

Social Disability of Women Empowerment in True Sense through Union Parishad in Bangladesh

Fakhrul Islam¹ & Md. OhidurZaman²

1 Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, Shahjajal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh.

2 Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Bangladesh University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Abstract: Government of Bangladesh took several policies to empower women in true sense but still unable to ensure the rights of women in every aspects of their life. Not only rights of general women are negligible but also rights of women government officers and rights of women people's representatives are insignificant in some aspect of their working area. This research work focuses on present scenario of empowerment of women people's representative of local government in the context of Union Parishad of Bangladesh. Moreover, this study tries to find out what should be actual initiatives to empower women members of Union Parishad. For this study five Union Parishad areas of BishwemberpurUphazila in Sunamgonj district have been selected purposively. Primary data have been collected from the reserved women members of these Union Parishads. And empirical data show that women member of Union Parishad are not really empower yet. They face problems both in their working place and house to perform their duties and meal members of Union Parishad are still not interested to provide them their full rights and power. These deprive women need friendly working environment and more effective government policies to achieve their true rights and power as a member of Union Parishad.

Key Words: Local Government, Women Empowerment, Social Disability, Government Policy.

I. Introduction

Historically women's participation in voting was established long ago but women's participation in the political and national movement has been negligible. Women constitute about 49 percent of the total population in Bangladesh¹. But their participation in the political process in Bangladesh is extremely limited. Despite various efforts the role of women in political affair has not yet been improved. This is happen due to the rise of gender inequality in the political process². Although both the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition in Parliament of Bangladesh are women, their high positions in politics do not reflect the whole scenario of women's position in politics of this country. Despite various efforts the role of women in political affair has not yet improved. This is happening due to the rise of gender inequality in the political process and the social disability in a sense, the way society is organized, rather than by a person's impairment or difference. It is possible to solve by taking proper strategy to empower women from bottom to apex level when barriers are removed, disabled people can be independent and equal in society and politics, with choice and control over their own way.

Union Parishad (UP) as a rural local government unit in this context has been playing major role to empower women. It enhances the potential of women in socio-political context³. The Union Parishad is such a political platform which gives amply opportunity and necessary space to women to participate in social, economic, and political activities at the grassroots level, even at the remote corner of the country⁴. The empowerment of women is to develop women's potentiality to control their own life, position and environment to greater extent⁵. The role of women in decision-making is one of the most important questions for consideration in the movement for their empowerment⁶.

Women did not have the rights to vote in election to rural bodies till 1956 and there was provision for nominated women members in local government bodies. The Local Government Bill 1997 has set a landmark in the history of political empowerment for rural women in Bangladesh. This bill has procession for direct election in the three reserved sets for women in the union council. It was the greatest step towards the empowerment of women in Bangladesh. Direct election of women is likely to establish link between women and community. Elected directly by the voters, the women representatives will be in a better position to actively participate in the decision making process. The social problem is that politics is male dominant and androcentric where is usually slim possibility for the integration and reflection of women's perceptions and needs in state politics that are determined, directed and controlled by men. As women are not adequately represented in political decision-making, issues of public policy relating to women's equality and empowerment remain under the competence of men⁷. In order to empower women in true sense political awareness, consciousness, participation and motivation

should be inculcated among women at the all level especially at local level. So, it is highly needed to observe the process of women empowerment in local level especially at the Union level.

This study aim is to examine and describe the emerging real situation in practice of empowerment of reserved women members of Union Parishad (UP) of rural Bangladesh and specific objectives of the study are –

1. to illustrate the problems associate with performing their responsibilities as a member of Union Parishad (UP)
2. to endow with a guidelines for removing existing problems at the grass-roots level.

