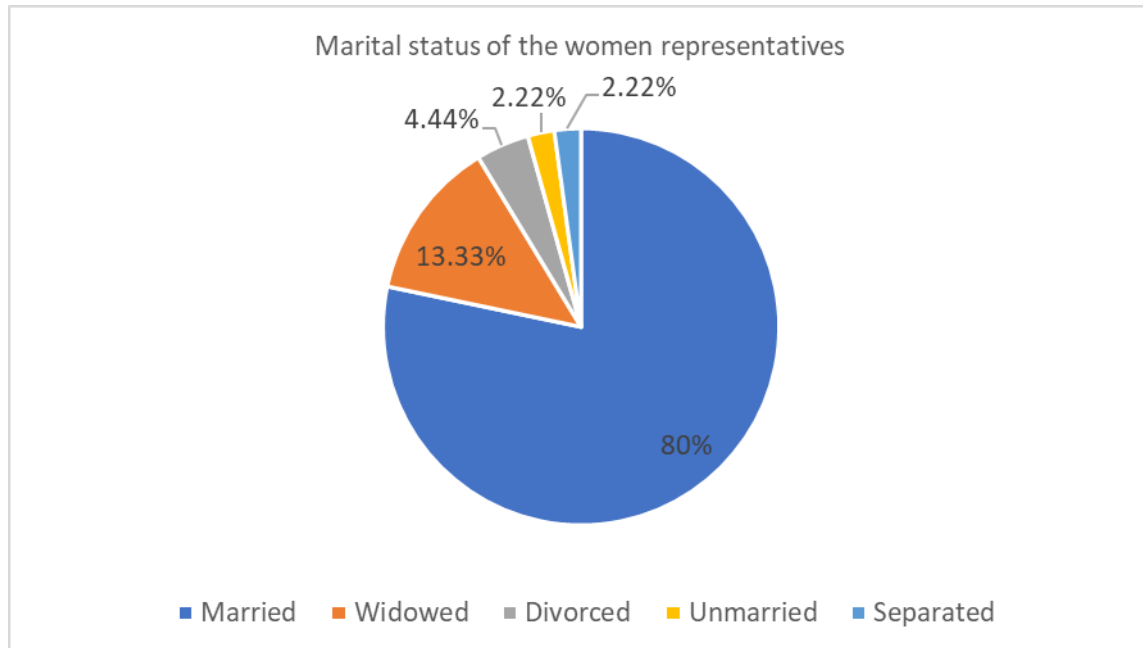


Figure 2: Most of the representatives are married.

In a patriarchal society like ours, the identity of a woman is usually determined firstly by her father and secondly by her husband (Mensah, 2023). Particularly, unmarried women have to face social constraints to participate in UP activities as members. So marital status has a significant importance for the mental as well as material support in women's participation in LGIs.

4.3 The majority of the representatives are lowly educated

Education is one of the important factors for women's empowerment in LGIs. It is only through education one can achieve the upliftment and betterment for oneself. Especially, literacy among women tends to develop their self-awareness and improve their analytical faculties, which may help them participate in political activities. The education of women can also be a powerful source of social change and economic development (Hasan Emon & Nisa Nipa, 2024). It is expected that education helps the women members of UPs to effectively contribute to the functioning of the Union Parishad because education gives them the necessary skills, awareness, and confidence.

In this study, it is found that about 56% of the elected women representatives have less than an SSC level educational background. The data presented above show that secondary education (classes six to ten) is the dominant education level, with a maximum of 45 (50.00%) women representatives coming from this education level. This is followed by 30% SSC and 10% HSC passed representatives. Only 3 (3.33%) representatives completed graduate degrees, and 6.66% respondents had primary level education. No respondents were, however, found to have post-graduate degrees.

It is learnt that common people are more inclined to favour educated women over the illiterate, considering education a key factor to perform roles in the local government body. The results of the vote thus show a verdict in favour of secondary education and above. The clear majority of secondary education of the WMs reflects the socio-economic scenario of rural Bangladesh, where graduate and

tertiary educated women still possess a small proportion of the population. One thing, however, is very important to note that the earlier study, like Halder (2002), found that 13% WMs of UP had their S.S.C., and only 2% of them had H.S.C. The present study, in this context, found 37% women members of UP to have their S.S.C and 4.44% to have H.S.C. This clearly shows increasing participation of educated women to come forward in local-level politics and could be considered a very significant sign in women's empowerment.

