

Women in Local Government: Assessing Representatives' Participation in Union Parishad Decision-Making in Bangladesh

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Abstract: Participation of women in governing and decision-making processes through gender-sensitive particular policies are prerequisites for achieving sustainable development in Bangladesh. Notwithstanding, Union Parishad (UP) is a unit of the rural government of Bangladesh and has a history of hundred years, but women's active participation was ensured not more than two decades. This research study intended to explore women representatives' participation in local government's decision-making process where Union Parishad is a concentrating point. There was an attempt to find out the barriers of women representatives that they face in the decision-making process of UP and explore the participation status of women representatives. This research study was conducted through mixed methods, both qualitative and quantitative, where pre-structured open-ended, close-ended questionnaire interviews and key informant interviews with a total of 116 respondents. Moreover, this research used Oliver and Marwell's Critical Mass Theory and S. Walby's The Theory of Patriarchy. Therefore, the research findings were shown firstly functional barriers of UP, that women representatives faced as in ward shava, project distribution programs, budgetary process, fund allocations, local arbitration, and not having satisfactory participation; these functions women representatives have been facing functional barriers. Again, socio-economic and other barriers explored patriarchal social structure, male-dominated political organization, lack of family support, lack of skill, political consciousness, education, and economic dependency were significant barriers in this area. Therefore, the status of women's representation at this level is crucial and deserves special attention to improve their participation, so policies have to upgrade within trending demand.

Introduction

In the modern world, politics is a way of life, and political decisions touch every aspect of the state, economy, and society. Therefore, it is only natural that women should actively participate in the country's political process. (Siddiqui, 2005). According to Population and Housing Census 2022, the total number of females in the country is 83.35 million, 50.50 percent of the total population. Therefore, Bangladesh cannot achieve a desirable improvement without this 50% of the population in the

active participation, development, and decision-making sector. It is, therefore, high time for policymakers and the government of Bangladesh to rethink women's active participation. There is nothing new about discrimination against women in Bangladesh. They are always lagging from family to state activities. To promote women's political participation, the government of Bangladesh has adopted various women's development policies giving importance to women's empowerment. Due to the influence of the United Nations Declaration of International Women's Year (1975) and the Decade for Women (1975-1985), Bangladesh has initiated a series of discriminatory policies to promote gender equality in aspects of life that was considered a benchmark for women's empowerment in politics.

At the national level, women are now participating and being politically active than before. In 2018, the 17th constitutional amendment approved 50 women's parliamentary seats for an additional 25 years. So, women are becoming more active and participatory at the national level. However, the representations of the local-level women are not satisfactory. After 1997, The Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act improved women's participation; the direct election of female representatives in local bodies established a link between women and the community. However, women elected from reserved seats do not have enough power in the decision-making process in the UP compared to the general seat members. A new act of 2009 has allowed women members to work in different UP committees through reserved provisions. It provides opportunities for elected women to be the adviser of Ward Shava. Also, provide the opportunity to work in Standing Committees (SC), Project Implementation Committees (PIC), budgetary procedures, and different UP development projects. Despite increasing women members' roles in various committees, service provisions, and functions in the UP, women are still far from contributing much to decision-making in the UP's functions. Males dominate the working place, and lack of capacity is considered the main barrier for women. Including women's participation in decision-making is essential because the democratic practice can be assured with the country's total development. So, to find out the present status of women representatives' participation in the decision-making process and the barriers women face at the Union Parishad is necessary to solve the existing barrier to promote women's representation in the local government decision-making process.

Research Question

The main aim of this study is to evaluate the women representatives' participation in the decision-making process of local government; this study presents the following question:

1. Which barriers do Union Parishad women representatives face in the decision-making process?

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are:

1. To illustrate how women representatives (UP's women members) participate in the decision-making process & their participation status at Union Parishad.
2. To find out, the barriers women representatives face in local government's decision-making process.