II. Constitutional Provision For Local Government And Women

The constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh has recognized the women as an important issue for development. In every sphere of state or government women are being considered as an integrated part. Besides, there are several provisions for local government institution. According to the Constitution of peoples Republic of Bangladesh-The state shall encourage local government institution composed of representative areas concerned and in such institutions special representation shall be giver, as far as possible, to peasant’s workers and women⁸. This Constitution also mandates that - steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life⁹. This provision ensure establishment of local government at the local level with the local people and also stated that women must have opportunists to participate in every sector of notional life. According to the Constitution, -Nothing in this article shall prevent the state making special provision in favor of women or for the advance of any backward section of citizen¹⁰. The Local Government Act of 1997 had been formulated with the provision of, “(1) Union Parishad shall consist of a chairman and twelve members including three exclusively reserved for women. (2) There shall be reserved three seats exclusively for women members in each Union Parishad, hereinafter referred to as reserved seats who shall be elected by direct election on the basis of adult franchise in accordance with the provision of ordinance and rules, provided that nothing in this subsection shall prevent a women from being elected to any of the nine general seats”¹¹. In the revised union council system each of the women constituency consists of three general wards i.e. women have a large constituency and bigger responsibility in terms of population and voters¹². Women are being considered as an important factor of development. There for, Union Parishad system brings them into the main track of political arena to empower them at the base level. The present Union Parishad structure is shown in following figure-1.

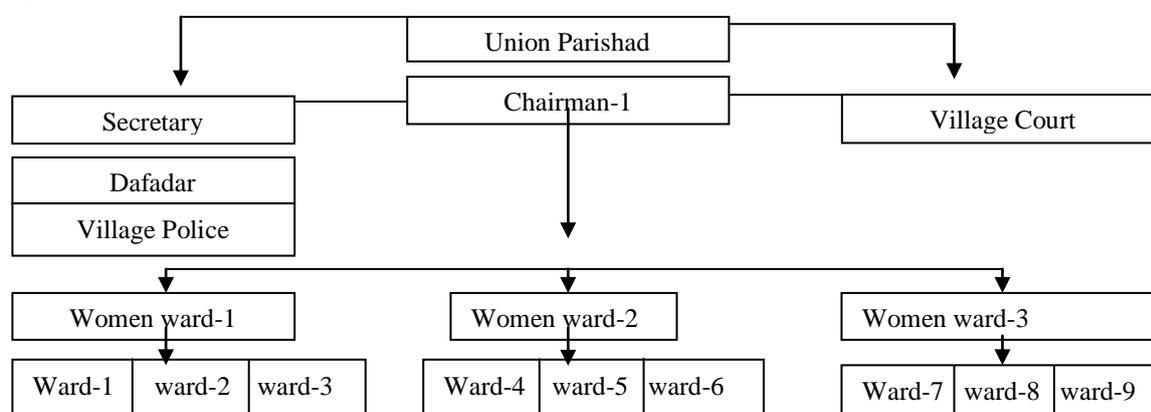


Fig-1: The structure of present Union Parishad system

Source: Ali, Md. Almas, 2003, *The Role of Union Council in Empowering Women at the Grass-Roots level: An Inquiry into the Problem and Prospects*, Miaazze Publication, Dhaka, P-43.

It appears from the figure that women have a large constituency that is composed of three wards. Moreover women have an equal chance to compete with male directly and nothing can restrain them from this provision.

Social Disability and Women Empowerment; Conceptual Perspectives

Disability is a universal element in the human condition to which no one is immune that is the result of the interaction between people living with impairments and barriers in the physical, attitudinal, communication and social environment. It is not the inability to walk that keeps a person from entering a building by themselves but the stairs that are inaccessible that keeps a wheelchair-user from entering that building. Many people in the Bangladesh view disability as a curse and a cause of embarrassment to the family. In Bangladesh,

there have been only a few systemic interventions to raise awareness of persons with disabilities at the community level¹³. The social disability indicates systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion by society (purposely or inadvertently) that mean society is the main contributory factor in disabling people.