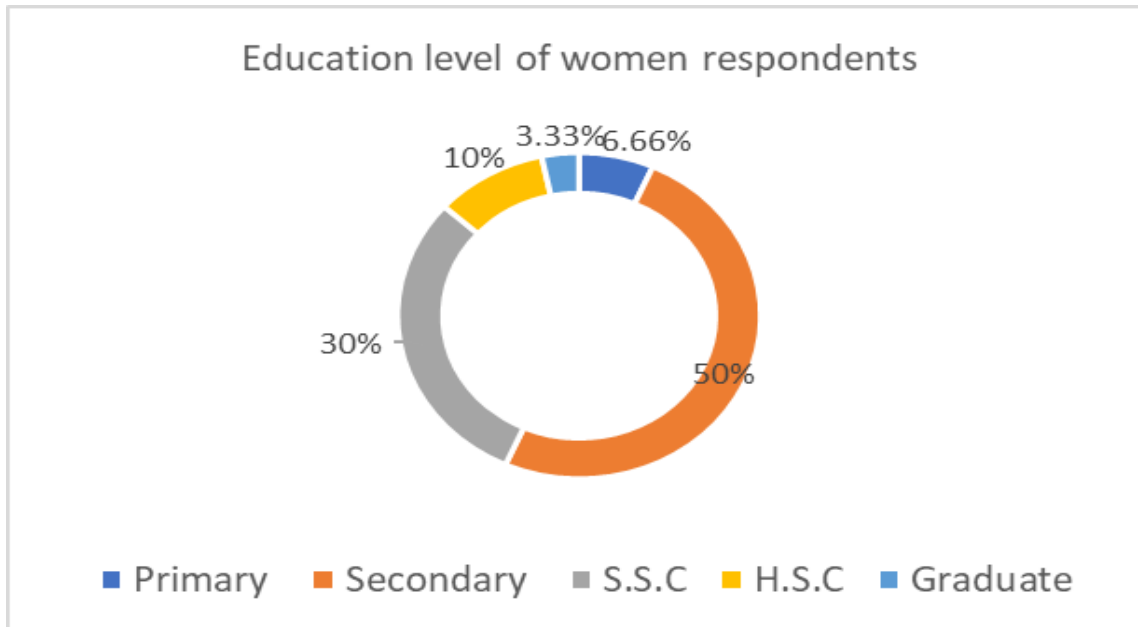


Figure 3: The Majority of the representatives are lowly educated.

4.4 Most of the representatives came from small and medium-sized farmers' families

Bangladesh is a developing country with agriculture at the forefront of the rural economy. Most of the people of our country depend on agriculture, and accordingly, land ownership determines the economic condition of rural people (Mahedi et al., 2024). Land ownership is considered a crucial factor in gaining status and prominence in the village. In this study, it is evident that the highest number of respondents (40%) have land between 2 to 4 acres (Figure 4). In the Bangladesh context, this amount of land corresponds to medium farmers. There are 35% respondents who have more than 4 acres of land, of which 23.33% own 4 to 6 acres of land, 7.77% own 6 to 8 acres, and a further 4.44% own 8 to 10 acres of land. The figures indicate that altogether 75% of the respondents come from medium to large farming families. Only 25% respondents come from marginal farming households with land holdings of less than 2 acres. Some of the respondents with less than 2 acres of land mentioned that agriculture is not their primary source of income. Some of them are engaged in business, and some in service. However, the 2021 UP election result reveals that 62 landless women came out victorious in the reserved seats across the country in the districts of Pabna, Natore, Faridpur, Rajshahi, and Rajbari. This study is in contrast with previous studies like Halder (2002) and Panday (2008). In these studies, most of the elected women representatives from the rural local government bodies were smallholders with less than 2 acres of land, followed by the medium farmers, ranging from 2 acres to 6 acres of land. These study results might indicate some shift in electoral politics away from marginal farming households.

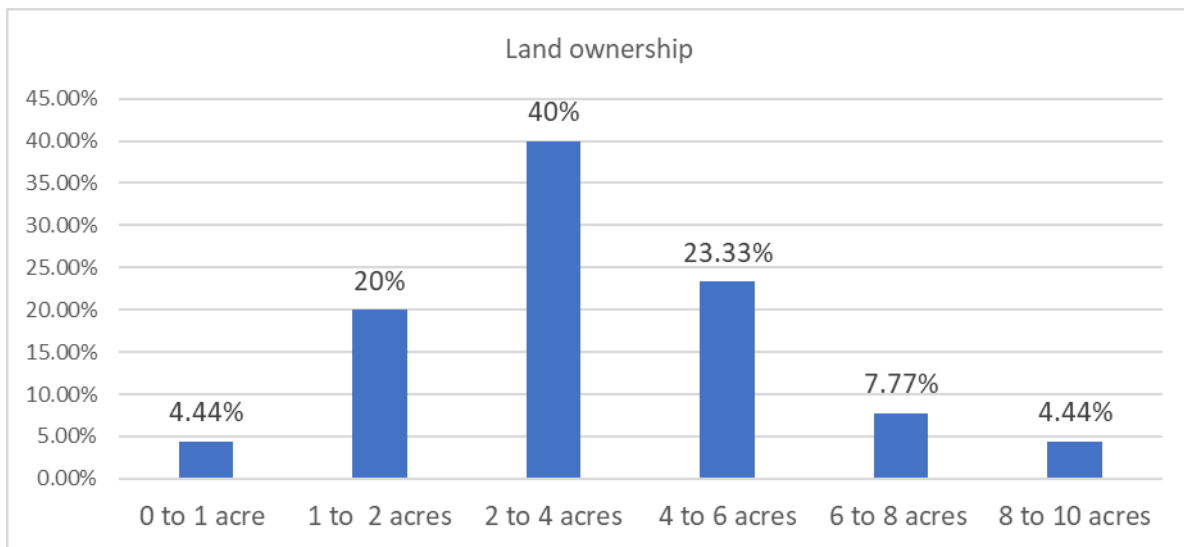


Figure 4: Land holdings by the elected women representatives.

4.5 The personal income of the representatives is very low

Income plays a vital role in determining the socio-economic status of a person. Especially for women, it is expected that income-earning enhances their status in the households as well as in society. Income earning brings economic independence, which develops the ability of decisions among women (Beaujoin et al., 2021). Therefore, economic independence may be considered as one of the major components of empowerment.

Table 1 shows that about 27 (30%) of the women representatives reported having self-income of Taka 2000 to Taka 4000. About 13.33% of the elected women representatives have a self-income of Taka less than 2000. About 6.66% women representatives have self-income of Taka between 4000 to Taka 6000, a further 4.44% have self-income of Taka between 6000 to Taka 8000, and only 5.55% have self-income of Taka above 8000. Note that in Bangladesh, the minimum monthly wage is set at Taka 8000 by the government. My Data reveals that only 5.55% of the women representatives earn the minimum salary of their own. This clearly shows the dismal condition of women in the rural areas of the country.

Table 1: Monthly income of the elected women representatives.

Monthly Income (in Taka)	Number of Respondents	Percentages (%)
No income	36	40%
Less than Tk 2000	12	13.33%
Tk 2000-4000	27	30%
Tk 4000-6000	6	6.66%
Tk 6000-8000	4	4.44%
Tk 8000 and above	5	5.55%
Total	90	100%

4.6 The majority of the representatives have no political involvement

Political affiliation and involvement in party politics of the women representatives are important in

electoral politics and women's empowerment. Political activities, meetings, procession, and political organizations help build leadership capabilities (Kwak, 2024). Furthermore, party politics often help them in building the organizational capability needed for leadership in UP activities. Figure 5 presents the political participation of women representatives in the survey area.