Rationale of the Study

The constitution of Bangladesh provides equal rights and opportunities to men and women in all aspects of life. However, women are excluded from significant sectors of Bangladesh for socio-economic reasons. The government of Bangladesh has taken various kinds of measures and policies over the few decades to make effective participation and empowerment of women so that they could make fruitful steps in the country's development and welfare. After the local government reforms in 2009, women got involved in different positions and responsibilities of local government. By contrast, women's participation is not up to the mark at the Union level. Women's participation in the decision-making process has not only brought a change in women's condition. However, it has also been linked with democracy because it creates an open public arena of discussion participation. A good number of research works have been accomplished on women's empowerment and political participation, but women in decision-making process have not mainly focused. However, limited studies have been conducted on women's participation in the local government's decision-making process. Currently, there are 4480 Union Parishad in Bangladesh, and all these Union Parishad needs to go under research to know the present conditions of women's participation in the local government's decision-making process. So present research is done on women's participation in the decision-making process in the Shiruail Union of Madaripur district. The study can contribute to policy developers and policymakers to introduce further reforms to create much better opportunities for women in local political participation and government functions.

Literature Review

Women's participation in local government in Bangladesh has increased through reserved seats in Union Parishads after 1997 Act and subsequent reforms, including the 2009 local government reforms (Siddiqui, 2005; Tipu, 2018). Participation is generally understood as involvement in decision-making processes that shape development interventions (Ali, 2003; Goswami, 2019). However, despite formal inclusion, women often face socio-cultural and institutional barriers, including

patriarchal family structures, limited education, financial dependence, and male-dominated local political environments, which constrain their active engagement in policymaking (Khan & Ara, 2006; Khan, 2015; Mannan & Merri, 2016).

While women's representation has provided social legitimacy and opportunities to participate in committees and project decisions, their roles are often limited to welfare-oriented or symbolic activities rather than substantive decision-making (Jahan, 1982; Panday, 2013; Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010). Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence on the participation of women in decision-making at specific local contexts, such as Shiruail Union Parishad of ShibcharUpazilla, Madaripur. This study addresses this gap by examining how women representatives crossfunctional and socio-economic barriers to influence decision-making at the grassroots level.

Methodology

This study is mainly based on mixed method (combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods). In this study qualitative method is used for gaining better insight into the theory and practices of women representative's participation in decision-making process of local government. The study is based on Shiruail Union Parishad of ShibcharUpazila under Madaripur district. There are eighteen (18) Union Parishad under Shibcharupazila and Shiruail Union Parishad is one of them. Here, the male population stands at 10,057 and female population stands at 9253 and its literacy rate are 40.90%. And here number of voters 10,957.

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

Purposive sampling techniques were used in this present study for collecting primary data and pre-structured questionnaire was provided in stratified sampling method. In total the respondents were in this study was one hundred and sixteen (116). One hundred and twelve respondents were selected for pre-structured questionnaire interview. There 3 were female representatives of UP, 9 were male representatives of UP, 50 were female stakeholders (voters) of the locality and 50 were male stake holders (voters) of the locality. $50+50=100$ stakeholder's samples were collected from 9 wards of Shiruail Union. Furthermore, four (4) respondents were selected from various organizations like government officials, female politician, chairman of the UP, teacher who have knowledge and interest in gender studies and local government of the study area, based on the principle of purposive sampling. These data were used as KII (Key Informant Interview). The study has gathered relevant secondary data from various sources such as books, articles, journals, newspapers, magazines, online images, reports from various organizations

and UP's documents. Three (3) pre-structured questionnaires were developed and served to conduct the present research. One questionnaire for UP's women representatives, here both close-ended and open-ended questions were used, one questionnaire for UP's male representatives, where close ended questions were served, and one questionnaire for stakeholders of Shiruail Union Parishad (voters), where male and female stakeholders were included in proportional manner and also here close-ended questions were used. The questionnaire of this research was in English but questions were asked to the respondents in Bangla for assistance. There was an attempt to investigate the barriers of women representatives of Union Parishad in the decision-making process. Four (4) people were selected for key informant interviews purposively; they are from Union Parishad, government official, teacher and political activist who have knowledge and interest in gender issues and local government of the study area and also resident of Shiruail Union. For confidentiality, codes were used for most respondents. However, names of public officials interviewed in their official capacity are included where appropriate.