Women empowerment is the most important and pronounced issue of the present world¹⁴. It is a combine result of different factors. It used to measure woman's both qualitative and quantitative change of women in the society. Empowerment means- to give somebody the power or authority to do something; to give somebody more control over their life or the situation they are in. Furthermore, empowerment can be defined as having a number of qualities such as, decision-making power, access to information and resources, to make choices, assertiveness, learning to think critically, learning the conditioning; seeing things differently; e.g., learning about and expressing anger, not feeling alone; feeling part of a group and Understanding that people have rights¹⁵.

Women empowerment is a combined result of different factor like decision making, power, mobility, reproductive rights, ownership of assets, participation, easiness, etc.¹⁶. Sen and Grower expressed their view as "women empowerment is the transformation of the structures of subordination including change in the law, civil codes, property, inheritance rights, control over women's bodies and labor and the social legal institutions that endorse male control"¹⁷.

KamlaBhasin the most prominent researcher expressed the following concept regarding women empowerment;

1. Recognizing women's contribution, women knowledge.
2. Helping women fight their own fears and feeling of inadequacy and inferiority.
3. Woman changing their self- respect and self-dignity
4. Women controlling their own bodies.
5. Woman becoming economically independent and self- reliant.
6. Woman controlling resources like land and property
7. Reducing women's burden of work especially within the home.
8. Creating and strengthening women's groups and organizations.
9. Promoting qualities of nurturing, caring gentleness, not just in¹⁸.

III. Research Methods

This is a descriptive study where survey method has been used for collecting data and information. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods has been applied for the study. In this study, qualitative approach has been used to analyze the opinion of women members to examine empowerment scenario of women in true sense focusing on existing limitations at local level. This study has used quantitative method to sort out of different variables of democracy promotion.

In this study, data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data have been collected from the representatives through face-to-face interview by using a structured questionnaire which has been framed by using both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Primary data were collected from 15 individuals, who were reserved women members of 5 Union Parishad of BishwemberpurUpazila. All the women members of each Union were selected as unite of analyses of the study. The questionnaire for primary source was pre-tested before collecting data. The pertinent secondary information was accumulated from the published books, relevant articles, newspapers, different position papers and relevant websites. Besides, a significant portion of the information has been gathered from literature review. Finally, collected data have been characteristically classified, and then statistical method (e.g. percentage analysis) has been applied on them. Quantitative data have been presented on frequency distribution tables and showed the responses in percentage.

IV. Data Analysis & Result Discussion:

Table-1: Age of Women Representatives

Years	N	(%)
30-39	3	20
40-49	10	66.66
50- Above	2	13.33
Total	15	100

Source: Field Data (Collected from BishwamberUpazilla, Sunamganj, November-December 2009)

The selected women representatives were of 30 to 53 years age. More than sixty percent women belong to above middle age group 66.66% (40 to 49 years) and only 20% is middle age (30 to 39 years). Among all of the representatives only 13.33% are above 50 year age.

Table-2: Marital Status of Women Representatives

Marital Status	N	(%)
Married	13	86.66
Un-married	0	0
Widowed	2	13.33
	15	100

Source: Field Data (Collected from BishwamberUpazilla, Sunamganj, November-December 2009)

It is appear from the table-2 that out of 15 women representatives 13 as 86.66% are married and 2 members as 13.33% are widowed. But there are no unmarried women have been found as member of Union Parishad