In this study majority of the women respondents (54.44%) mentioned not being involved with any political parties. A total of 45.55% stated their party affiliation. Among them, 18 (20.00%) were involved with the ruling Awami League and 10 (11.11%) with the main opposition BNP. A few respondents were affiliated with Jatiyo Party 8 (8.88%), 2 (2.22%) with Jamat-e-Islami, and 3 (3.33%) with others. Women members involved in party politics mentioned that they are mostly aligned with the party that their husbands work. In a similar study, Panday (2016) observed that women members were influenced mostly by their husbands or by their fathers.

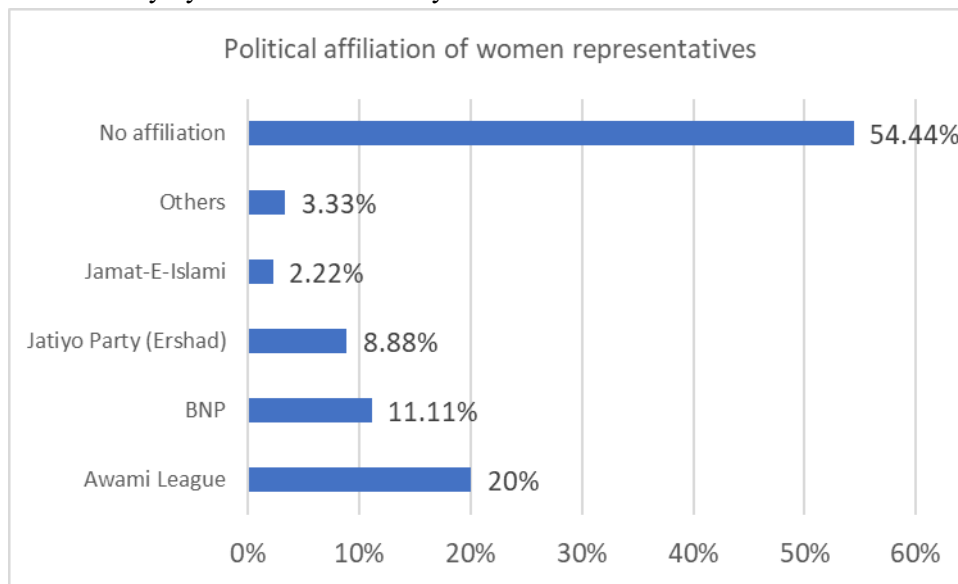


Figure 5: Prior political involvement of elected women representatives.

4.7 Representatives do not use the internet or read newspapers

Access to mass media, including Radio, Television, and newspapers Paper helps enhance awareness of the women representatives. Women representatives' exposure to mass media plays an evident role in increasing the level of their participation in the development activities of the UPs. Figure 6 presents the media exposure of the WMs.

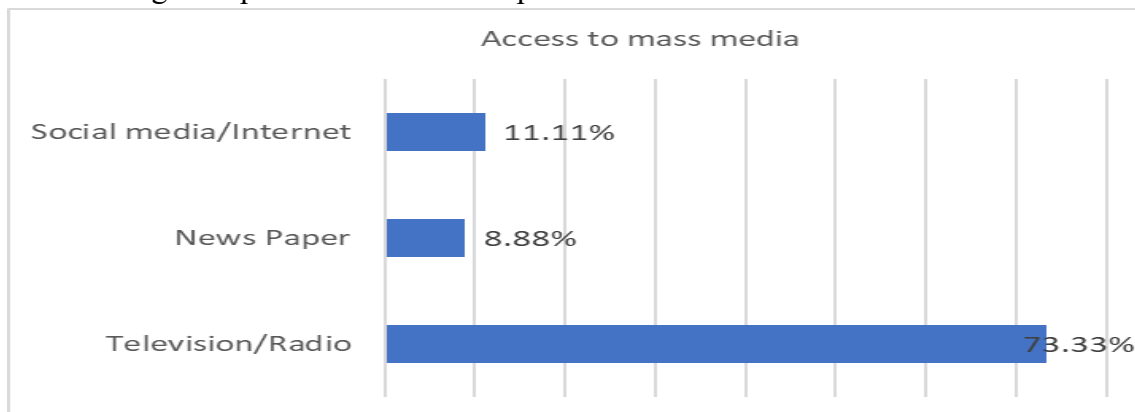


Figure 6: Women members' access to mass media.

The figure above shows that the majority of respondents, i.e., 66 (73.33%), had access to Radio or Television. The respondents mentioned that they mostly watch television and hardly listen to radio programs. Only a few of these respondents further mentioned having a cable TV network. Ten (11.11%) respondents were reported to have access to social media using the internet. About 8(8.88%) women representatives mentioned reading newspapers regularly. The respondents who read newspapers were involved in services, and they mostly read newspapers at their offices. And most of them read local newspapers rather than national dailies. Respondents mentioned that newspapers are costly for them and they prefer watching television instead to get up-to-date information. In a very similar study, Aktar (2021a) observed that most of the WMs watched television regularly. But their exposure to newspapers and radio was very little. Moreover, she mentioned that those WMs who watched television used to watch movies, dramas, and musical programmes and were reluctant to news, education, health, or development programmes in general.

4.8 Limited awareness about standing committees

Standing committees are at the core of the local government's functioning. So, women representatives must be more aware of standing committees. In this regard, information is shown in Figure 7.