Theoretical Framework

Women's participation and representation in decision-making process, numerical representation and its effect can be related through 'Critical Mass Theory'. Oliver and Marwell (1988) claimed in Critical Mass Theory that, women would achieve solidarity of purpose for their interests and welfare if represent in decision-making. In critical mass theory Thomas (1991) also said that legislatures with high proportions of women introduce and pass more bills on women's issues than legislature with low women representation. This critical mass theory has been used in this present study to relate the conditions of women's participation and numerical representation in the decision-making process. The critical mass theory and its idea are used in the current study because it has been observed that when women representatives of Shiruail Union Parishad participate more in decision-making processes like the budgetary process, resource allocation, development function, and committee system of UP, they are better able to demonstrate local women's (Shiruail Union) needs, demands, and rights as outlined in the local government act of 2009. If they participate more in Shiruail Union Parishad's functions and procedures; they will be able to overcome their barriers more easily.

Walby (1990) argues in 'The theory of Patriarchy' that there are two distinct form of patriarchy that exist in the social world: private patriarchy and public patriarchy. In public patriarchy and in public life women are more collectively separated from power, wealth and influence than men are. This theory of patriarchy is relatable in this study.

In addition, the current research also makes use of the Theory of Patriarchy and its associated idea. From different relevant literature of this study, it is clearly seen that, pattern of patriarchal society, patriarchal mindset and male dominated political party and Union Parishad are the prominent reasons of the barriers of women representative’s participation in decision-making and other activities, Shiruail Union Parishad is not different from the whole country's situation. Women representative of UP in Bangladesh are excluded from the resource distribution, important decision-making, meeting, which are relatable to the ‘Theory of Patriarchy’.