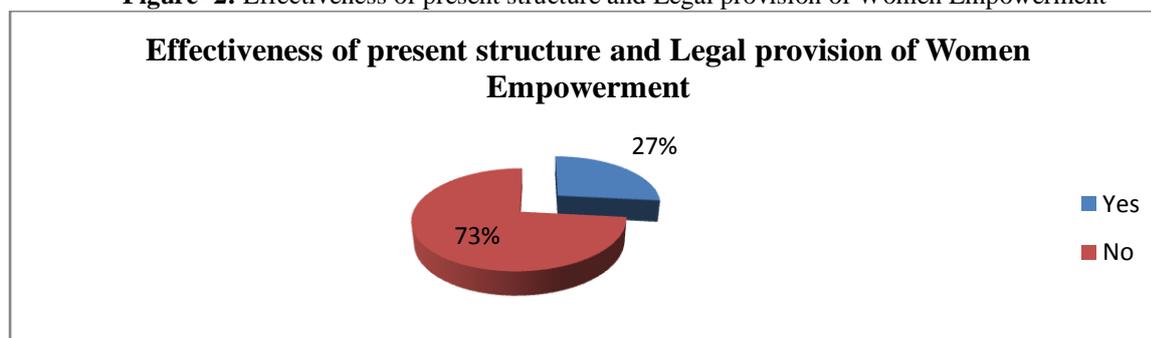
Table-3: Literacy Level of Women Representatives

Literacy Level	N	(%)
Literate	2	13.33
Primary	5	33.33
Up to Class VIII	7	46.66
SSC	1	6.66
	15	100

Source: Field Data (Collected from BishwamberUpazilla, Sunamganj, November-December 2009)

Empirical data of the table-3 shows that out of 15 women members 7 as 46.66% are up to class VIII and 5 members as 33.33% are Primary level and 2 member as 13.33% are literate only, and only one member has been found who has passed S.S.C level.

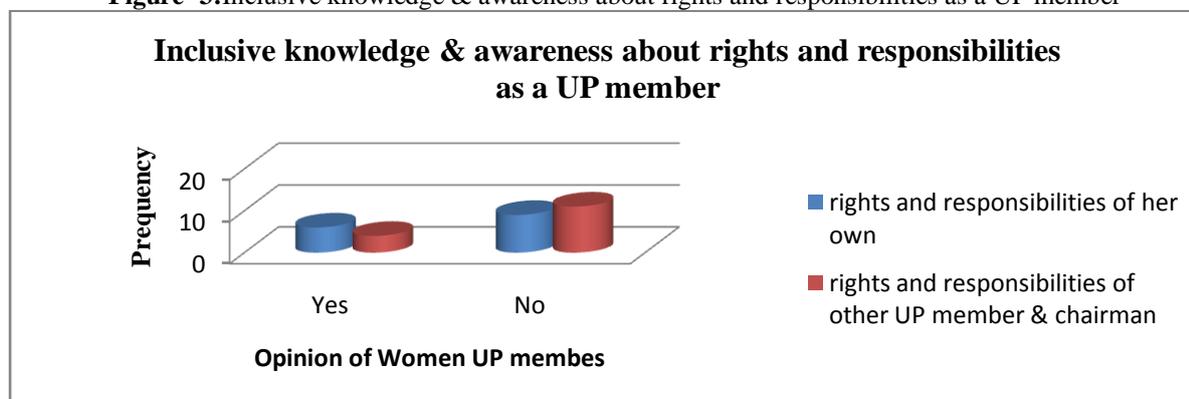
Figure- 2: Effectiveness of present structure and Legal provision of Women Empowerment



Source: Field Data (Collected from BishwamberUpazilla, Sunamganj, November-December 2009)

It appears from the figure-2, most of the women do not think that present structure and legal provision are not appropriate and effective. Among the representatives 73% (Frequency- 4) responded as such as aforementioned and the rest (27%, Frequency- 4) of responded that it is effective. This less effective structure and Legal provision is one of the most responsible causes for gender inequality in Union Parishad.

Figure- 3: Inclusive knowledge & awareness about rights and responsibilities as a UP member



Source: Field Data (Collected from BishwamberUpazilla, Sunamganj, November-December 2009)

Figure-3 simply shows that, respondents do not have inclusive knowledge and awareness about their rights and responsibilities as a Union Parishad member. Only six members among fifteen members know about

their own rights and responsibilities, where only four know about the rights and responsibilities about other members of Union Parishad. This unconscious situation deprive them from them from their real rights and responsibilities.