The survey results show that only two-fifths of the elected women representatives (40%) had full awareness about the functioning of the standing committees. Among the remaining respondents, 26.66% had moderate knowledge about the standing committees, while one-third of the respondents (33.33%) had no clear understanding about the standing committees. Most of the respondents mentioned that they only know about those committees in which they had the opportunity to be a member, and have little or no knowledge about other committees. This indicates insufficient knowledge of the women representatives about these very important committees. A similar fact is revealed in the study of Panday (2016). In his study, the author mentioned that WMs of UP demonstrated limited awareness about the standing committees.

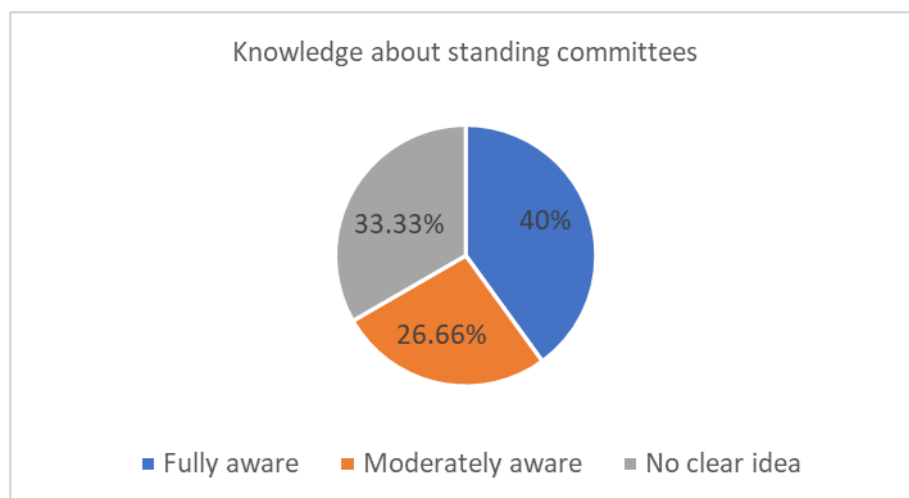


Figure 7: Women members' awareness about standing committees.

4.9 Women representatives' priorities to solve local problems

Women in Bangladesh are confined at home traditionally and less likely to raise voice in the public domain. However, empowerment of women requires that women's participation in the decision-making process is enhanced not only within the household but also at the institutional level. The quota seats at the local government bodies offered an opportunity for women to play an active role in the decision-making process at the institutional level.

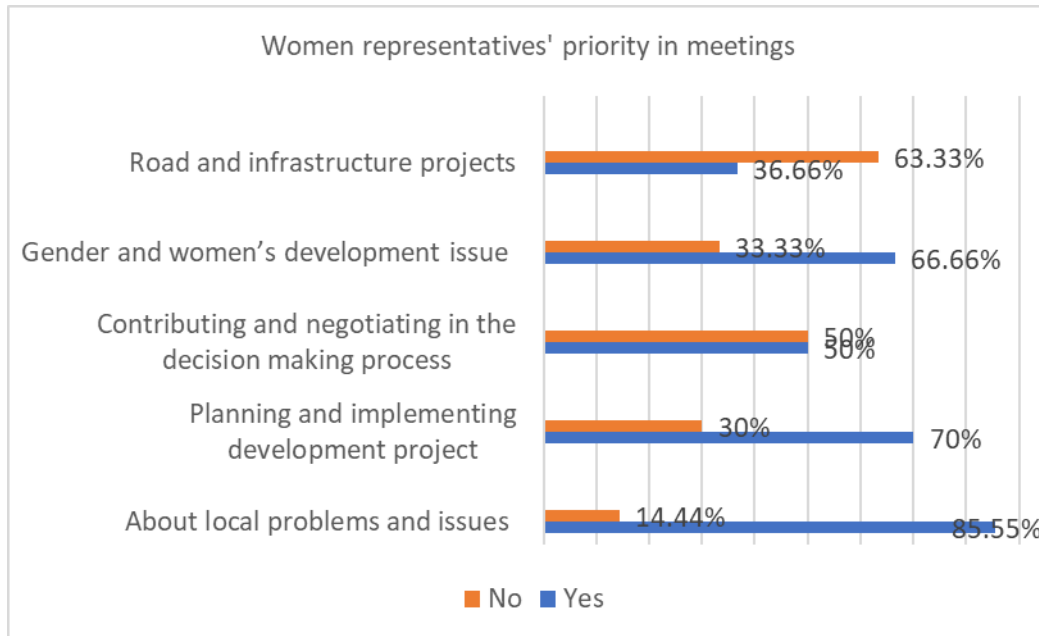


Figure 8: Women representatives' priority in local government.

The survey data presented in Table 4.16 and Figure 4.16 show that a vast number of elected women representatives (85.55%) raised local problems and issues in the Union Parishad meetings. They mentioned that local people often come to them with various problems, including muddy roads, river erosion, and many other issues. They raise all these issues in the Union Parishad meetings so that necessary development projects can be taken and, if necessary, can be sent to a higher authority for funding. About 70.0% of the women representatives mentioned that they raise issues on the planning and implementation of development projects and their participation in those. About 66.66% women representatives participated in the issues relating to gender and development, and a further 50% mentioned that to would participate in the decision-making negotiation. In contrast, only 36.66% of the women representatives participated in the discussion of the infrastructure development issues. Aktar (2021b) found very similar results in her study. She observed that about half of the elected WMs of UP projected problems of their areas; insisted on the need for development works, advocated on issues for preferential treatment of the destitute women, resisted moves to bypass the women members and female issues, and participated in discussions on project planning and implementation. Nearly one-fourth of the elected women members felt that they could play a very small role in the UP meetings.

4.10 Representatives are eager to contribute to health and family planning

Women representatives can play a certain role in improving health and family planning for

rural women. In rural Bangladesh, health services are poor, and women are largely excluded from necessary primary health care facilities (Mahedi et al., 2025). This offers scope for women representatives to play an active role.