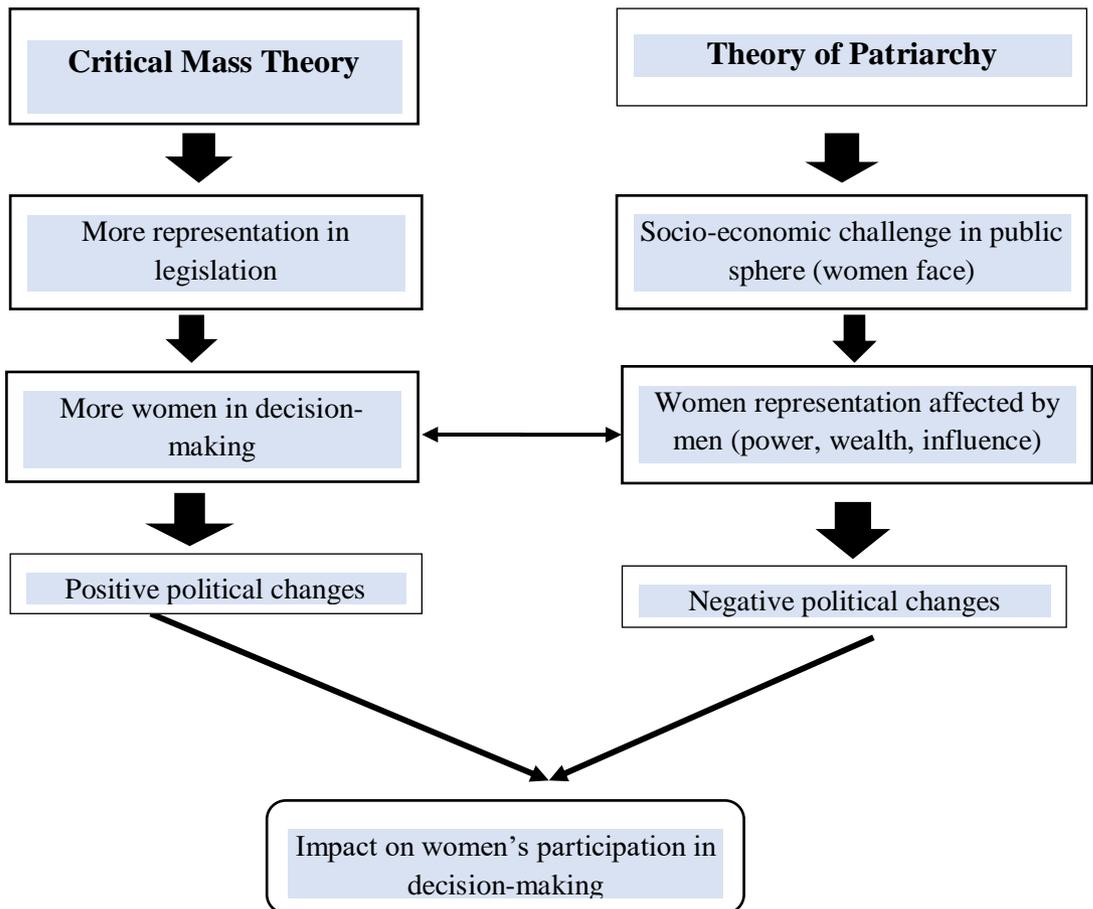


Figure 1: ‘Critical Mass Theory’ and ‘Theory of Patriarchy’ relationship to women’s participation in the decision-making process

Constitutional Basis and Structure of Local Government in Bangladesh

Local government system is a century- old practice in Bangladesh (Amin, 1989). By definition, local government means an intra-sovereign governmental unit within the sovereign state dealing mainly with local affairs, administrated by local authorities and subordinate by the state government (Jahan, 1997). Chapter III and Articles 59(1), 59(2), and 60 of Bangladesh's Constitution make reference to local government. According to article 59(1), local government in every administrative unit of the republic shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with law.

Bangladesh currently has two different sorts of local government institutions one for the rural level and other for the urban level. The local government in rural areas consists three tires: UP at Union level, Upazila Parishad at Upazila level and Zila parishad at District level. On the other hand, the local government in Urban levels comprises two tires: Pourashava and City Corporation. Union Parishad is the lowest tire in the form of local government of Bangladesh. According to Local government division there are 4480 Union Parishad in Bangladesh. The structure and function of Union Parishad are described below according to the local government act-2009. The structure of the Union Parishad in Bangladesh follows a hierarchical framework headed by an elected Chairman. It consists of nine general members, each representing one ward, and three women members elected from reserved seats, each covering three wards. Supporting officials include a Secretary and Village Police, while the Village Court operates under the Union Parishad to address minor local disputes.

Legal Framework & Provisions for Women's Participation in Decision Making Process of Local Government in Bangladesh:

The constitution of Bangladesh recognizes the fundamental rights of citizens, regardless of gender, creed or religion. According to the constitution of Bangladesh article 19(1), article 27, article 28(1), article 28(2), article 29(2), it is clear that the constitution provides a guarantee of equal rights for women and also does not impose any legislative barriers to promoting gender equality.

The Local Government (Union Parishad) ordinance 1976 and 1983 provides the basic legal structure of Union Parishad and gave women representatives seat at Union Parishad. There was no provision regarding the role, power and responsibility of women. From the Local Government Ordinance 1983, three (3) women representatives were nominated by the Union Parishad not by direct vote of the

people. After 1983, the initiative of ‘The Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act, 1997- was remarkable for increasing and promoting women’s participation in different positions and institutions of local government. Under this act, three reserved seats were reserved to women and they were directly by the people. With three (3) wards, each constituency was formed. A number of measures were added to the 2009 Act with the intention of improving the prospects for women.