Table-4: Problems Faced by Women Members in Attending Union Parishad Meeting.

Problems	Yes		No	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
Distance and Security	1	6.66	14	93.33
Lack of Information	1	6.66	14	93.33
Their views are ignored	12	80	3	20
No problem	3	20	12	80

Source: Field Data (Collected from BishwamberUpazilla, Sunamganj, November-December 2009)

According to table-4, the data shows that women member's opinion or views are not accepted at the meeting of Union Parishad. Out of total 93.33% said that their views in Union Parishad are not accepted. Another problem is distance and security for the women members but 93.33% said that it does not influence them to keep out themselves from the responsibilities. Lack of information may be problem to attend meeting in Union Parishad. But 93.33% women said that they are being informed properly at the time of meeting. Among all of the representatives only 20% said that there is no problems exist in Union Parishad but the rest of them do not think as such. It has been found that only because of being women member they are being ignored in Union Parishad meeting.

Table-5: Problems in Performing Responsibilities as Women Members

Problems	Yes		No	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
Not being legally empowered	11	73.33	4	26.66
Unpleasant behavior of male member	12	80	3	20
Limited work experience	4	26.66	11	73.33
Less education	7	46.66	8	53.33

Source: Field Data (Collected from BishwamberUpazilla, Sunamganj, November-December 2009)

The table-5 shows problems in performing responsibilities as women members. Out of the total 73.33% member said that they are not being legally empowered. While performing responsibility unpleasant behavior of male representatives is become common incident in Union Parishad. Among all of women members 80% said that male colleagues do not show good conduct to them. Limited work experience may drive them into problems but 73.33% do not think that it is creating problem to them. Out of total member above fifty percent said that they are not facing problems due to less education. They think that they are able to solve the problems by applying their empirical knowledge.

Table-6: Problems Faced by Women Members arising from their Own Families

Problems	Yes		No	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
Getting less time due to involvement in household work	13	86.66	2	13.33
Facing obstructions from husband/ other family members	4	26.66	11	73.33

Source: Field Data (Collected from BishwamberUpazilla, Sunamganj, November-December 2009)

As we have seen from the empirical data that most of the members are married and they are certainly house wife. They are compelled to accomplish most of the domestic chores. As a result they get less time comparatively male representatives. Out of the total representatives 86.66% said as such. But 73.33% member said that they are not being forced by their husband or other family members.

Table-7: Opinion of Women to sorts out existing problems for empowerment.

Existing problems for empowerment.	N	%
Patriarchy mentality	1	6.66
Ineffectiveness of present social structure	3	20
Lack of consciousness and qualification of women	5	33.33
Social stigma and superstition	2	13.20
Religious orthodox and abuseness	1	6.66
Lack of proper initiatives of government	3	20
Total	15	100

Source: Field Data (Collected from BishwamberUpazilla, Sunamganj, November-December 2009)

It appears from the table-7, women sorted out their own problems and backwardness to empowerment. Their thinking is more rational because they identify the reasons why they are out of power structure. Out of the

total members 33.33% responded that lack of consciousness and qualifications women are not being empowered. Ineffectiveness of present social structure and Lack of proper initiatives of government have been identified by the 20% member respectively. Patriarchy mentality, Social stigma and superstition and Religious orthodox and abuseness are also sorted out as the major problems of women empowerment by the women representatives.

Figure-4: Priority ranking of taking policy to empower the UP women members

Policy Initiative to empower women UP members	Ranking							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Ensuring the equal participation in decision making to all UP Women Members								
Arranging effective training for UP Women Members to enhance their potentiality								
Ensuring friendly working environment to every UP Women Members								
Ensuring security for women UP members when performing responsibilities outside the Union Parishad								
Ensuring equal rights to express opinion in making budget								
Providing logistic support in emergency situation to full fill their responsibilities								
Providing equal rights to participate in various programs with development organization.								
Reformulate the government law to enhance participation of women in every aspect of UP program.								