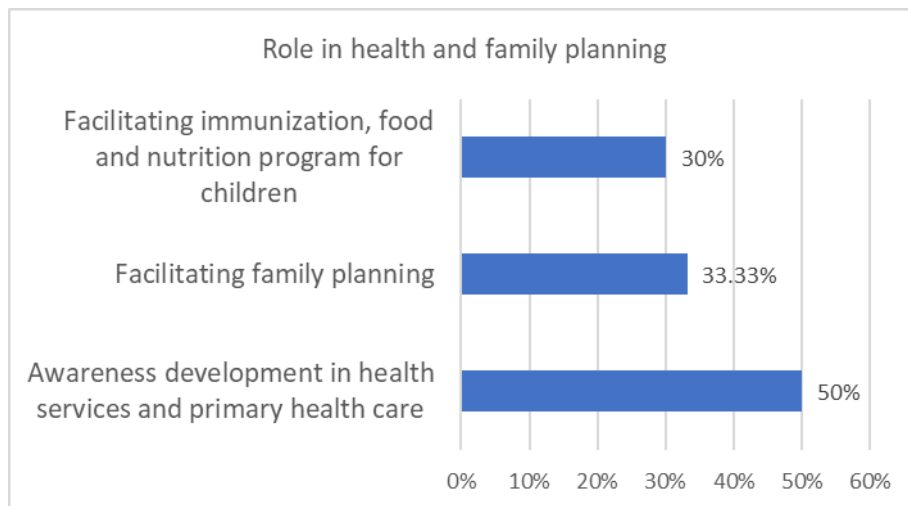


Figure 9: Women's role in health and family planning.

Figure 9 shows that about half of the elected women representatives (50%) contributed to creating awareness for health and primary health care in their constituency. Women members mentioned that there are prejudices against primary health, especially regarding treatment in the event of sickness. Being elected women representatives, they always inspire rural households to access modern medication, and they encourage improving the family's health and well-being for a better future. About 33.33% women representatives mentioned that they actively contributed to improving family planning services in their area, as family planning can help keep families small and planned. They argue that a smaller family can provide better education, good food, and treatment. Therefore, they encourage local people, especially newly-wed and young women, to adopt family planning methods. About 30% women representatives further mentioned that they facilitate the children's immunization programme, and also help Union Parishads and NGOs to run programs to deliver food and nutrition for children.

4.11 Women representatives set a footprint in fighting against domestic violence, dowry, and rape

Women in rural Bangladesh are neglected and oppressed due to strong patriarchy. Social curses like dowry, polygamy, child marriage, acid throwing, and physical and sexual assault are widely suffered by women. Being economically dependent and lagging in employment, education, and income, they are the easy prey of man's dominance, greed, and oppression (Devi, 2025).

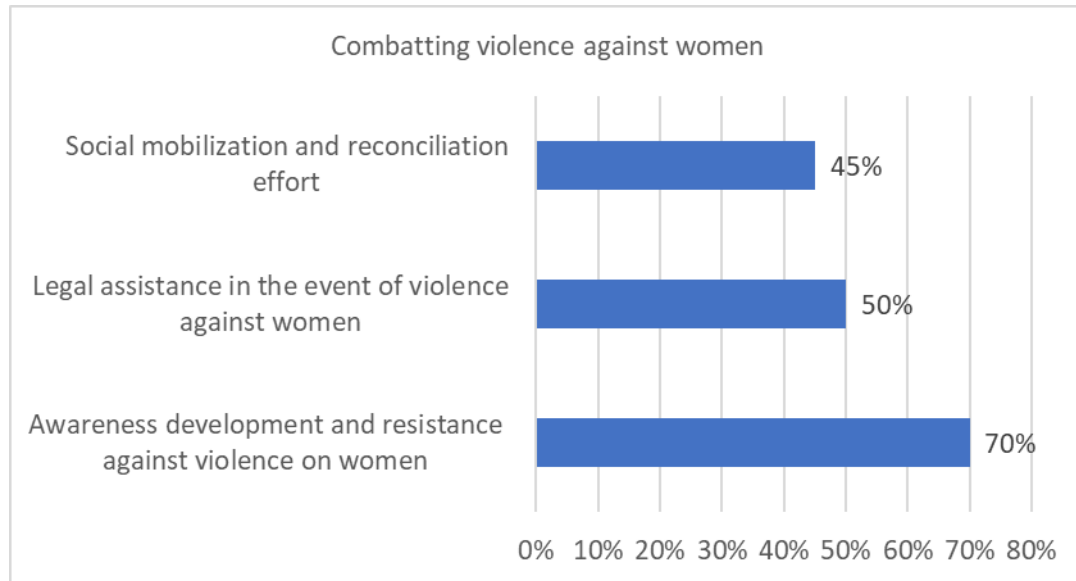


Figure 10: Combating dowry and domestic violence.

The study finds that about 70% of the elected women representatives tried to create awareness building in the society against domestic violence (Table 4.18 and Figure 4.18). They said that violence against women is a social disease and only social awareness can solve this problem in the long run. They emphasized that an oppressed and tortured women cannot be a good mother, cannot be a good keeper and educator for children. It is therefore important for men to keep their women happy, and they are trying to create that awareness in society. About 50% of the women respondents mentioned that they offered legal advice and necessary assistance to the victims in the event of violence. They mentioned that women facing domestic violence often come to them for immediate shelter and advice. They said that these distressed women feel free to share their tragedy with the women representatives, and being women, they can understand their problem well. Therefore, they try to help the victims whenever they approach them for help. A further 45% elected women representatives mentioned that they often sit in meetings and reconciliation efforts. They mentioned that some victims don't want legal action, which may lead to separation or divorce. Instead, these women want women representatives' help and support in their household so that they can feel safe and face no more oppression. Study findings of Aktar (2021a) also revealed that women representatives had contributed significantly to social awareness building to resist violence against women, to provide legal assistance, and facilitate arbitration at the local levels.