Ward Shava (Ward Meeting)

The Act of 2009 established the provision of the Ward Shava according to the article 4(1). One Ward Shava will be formed in each of the Wards. Article 5(5) of this Act-2009 mentioned that, members of reserved wards of respective wards shall be advisors of the ward meeting. Article 5(5) of the Act-2009 mentioned that, members of reserved wards of the respective wards shall be advisors of the ward meeting. According to article 6(6) of the Act of 2009, the participation of women members and the general opinion of the members present at the meeting must be taken into consideration when making the Ward Shava decision.

The Chairman Panel

The concept of Chairman Panel under the Act of 2009 also has given more opportunity to work in a leadership and decision-making position. According to the article 33(1), after the formation of the Council, in the first meeting of thirty working days, a panel of three (3) members will be formed, members of the council will choose from among themselves. Provided that the elected 3 chairman panel at least one (1) of the reserved seats will be elected from amongst the female members.

Standing Committee

According to Article 45(3) of the Union Parishad (Rules of Procedure), elected women representatives must hold the chairmanship of at least one-third of all standing committees. Article 45 lists thirteen standing committees that focus on finance, education, health, agriculture, law and order, social welfare, and women and child affairs. These committees are important for managing local governance tasks. As a result, this provision creates a required space for women representatives to lead, letting them have an impact on different areas of Union Parishad work. The Union Parishad Standing Committees (SCs) are extraordinarily powerful tools that can engage with every local issue without being impacted by official law. Consequently, women have special power in standing committees because the chairperson of one-third standing committees will be female members of UP.

Project Distribution

According to article 47(3), one-third of development project for respective wards like- TR KABIKHA, KABITA will be supervised and run by the respective ward reserved female members. Then women representatives also involved in different project distribution programs like Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Food for Work Program (FFWP), Old Age Allowance Program (OAAP) etc.

Findings and Discussion

This research has been conducted to find out the barriers of Women Representatives (WR) of Union Parishad are facing by gathering primary data mainly. As women representatives' participation in Union is not a new incident, it has been started with the Local Government Ordinance 1983. Women's participation in Union-level politics is increasing day by day, but still, in the 21st century, they are facing different barriers to conducting their duties and decision-making. In this research, large portion of respondents 26.72 % were from 38-48 age range, and all the respondents were voters above 18 years. Thus, they are mature enough, and participate in several times voting procedures and active stakeholders. So, they are aware of the functions of Union Parishad and voting. The findings of this research delineated the multifaced barriers encountered by women representatives in Union Parishad, systematically categorizing these challenges into two distinct dimensions; functional barriers of the women representatives of the Union Parishad and socio-economic and other barriers.

Functional Barrier of the Women Representatives of the UP

Area of participation	Participation of women				Participation of Men			
	High	Moderate	Low	No	High	Moderate	Low	No
In committee as chairperson of UP	0%	0%	0%	100%	22.22%	0%	0%	77.78%
Development Functions of UP	0%	0%	100%	0%	11.11%	77.78%	11.11%	0%
Budget Making Process of UP	0%	0%	0%	100%	11.11%	88.89%	0%	0%
Relief Programs of UP	0%	33%	66.67%	0%	88.89%	11.11%	0%	0%
Participation in Local Arbitration	0%	0%	33.33%	66.67%	77.78%	22.22%	0%	0%
Participations in Ward Shava	0%	0%	0%	100%	88.89%	11.11%	0%	0%
Participation in Project distribution of UP	33.33%	33.33%	33.34%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%

