

Women's Representative posts are all smoke and mirrors

Hasan Mehedi, Dainik Bangla, 14 February 2023

Upazila Parishad Chairman and Vice Chairman (Responsibilities, Duties and Financial Benefits) Regulations clearly state the responsibilities of female vice chairmen. She 'can be chairman of more than one standing committee; If the post of chairman is vacant, they can serve as temporary chairman.'

Although such potentiality has been given through the policies, the real picture of the women representatives working at the grassroots level was depicted to us by Rokeya Begum, the female vice-chairman of Pangsha Upazila of Rajbari. She was elected four years ago. She is yet to have an office room or place to sit at the Upazila Parishad. She complained that the local Member of Parliament controls everything. As a result, she could not do anything so far. This elected public representative did not get any solution despite complaining to the District Commissioner and the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO).

The female vice chairman of Kishoreganj Sadar Upazila, Masuma Akhtar, expressed similar regret regarding her position. She said, 'Actually, there was no point in creating this post. It is all smoke and mirrors! The female vice-chairman has no signatory authority. A small allowance is provided. Although we are invited to various events, we cannot go due to a lack of vehicle facilities. As there is no allocation of funds, I can't even go to the event and gift anything to the people who elected us by voting.'

Women representatives from all parts of the country have similar complaints. They say that the law and regulations have defined the scope of work of woman public representatives. Despite this, most of the country's women representatives do not actually have any work, except to give formal opinions on official work. Objections were raised regarding this but it fell to deaf ears. As a result, although the law has given several powers to women representatives, it is not being implemented. A similar situation exists in the Union Parishads under the local government system.

How many women representatives are there?

The election commission announced election schedules for 4,138 union councils in 2021. 4,114 union council had their poles. However, the commission does not have information on how many women representatives have been elected. The local government department also has no information about this.

A related source says that women have been elected as chairpersons in at least 50 UPs. Among them, 41 were members of the Bangladesh Awami League, one was from the Jatiya Party and others won as independent candidates. Earlier, 26 women chairpersons had won the six-phase UP elections from February to June 2016.

The Upazila Parishad Act, 1998 and the National Information Bulletin state 'Upazila Parishad shall be constituted with an elected chairman, a male vice chairman, a female vice chairman, the chairman and reserved women members of each UP and the mayor of the municipality, in case the area of the Upazila has one.'

According to the data of the National Information and Local Government Department, there are now 495 Upazilas and 492 Upazila Parishads and 4,571 Union Parishads in the country. Therefore, there are at least 492 women vice chairpersons in these councils and a total of 13,713 women UP members, three each in reserved seats in each UP. Other than this, no figures of how many women have become public representatives through direct competition for Upazila chairman and UP member posts apart from the reserved seats were found.

Therefore, it is evident that there are at least 15 thousand women representatives in the country. Dainik Bangla's investigation suggests that various kinds of obstacles have turned this large number of women public representatives into 'toothless tigers.'

Complaints, regret and disappointment

Women representatives complain that despite the increase in the number of women in the local government structure, they are not being empowered. Although the government distinguishes the duties of public representatives by regulations, it is limited to papers.

Women representatives say, even if elected, in most cases, women representatives are not able to fulfil their duties due to various equations of local politics, dominance and obstacles created by the male chairmen. As most of the reserved women members of UP are poorly educated, they have to depend on the chairman and male members to perform their duties. Women UP members of reserved constituencies do not have any knowledge about the responsibilities under the law.

Nazmin Nahar, a member of the reserved seat of Bashbaria Union Parishad No. 8 of Maheshpur Upazila of Jhenaidah District, said, 'We do not have any work as women members. The people of the area recognize us as members. They respect us for that. This is the only thing that we get. All the work of the union is done by the chairman and male members.'

Dainik Bangla investigated the situation of at least 20 female vice chairpersons of the Upazila Parishad and some member-chairmen of the Union Parishad among the women representatives at the grassroots level of the local government. According to the regulations, Upazila women vice chairpersons are in charge of supervising the work of 17 standing committees. It has been observed that although their names were on these committees, they were not informed about the activities.

Upazila Parishad gets 20 per cent of the allocated funds that come to the Upazila under the Test Relief (TR) and Food for Work (Kabikha) program. Out of this, the Upazila chairman gets 8 per cent, UNO 6 per cent and two vice chairmen get the remaining 6 per cent.