4.12 Women representatives find it difficult to fulfil election promises

During the election campaign, women representatives pledged several developments, social and political actions for the improvement of the well-being of their voters. After getting elected, women representatives are under moral pressure to fulfil those promises, as failure to achieve the stated goals will jeopardize their reputation and face voters in the next election.

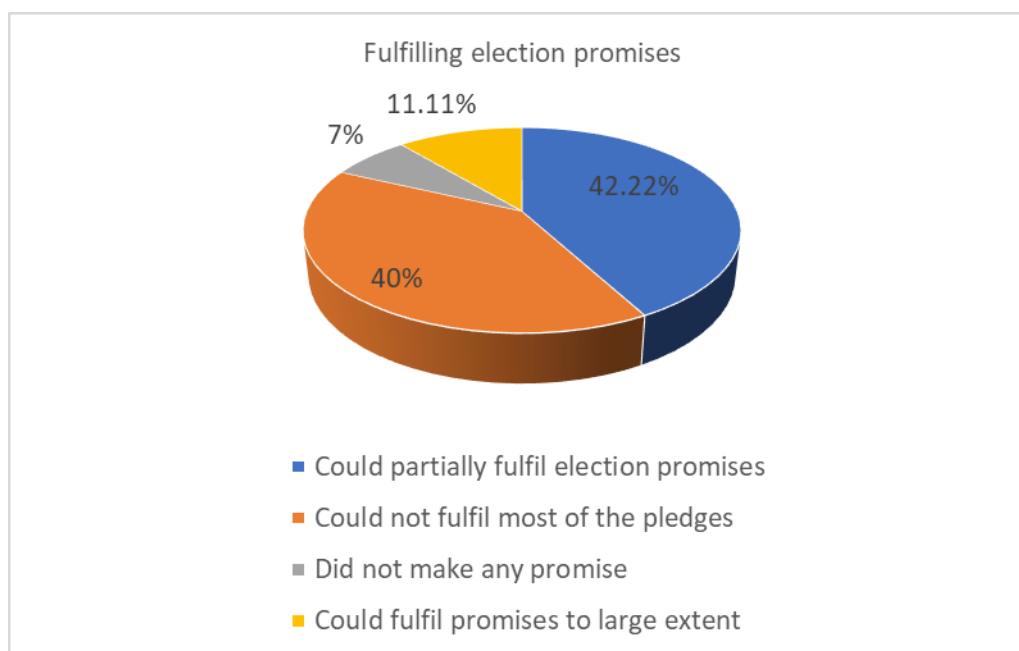


Figure 11: Election pledges by women representatives.

The empirical survey shows that about 42.22% women representatives could fulfil election promises partially, and only 11.11% mentioned that they fulfilled most of their pledges (Table 4.19 and Figure 4.19). A significant number of the women respondents (40%) mentioned that they couldn't fulfil most of the election pledges they made to the voters, while a further 7% mentioned that they didn't make any specific promise. Women members mentioned that though they could fulfil their election promises in some areas, including food and relief distribution but they could hardly fulfil promises in road development, electrification, small and cottage industry, etc., for which they need funding from the central government.

4.13 Reasons for failing in election promises

Women representatives outlined some specific reasons for their failure to fulfil election promises.

The vast majority of the women representatives (70%) mentioned that it is because the Union Parishad is a male majority institution, their cooperation is essential for women members to play a role and fulfil election promises (Figure 12). However, they mentioned that the male representatives are dominating, stubborn, and unwilling to respect them as colleagues and elected representatives. About 40% of the women representatives also mentioned that there is no clear law protecting the contribution and participation of women representatives in the development activities conducted by the Union Parishads. They mentioned that though the Local Government Ordinance states that women members should take part in at least three standing committees each, that ultimately cannot protect their participation and fair share because a committee of five members is by default dominated by male representatives. About 33.33% of women representatives mentioned a lack of proper training to enhance awareness among women representatives about development projects and activities. Lacking education, as most of the elected women members are lowly educated with less than a high school level

education, the need for training is tremendous for the women representatives. About a quarter of the women representatives (24.77%) further mentioned that the Union Parishad does not have sufficient funding and resources to carry out development projects. They mentioned that they can raise development issues at the Union Parishad meetings, but there are no resources. The issues they raise are often sent to the Upazilla Parishad and District Council, where they hardly get any backing for necessary funding.

Various studies conducted by Moin (2004), Halder (2002), and Aktar (2021a) also found election promises of WMs as moderately fulfilled. Aktar (2021a) mentioned that limited resources and non-inclusion of the WMs in the finance committees were responsible for not fulfilling their election pledges. Moin (2004) stated that the direct opposition from the male members and often the chairman, as well as sometimes their lack of awareness, was also responsible to a significant extent for not fulfilling their election promises.

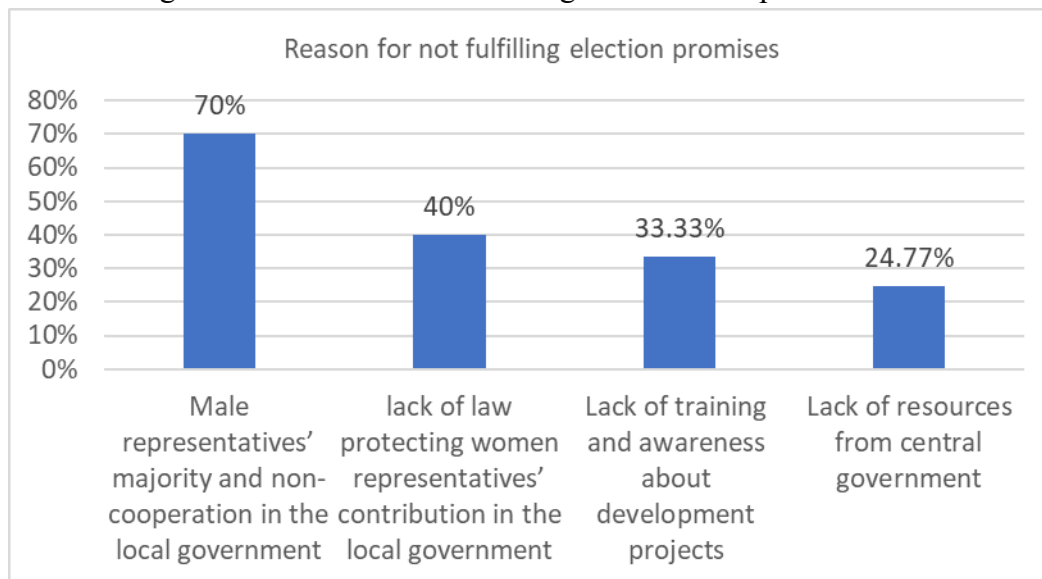


Figure 12: Factors behind failing to meet elected promises.