Source: Field Data (Collected from BishwamberUpazilla, Sunamganj, November-December 2009)

According to the Priority ranking, women suggest their opinion to take effective policy for improving their condition. Firstly, they said if government policies could ensure the equal participation in decision making they could actively participant in the development work of Union Parishad. Secondly, they seek friendly working environment within and outside of the Union Parishad. Thirdly, they believed they will be empowered if they got the chance to provide opinion in budget. Fourthly, they want to pursue equal rights to participate in various programs with development organization. Fifthly, they emphasized to arranging effective training for UP Women Members to enhance their potentiality. Sixthly, they felt there are many gaps in present laws regarding to women empowerment in Union Parishad. They said reformulation of present government law will be effective to properly empower the reserved women members of Union Parishad. Seventhly, they think in emergency period due to lack or logistic support they can't play they role appropriately. They demanded logistic support in emergency situation to full fill their responsibilities. And finally, they agreed they are not always secure when they are outside of the Union Parishad Complex. They claim ensuring security for women UP members when performing responsibilities outside the Union Parishad

V. Conclusion And Recommendations:

The overall age patterns of the representatives as can be seen that most of the women representatives above middle age. But relatively younger women are not coming forward to take over leadership at the Union Parishad. It is one of the major problems in rural area that the young generations are reluctant to take part in political activities. Rural society like Bangladesh married is universally acceptable as leader of due to prevailing religious and socio-cultural norms and values. Unmarried women are strictly confined to come forward and dealing with people. This is happening due to social bindings and stigma which is found very common social barrier at rural level. However, education is considered to be an essential pre-condition in the development of human qualities. As regards the educational status of women representatives are very low. There is no any person here who comes with higher degree. Therefore, it can be strongly argued that low level of literacy undoable act as one of the strongest hindrance to women's empowerment.

Local government is an integral part of the whole governance process which performs many, similar functions such as, agriculture, health, education infrastructure development etc., within their legal jurisdiction (Islam,F.2015)¹⁹. But the lower level of local government system, Union Parishad plays important role to develop the rural structure. To empower women from grass-root level Bangladesh government ensure the participation of women in local government by establishing law. By the law of constitution there shall be reserved three seats exclusively for women members in each Union Parishad. But participation of women in lowest tire of local government do not show the real scenario of women empowerment because empirical data show that woman members of Union Parishad are unable to perform their duties. Various social and cultural obstacles are mainly play important role to make them incapable. Firstly, woman members of Union Parishad

are not educated enough. So they cannot perform well as like as other male members. Secondly, they properly do not know about their duties, even they are unconscious about their rights. Thirdly, they can't always perform easily because of long distance of Union Parishad Complex, lack of security and lack of information. In emergency situation like disaster they face these problems more seriously. Fourthly, sometimes household responsibilities and abstractions of husband & family members make their job more difficult as a member of Union Parishad. Fifthly, working environment of Union Parishad is not friendly enough to them. In regular meeting their view and opinion have been ignored by chairman and other male members. They can't establish their opinion in any major decision of Union Parishad. Because of legal weakness male members and chairman disregard their participations.

Therefore, in true sense female members of union Parishad are not empowered yet. To ensure the empowerment of women in grass-root level of local government system, Bangladesh government should consider the mentioned problems of this study. Though this research is conducted in a small scale, government should run more research program to find out the major problems around the country. From this empirical study following recommendations would be effective for actual women empowerment, and these are:

1. Awareness program & Proper training related to Union Parishad activities should be conducted at the beginning of Union Parishad term.
2. Equal distribution of project between women representatives and make representative should be ensured.
3. Women representative's participation in every committee and meeting should be equally ensured.
4. Promote equality between male representatives and women representatives in sharing of power, budget and decision making at all levels.
5. Social stigma, religious orthodox and all sorts of superstition and any other obstacle must be obliterated towards the development of women.