Female public representatives have complained that female vice chairmen do not receive the allocated amount if they are not on good terms with the chairman. They also said that if they were not the followers of the same party, the Upazila woman vice chairmen would not be allocated various government funds properly.

Some of the women chairmen of Union Parishads said that even after being elected, they get cornered by local politicians. The male members of the council are also not always cooperative. When given the responsibility of taking care of the male members in developmental work, they do not properly account for the allocated money. For that chairman is held responsible.

Meanwhile, reserved women UP members claim that their power is also hostage to the will of the Union Parishad Chairman. Most of the women members are poorly educated and do not even know about their responsibilities. The male members take advantage of their ignorance and try to manipulate them. As a result, the women members have no other options other than to agree with all the decisions made by the chairman and the male members.

Rekha Parveen, the elected vice chairman of Faridpur's Boalmari Upazila for 15 years, expressed her disappointment at not being able to work according to the law. She said, 'I can't do anything for those who voted for me. In 15 years, I could not even be associated with five development projects. The post of the female vice chairman has been kept only as an ornament.'

What the law says

Upazila Parishad Chairman and Vice Chairman (Responsibilities, Duties and Financial Benefits) Regulations state the duties of female vice-chairmen, they can be chairpersons of more than one standing committee; If the post of chairman is vacant, they can serve as temporary chairman.

Apart from this, her duties include taking measures to ensure health, nutrition, family planning and maternal welfare services; Provision of sanitation and safe drinking water supply; Identifying actions for the development of women and children; Undertaking development projects to establish and develop cottage and small scale industries; Adoption and implementation of self-initiative programs for self-employment and poverty alleviation; Building public opinion against women and child abuse, dowry and child marriage; development of livestock and fisheries; Supervise the work of cooperative societies and private voluntary organizations; and Make proposals and recommendations regarding participation in social welfare work. Other than these if the government and the chairman give them any task, the women vice chairmen have to do it.

Regarding the powers and special tasks of the women members of the reserved seats of the Union Parishad, it is stated in the policy that they can act as advisors by attending the ward meeting. Out of more than 13 standing committees of the Parishad, one-third shall be headed by the women members as the chairman of the committee.

She shall be the president of at least one-third development project implementation committee for the implementation of development projects implemented in the respective wards such as Test Relief (TR), Food for Work (Kabikha), Money for Work (Kabita), annual development program (ADP) development allocation, bulk allocation and other projects. At least one of the three-panel chairpersons can be from among women members of reserved seats.

Apart from this, the policy prescribes 21 functions for the women members of reserved constituencies including being on the panel of village court judges, preserving the property of the people of the ward, supervising rural infrastructure development, providing training for women's vocational and income-generating programs; Prevention of abuse of women and children and prevention of dowry and acid throwing and prevention of child marriages including marriage registration.

The post of Women vice-chairperson is 'ornamental'

The woman Vice Chairman serves as the president of the Upazila Women's Development Forum as per her designation. Women members of municipality and union councils are also members of this forum. Women representatives complained that parliamentarians and chairmen withheld various allocations of the Women's Development Forum.

They have also complained the recommendation of women vice-chairmen is also not followed in the allotment of VGF's rice and maternity, old age and widow allowances. Women vice-chairmen are not regularly called to monthly council meetings. Even if they are called, a lot of times their words are not taken into consideration. Although three per cent of the Upazila's annual development budget is supposed to be allocated for the women's development forum, the chairman does not approve it. If women representatives want a vehicle to travel to remote areas, they cannot get one. In the absence of the chairman, female vice-chairmen are supposed to take on the role of temporary chairman, but in most cases, the male vice-chairman is given that responsibility.

Being hostage by the party and power

Most Upazila women vice chairmen are disappointed not to get any work after being elected. Many have raised the question of whether the government has created this position as an ornamentation for women! They also expressed regret for not getting cooperation from their male colleagues.

Rokeya Begum, the female vice-chairman of Pangsha Upazila of Rajbari, said, 'Zillul Hakim, the local member of parliament, controls all the work in Pangsha Upazila. He controls all the allocations starting from the development work of the upazila. I was not allotted a room in the Upazila Parishad, even though it has been almost four years since I took charge. As there is no room, I sometimes go to the council clerk's room and sit. Even though I am elected by people's vote, I am not given the opportunity to serve them. If any allocation comes it is also not distributed properly. This is how I pass my time. The rest of the time may pass like this.'