Unexpectedly, the research discovered during fieldwork that there is no women representative serving as committee chair. However, according to the local government act-2009, One-third of the chairpersonship of the Union Parishad Committee has to give to Women Representatives. Different development functions are done by UP every year, and these development functions are implemented through many UP meetings and discussions. Up's development functions including: maintenance of roads, bridges, culverts, canals, drainage systems, agricultural projects, electricity, and other projects. The present study and numerical data show that 100% of women representatives low participate in the development function. Surprisingly, the findings of this study indicate that none of the female members have ever been involved in the budget formulation process. The research findings indicate that women representatives' participation in various functions of the Union Parishad, such as relief programs, local arbitration, and project distribution remains at a moderate to low level. Although they do participate in these activities, their involvement is far from satisfactory or fully effective. Moreover, the study reveals that there is no participation of women representatives in the *ward shava*, reflecting a significant gap in their inclusion in grassroots decision-making processes.

Socio-economic and other barriers for Women Representatives to participate in Decision Making Process of UP

According to the respondents Socio economic barrier's scenario that affect the decision-making process of UP are shown in the following box

Barrier/ Factors	High	Medium	Low	Never
Male dominated political organization	75.89%	16.07%	8.04%	0%
Influence of male guardian	79.46%	16.96%	3.58%	0%
Lack of family support	70.54%	18.75%	10.71%	0%
Economic dependence	80.36%	17.86%	1.78%	0%
Inadequate UP's Salary	91.96%	8.04%	0%	0%
Minimal Educational Background	49.11%	16.96%	31.25%	2.68%
Lack of consciousness about women's right	88.39%	8.04%	3.57%	0%
Lack of Skill	70.54%	21.43%	8.03%	0%
Lack of co-operation from Colleague	79.46%	12.5%	0%	8.04%

The data indicate that women representatives of Union Parishad face various socio-economic barriers which limit their effective participation in local governance

decision-making process. Among the identified barriers, inadequate UP's salaries (91.96%) and economic dependence (80.36%) emerged as significant constraints. These factors show that financial insecurity greatly limits women's autonomy and involvement in decision-making. A substantial number of respondents (79.46%) also noted the impact of male guardians as a major barrier, which reflects the ongoing control of patriarchal systems over women's political actions.

Additionally, male-dominated political organizations (75.89%) and lack of family support (70.54%) were reported as key barriers. This shows that social norms and family expectations still undermine women's leadership potential. The lack of skills (70.54%) also indicates a need for programs to improve women's administrative and decision-making abilities.

Another important issue is the lack of awareness about women's rights (88.39%). This highlights persistent gender stereotypes and limited understanding of gender equality in rural governance. While minimal educational background (49.11%) was rated less frequently as a "high" barrier, combining medium and low ratings shows that education still plays a vital role in shaping women's confidence and involvement. Finally, a lack of cooperation from colleagues (79.46%) demonstrates institutional gender bias within the Union Parishad environment. This often prevents women representatives from participating in important discussions and responsibilities.

Overall, the findings suggest that women's participation in decision-making is hindered by a mix of economic dependence, patriarchal attitudes, and institutional barriers. Together, these elements restrict their ability to serve as effective and independent representatives in local governance. This finding also present data from KII (Key Informant Interview) about women representatives.

Shurab Uddin Matubbor, a 52-years-old Chairman of Shiruail Union Parishad, positively expressed in opinion first. He stated that,

It is encouraging to see that women members in my Union Parishad are more educated than the majority of the male members, and women members are more conscious than before. One of our women members is an active member of the ShibcharUpazilapolitics. Women representatives are mainly involved in social activities like education, women related-issues, and child marriage discouragement. They are also sometimes involved in the infrastructural development of the Shiruail Union, listing destitute and VGD beneficiaries. The women representatives of our

UP, not only our UP whole country's situation, WR get less allocation than their male colleagues, as a three (3) wards representative female member cannot get the equal allocation of resources or projects than the male representative of the single ward. I think the patriarchal societal barrier and also not being well- skilled is their working barrier at UP.