4.14 Representatives' plea for training programmes

Women representatives get training from the government and non-government organizations after the election in order to facilitate their participation in the local government functioning. I surveyed about the importance of such training.

Figure 13 shows that about four-fifths of the respondents, 85.55% believed that training could contribute to developing knowledge about the roles and functions of the union parishads. About 80% of the women representatives considered training instrumental in raising women members' knowledge about their roles and responsibilities in the local government bodies. About 70% of the women representatives mentioned that training is important for them to undertake development activities. About 61.11% women representatives opined that training to increase awareness about violence against women, while a further 40% mentioned training to help them think of development options for women and other marginalized groups of society. Finally, about 50% of the women representatives mentioned the necessity of training to enhance their capability for them to take part in the decision-making process. A study conducted by Aktar (2021b) also echoed similar findings and stated that all of the respondents considered training to develop knowledge of the WMs about their institutional

roles and responsibilities, and also to develop the courage to protest against injustice.

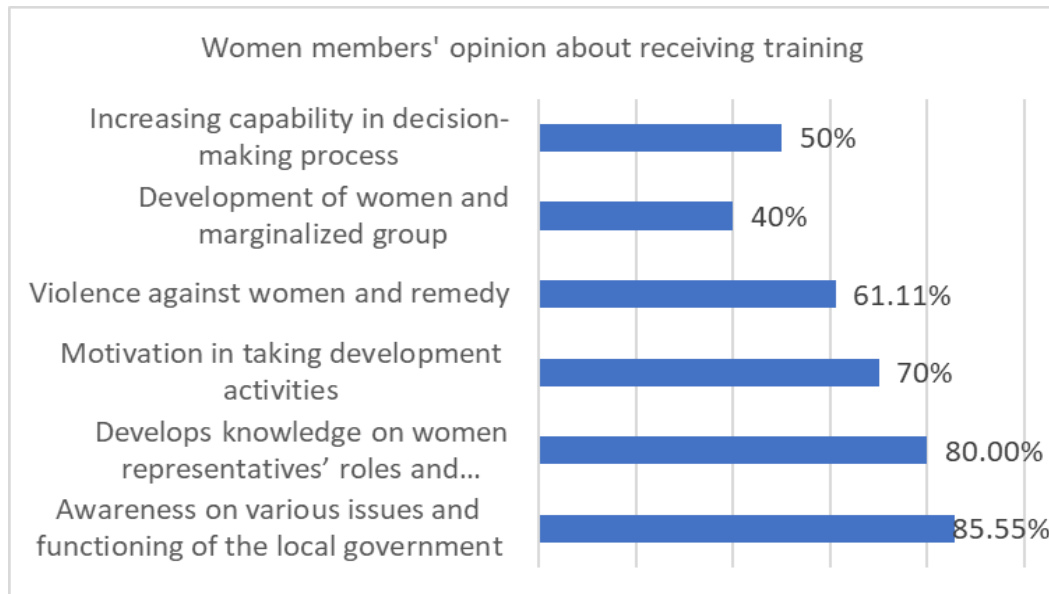


Figure 13: Women representatives' plea for training programmes.

4.15 Union parishads are a male-dominant organization

Women members mentioned that the Union Parishad is a body of 9 general members (male), 3 women members from quota seats, and the Chairman (also all male in our survey)—giving us a body of 13 representatives. Since the 3 women members are a minority in the decision-making process, they are often included in the committees as ornamental pieces rather than with ample opportunity and authority to lead the committees. This finding indicates that due to loopholes in the local government regulations as well as the patriarchal attitudes of the male representatives, women members are unable to exercise agency, choice, and make strategic contributions as emphasized by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (1999, 2000) as central to human development and the Capability Approach.

4.16 Women representatives are sincere and ready to participate

This study finds that women members are regular and motivated to take part in official duties at the local government bodies. It finds that most of the women members attended the Union Parishad meetings regularly. Raising local problems, problem of women and poor people are their top priority in the union parishad meetings. I found that women members are regular in meetings if given meeting notices in time and if the meetings are convened during the day. However, if the meetings are emergency and the meetings are to be held at night, it is often the case that women members' participation in the meeting is low. The women members said the insecurity issues at night are the main reason why they avoid nightly meetings. This finding shows that women are responsive to practical reasons, as emphasized by Nussbaum (2011) as a key component of the central human capability. Women are more likely to participate in the local government meetings when the meetings are scheduled at a logical time.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The research explores the dynamics of capacity building and gender mainstreaming in the local government institutions in northern Bangladesh through the lens of the Capability Approach. It also explores the challenges and loopholes of the institutional provisions facilitating gender mainstreaming at the local government. The study used primary data employing a household survey in the rural areas of Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, and Kurigram districts. Findings of the study show that 80% of the elected women respondents were married, and less than seven percent are unmarried or divorced. This result resembles a strong patriarchal presence in the society where marital status sets the norm to be a good girl or a bad girl. A divorcee or an unmarried woman is not seen as representing society, and hence it is difficult for them to contest elections and win in this patriarchal setting. The findings also highlight the uphill battle women face in this society to raise their own identity, agency, and achievement. Study findings indicate that women in the survey are at the centre of their reproductive role as stated in Moser's framework (Leuenberger et al., 2021).