Reference

- [1]. Peter, Jakirul Islam and Mia, Md. Idris; Women Empowerment and Poverty Alleviation: A Study of RD-12 Project Under BRDB in Jamalpur District, Journal of Rural Development Vol.33 no. BARD Comilla, Bangladesh, pp.27-40(2006)
- [2]. Hossienie Abdullah Al-, Chowdhury Mohammad Shahjahan and Islam Fakhrul, Empowering rural women in bangladesh: the role of union parishad as a local self-government body, SUST, Journal of Public Administration, Vol.2, pp51-52 (2009)
- [3]. Hossain, Maleque, Anwar and Talukder, Abdul Maleque, Women Particaipation in Local Government: Expectations and Performances- A Case Study of Union Parishad, Journal of Public Administration Quarterly vol. 36, September 2005.pp.49-63 (2005)
- [4]. Ali, Md. Almas, The Role of Union Council in Empowering Women at the Grass-Roots level: An Inquiry into the Problems and Prospects,MiazeePublicaitions, Dhaka, pp.1-44(2006)
- [5]. Jahan, Rayhan Akter and Mahmud, Dr. Reza Hasan, Bangladesh NarirKomotayonayerUtsho: AkteMotamothBithikPorgaluchona, Journal of Public Administration Quarterly, Vol.23, pp51-52(2002)
- [6]. Khan, Md. MostafizurRahman and AraFardaus, Women, Participation and Empowerment in Local Government: Bangladesh Union Parishad perspective,Asian Affairs, Vol. 29, No. 1:73-00, (2006)
- [7]. Zaman Farhana, The Nature of Political Empowerment and Gender in Local Governance: A Comparative Study of Dhaka City Corporation and Narayangonj Municipality, Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology, Volume 4. No.1(2007)
- [8]. The Constitution of Bangladesh(Article- 9)(2015)
- [9]. The Constitution of Bangladesh (Article- 10)(2015)
- [10]. The Constitution of Bangladesh (Article- 28(4))(2015)
- [11]. Muhit, Abulmal Abdul, Zalye&ZalyeShorker- StanioShorker-erAktiPorgaluchona,University Press Ltd. Red Crescent Building Dhaka(2002)
- [12]. Ali, Md. Almas, The Role of Union Council in Empowering Women at the Grass-Roots level: An Inquiry into the Problems and Prospects,MiazeePublicaitions, Dhaka, pp.1-44(2006)
- [13]. Titumir, Rashed Al Mahmud and Hossain, Jakir, Disability in Bangladesh: Prevalence, Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice, UnnayanOnneeshan, Dhaka (2005)
- [14]. Jahan, Rayhan Akter and Mahmud, Dr. Reza Hasan, Bangladesh NarirKomotayonayerUtsho: AkteMotamothBithikPorgaluchona, Journal of Public Administration Quarterly, Vol.23, pp51-52(2002)
- [15]. http://www.power2u.org/articles/empower/working_def.html (Accesses Date: 15 january,2015)
- [16]. BiswasTapash Kumar and Kabir M., Women's Empowerment and Current use of Contraception in Bangladesh; Asia- Pacific, Journal of Rural Development vol.XII, December, p.1-2(2002)

- [17]. Mannan, Md. Abdul and Mary, ShamsunnaharKhnom,Nari O RajniteeAboshorProkashona, 46/1 Hemendrodush Road, Shitrapu,Dhaka(2006)
- [18]. Quddus, Abdul and ShakilJahirulHaque, Bangladesher Artho-ShamagicPrayecapoteNarirKomotayan; Shommosha O Shombabona, BatayanProkash, Banglabazar, Dhaka, pp.55-98(2003)
- [19]. Islam, F. (2015). The role of local self-government institution for deepening democracy at the grass-root level in Bangladesh. *Journal of Public Administration and Policy Research*, 7(2), 29-38.
http://www.academicjournals.org/article/article1426952098_Islam.pdf