Adhir Chandra Sarkar, 49 years old, Headmaster of '107 No. Char Kakair Sahara Primary School' and the resident of 3 no. Ward of Shiruail Union Parishad gave a positive opinion about women representatives of Shiruail Union Parishad. He stated, *Women representatives of Shiruail Union Parishad are supportive, and they come to us for our needs. Furthermore, they are educated, and they have basic literacy skills. However, we cannot see them serving as chairpersons or in financial decision-making. They are dependent on Chairman's decision and command. Here, women representatives get very few projects and allocations, which is insufficient to help her constituency. Rural women are lagging today and are not conscious of their rights. They are dependent on their husband's decisions most of the time and cannot run their duty of UP individually.*

Jahid Hossen, 40 years old and Secretary of Shiruail Union Parishad, talked about the struggle of rural women of Bangladesh and the reality of a patriarchal society during the discussion and interview session with him. He stated that, *In our Union Parishad, women representatives are active, and they are literate but do not have proper involvement in the decision-making sector, such as the committee system, ward shava, and budgeting process. Sometimes they don't have the necessary knowledge or expertise to manage their duty and do not know their rights, laws, and acts of Union Parishad. I think a male-dominated working place and not getting cooperative male colleagues is a prominent barrier for WR of UP.*

Mrs.Sayma, 39 years old and a teacher of 'Rizia Begum Mohila College Shibchar' and women political activist, talked about the conditions of women representatives of Union Parishad. She stated that, *I am a teacher of Social Work and also a women political activist of ShibcharUpazila of Madaripur district, so I am close to women representatives of our Union Parishad and can see and realize the actual activities of women representatives of UP of our locality. It is a matter of hope that the conditions of WRs at Union Parishad are upgrading more than a decade before, and many of our women representatives are now literate and have a minimum level of knowledge and skill. But till today, women representatives do not have 100% involvement in the*

decision-making process, resource distribution, important meetings, and committees. And I have real experience in getting election support; women representatives have to show their father's or husband's wealth, affiliation, power, not their capability or quality most of the time. Women representatives tend to participate in simple activities and, under the subordination and direction of their male colleagues, do not play any role as the head of any committee. We see that they are mainly involved in social welfare activities such as child marriage, helping to get VGD cards, and locality programs.

These key informants are familiar with how women representatives' function and carry out their current responsibilities. After discussing and analyzing their views and opinions, these ideas have come out that women representatives of Shiruail Union-perform only welfare activities under sub-ordinance and direction of their male colleagues, male-dominated working environment also barrier, women representatives do not have up to date skill, sometimes they do not have proper family support (husband, In-laws members) and do not give value to their aspirations, capabilities whereas the father's husband's wealth and power are given priority.

Summary of Findings

Women representatives' participation in local government decision-making level is not satisfactory. Almost every time, 100% of women representatives face various barriers in UP's decision-making process in various ways. Even though their educational qualification compared to male representatives, they cannot play a vital role in the decision-making process due to our existing functional barrier, lack of implementation of the existing law, lack of adequate law & lack of proper training and counseling of women as well as male representatives. Besides this, social & economic barrier is the most crucial drawbacks to women representatives' active participation & decision-making process in local government. Our patriarchal culture, male-dominated political organization, lack of political awareness of rural people, economic dependency, and ancient phenomenon towards women are the most critical drawbacks for women representatives' participation in the local government decision-making process, found throughout this research.

Recommendations

Some measures must be taken to fulfill government initiatives about improving women's representation in the local government decision-making process. The existing rules & laws of local government regarding women representatives have to be reformed according to the current scenario; also, the roles and responsibilities of

the women representatives should be clearly defined. Moreover, local government laws must be implemented and appropriately monitored by the authority. Furthermore, various opportunities for leadership training & training regarding skill development should be given to women to encourage them and improve their skills. In addition, regular research activity about women's participation in the local government decision-making process is essential to find the problem and solution within the period of time.

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