The study findings document that about 57% of the elected women representatives have come with an education of less than the SSC level. The government made primary education compulsory for all men and women back in 1990. Girls are getting a stipend to study and complete secondary education, and girls' education is tuition-free up to graduate level. A study shows that despite all these initiatives, women are still lagging behind men in terms of education. It indicates the underlying social barriers women are facing, including lower priority for girls' education, child marriage, school drop-outs, and so on. This finding shows that women in the survey area are lagging behind in their productive role, as emphasized by Moser's framework (Moser, 1993). This also limits women's capability of living a life of their choice, with dignity, bodily integrity, and a sense of pride as emphasized by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (1999, 2000) in the Capability Approach. The findings call for action in enhancing girls' education in the country in order to enhance women's capability to enjoy a life that is worth living (Sen 1999, Nussbaum 2011).

Data also documents that as much as 70% of the elected women representatives were housewives. The study also documents that only over five percent of the women members earned a monthly income of Taka 8000, which is the minimum monthly wage as per the country's law. These show the poor status of women in rural Bangladesh who have very low income and employment. With negligible income and employment, it is nearly impossible for women in the survey area to meet practical and strategic gender needs as emphasized by Moser (1993). This is a serious obstacle in the path of women's empowerment (Chowdhury and Somani 2020).

Survey data show that only one-fourth of the elected women representatives came from small farmers' households (with less than 2 acres of land). One of the key objectives of introducing elections in the quota seats was to promote political representation, participation, and empowerment of grassroots women. However, this finding shows that there are challenges in doing so, especially bringing women from an unprivileged background. One potential reason might be that elections in Bangladesh are very expensive in nature, where candidates often spend a huge sum on their election campaign, which essentially puts unwealthy families at odds in the election race. This finding shows that women from an impoverished background do not enjoy control over the environment that surrounds them and sets their destiny (Nussbaum, 2011). Policy makers, therefore, need to ensure a level playing first to mobilize women from the grassroots into electoral politics.

Study data indicate that more than half (fifty-five percent) of the women members had no involvement with political parties. This shows that the election in the reserved seats inspired general women without prior political involvement to come and join the electoral battle for their empowerment. This is a good sign and a welcome indication for this conservative society. This finding confirms that with election in the quota seats, women can participate and play a role in organizations, form and maintain social relationships, and they are able to interact with people and connect with them, as emphasized by Nussbaum (2011) as a key feature of the central human capability.

I investigated women representatives' roles and performances in the functioning of the Union parishads. Women members mentioned that the Union Parishad is a body of 9 general members (typically male), 3 women members from quota seats, and the Chairman (also all male in our survey)—giving us a body of 13 representatives. Since the 3 women members are a minority in the decision-making process, they are often included in the committees as ornamental pieces rather than with ample opportunity and authority to lead the committees. This finding indicates that due to loopholes in the local government regulations as well as the patriarchal attitudes of the male representatives, women members are unable to exercise agency, choice, and make strategic contributions as emphasized by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (1999, 2000) as central to human development and the Capability Approach.

My Study finds that as much as three-fourths of the elected women members put their top priority being the local problems, such as building and maintaining roads, relief distribution, distribution of agricultural inputs, and widow and senior allowance cards. This finding shows that women members are conscious about the practical and strategic gender needs (Moser, 1993) as the cornerstone for their empowerment. The study also finds that women members are engaged with various domains in the arena of family planning and mothers' and children's health. They are found to be engaged in various activities that can benefit the households. They mentioned that though family planning programs and health programs are run by different government agencies, they consider that they have a responsibility to encourage people to use family planning methods, to visit hospitals and clinics in the event of sickness, follow government instructions in the successful operation of child immunization, combatting Covid-19, seasonal flu, and diarrhea. This result further justifies that women members are eager to lead these practical and strategic needs to achieve authority, agency, and influence, which are essential as central human capabilities (Sen 1999, Nussbaum 1999, 2000).

This study found evidence that about seventy percent of the women members were engaged in the protection of women against domestic violence. They helped the victims in accessing legal assistance in the event of violence against women. They also participated in meetings to settle disputes and raise social awareness against abuse. They always try to prevent child marriage, stop dowry practice, and provide legal and psychological support in case of domestic violence. This strategic gender needs to subtly challenge the oppressive male dominance, torture, and repression against women is essential for Moser's framework (1993) for development, and also at the cornerstone for the central human capability (Sen 1999, Nussbaum 1999, 2000).

This study further explored the extent to which women representatives are successful in delivering their election promises after being elected. An overwhelming majority (seventy percent) of the women members mentioned that male representatives, including the Chairman's non-cooperation and patriarchal attitude, as the major cause for their limited capacity to fulfill election promises. This

finding warrants necessary action from policymakers to safeguard women representatives' roles and performances in the local government bodies. These findings indicate that despite achievement and progress in many dimensions—women representatives' capability, agency, and achievement (Kabeer 1994, 1999) to achieve practical and strategic gender needs (Moser, 1993) are largely unfulfilled in the study area. Therefore, the government should take steps to investigate the root causes of women representatives' performance dissatisfaction and take necessary action.

The study finds that almost all of the women members agreed on the necessity of training to raise awareness and capability of the elected women representatives in functioning and performing roles at the local government bodies. They also emphasized training for male representatives about gender issues and about women members' rights and responsibilities, so that they can see women representatives as colleagues rather than rivals in delivering development initiatives for their constituencies. This finding indicates that agency, capability, and development need to be delivered and achieved through the coordination of a series of activities as emphasized by Central Human Capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011). Quota seat is not a panacea that can overthrow the century-old patriarchal prejudices and empower women overnight—rather, study findings resemble the fact that empowerment of women is a difficult terrain, and the policy makers must take further actions to materialize the positive vibe emanated through the election in the quota seats for women's agency, capability, and development.

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