UNO of Pangsha Upazila Mohammad Ali talked to Dainik Bangla regarding the grievances of the public representative. He said, 'She has been the Upazila vice chairman before I got the job here. I know that she is in the same room as before. After the construction of a new building in the Upazila, rooms were not allotted to anyone separately. And the matter of not getting other allocations is not true. All allocations of the Upazila are received by public representatives.'

We called MP Zillul Hakim on February 6. He did not receive it. Then we called several times on February 7. He hung up each time.

Women are not taken seriously

Rekha Parveen, the female vice-chairman of Boalmari Upazila, said that after the Upazila chairman left for Hajj, she got the chairmanship for a month. But could not do anything other than sign papers for regular work.

Asma Akhter, female vice chairman of Karimganj Upazila of Kishoreganj District said, 'Recently, maternity allowance for six months was approved for the Union Parishads. On average, 200 to

250 cards were received by the chairmen per union. I sent all the documents of a pregnant mother to the UP Chairman. But he did not approve.’

She further added, ‘Vice chairmen are supposed to be in charge of the project of installing arsenic-free deep tube wells in all unions. But the chairman auctioned this project without informing us. Whether we get a job or not depends on the consent of the chairman and the member of parliament.’

In response to this accusation, Karimganj Upazila Chairman Nasirul Islam Khan said that he could not work himself.

He added, ‘All the work of the Upazila is done by the member of parliament. I do not see any need to keep the post of chairman, or vice chairman in the council. Apart from carrying out routine duties as the chairman, I don’t have much to do, the work of the vice-chairmen is even less.’

Chairperson’s work done by her husband

Many of the elected-UP women chairmen had fathers or husbands as chairmen. Although elected, they are facing many obstacles while working as women. Some women’s husbands are performing the duties of a shadow chairman as the women chairmen cannot be present at all times.

Moushumi Haque Sultana won as an independent candidate in Lakshmipur Union Parishad of Kalkini Upazila of Madaripur. But most of the work including development projects, TR, Kabikha, old age and widow allowance, and VGF rice distribution is handled by her husband and former chairman Fazlul Haque Bepari. Even though he could not participate in the election because of his involvement in a criminal case, he continues to serve as the chairman for his wife. Moushumi Haque only does desk work in the Union Parishad.

Rakib Hossain, a resident of that union, said Moushumi Haque is the chairman for an ornamental purpose only. She has no job except to sign official papers. Her husband does all the work. He also controls the group-based politics of the area.

When asked, Fazlul Haque Bepari said, ‘I don’t have the opportunity to fulfil government duties. As this is a big union, a lot of problems arise and I settle them. As a woman, she cannot solve these problems. As the chairman, she conducts government meetings. I do the works of TR, Kabikha. If my wife garners some fame, I will also be reputed. That’s why I support her.’

Moushumi Haque Sultana said that she could not stay in the area all the time. She added, ‘My husband does some work at that time. We both work in coordination.’

Obstacles in every step

Safia Parveen has been elected as a candidate of the Jatiya Party in Krishnanagar Union Parishad of Satkhira’s Kaliganj Upazila. She said that the local politicians of the ruling party have created obstacles in fulfilling her duties for the past year. She also said that she complained about a person named Hossain from his area to the ACC for creating impediments in the development work. But as no evidence of corruption was found, the investigating Upazila Agriculture officer only warned the accused and ended the investigation.

Safia Parveen opined that being selected as a woman public representative is very challenging. Even after facing that challenge and winning, one has to face many obstacles while fulfilling the responsibilities.

What the authorities say

When asked about the obstacles in the work of women public representatives, on February 7, Additional Secretary of the Election Commission, Ashok Kumar Debnath said, ‘After the election of the public representatives, the Election Commission has no duties. The Ministry of Local Government will look into this matter. These do not fall under the jurisdiction of the Election Commission.’

Md Tazul Islam, Minister of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives talked to Dainik Bangla over the phone on this issue. Last Tuesday he said, ‘There was a time when there was no participation of women anywhere in the country. But now, with the initiative of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, women’s participation has increased at all levels, starting from the secretary. The work of women’s public representatives is detailed in the law and regulations. That’s how they operate. However, there is an opportunity to think about whether more facilities can be extended to women under the law or not.’