

# In Letter, Not in Spirit

## Tokenism Marks Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh

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**T**he Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, as modified up to December 1986, highlights the establishment of local government institutions in the country for people's empowerment and their participation in the development process. Local governance in Bangladesh follows two distinct patterns of organisation. Rural government institutions are tiered into *zila*, *upzila*, *gram* and union parishads, while corporations and municipalities undertake development work in urban areas. Existing ordinances provide for an elected Chairperson for each of the municipalities and for a Mayor for the city corporations.

This essay will focus on the socio-political profile of women who were directly elected as ward commissioners to the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC). More specifically it will assess the role of these ward commissioners in the overall contexts of urban governance, poverty alleviation and women's development.

### Political Representation

While women constitute nearly fifty per cent of the population of Bangladesh, there are very few women at policy-making levels in government. Though women occupy twenty per cent of parliamentary seats, less than one per cent of the cabinet members are women. Less than eight per cent of

civil servants are women, with almost no women (0.012 per cent) in decision-making positions. In local government, women have a twenty per cent representation; but, while this figure is higher than in many countries, lived realities place it in a very different light.

In 1992, seventeen women contested for ward commissioner seats in the various city

corporations, but none were elected. In both the 1994 and the 2002 city corporation elections, no woman contested for the four mayoral positions available in the cities of Dhaka, Khulna, Chittagong and Rajshahi. Until 1993, no woman had been elected as Chairperson of any municipality, though women candidates became municipality members after each of the elections of 1977, 1984 and 1993. The method of election was "indirect": women were appointed to the seats reserved for them, not by universal vote, but by the men elected as members of these bodies.

### A Welcome Initiative

Since 1997, Bangladesh has made great strides in promoting women's participation in decision-making by allowing women to be directly elected to seats reserved for them in all local bodies. The Union Council Elections of 1997 set a landmark in the political empowerment of Bangladeshi women. For the first time in the history of the country, direct election for women representatives was provided for even at the lowest tier of local government, the rural Union Parishad. The pattern of the Union Parishad was also followed in urban local government. In the same year, the government upgraded the status of women commissioners by introducing direct election for women commissioners – one for every three wards of the city



corporations and municipalities. As of now, the municipalities have a total of twelve members with a provision for three women ward commissioners, each representing three wards. In the city corporations, the number of reserved seats for women depends upon the population of the cities these bodies belong to. In 2002, a total of sixty-three women commissioners were elected in four city corporations, as per the provisions that had been made for them. Among them, thirty were elected from Dhaka, thirteen from Chittagong, and ten each from Khulna and Rajshahi. (The position of the elected ward commissioners of the four city corporations is presented in the accompanying table.)

The newly-introduced provision for the direct election of women in local government is highly acclaimed, as it is assumed that it will empower women and ensure them their deserved rights. But discriminatory attitudes combined with a lack of appropriate facilities have made all such strategies useless for empowerment. In actual practice there is effective disempowerment of the women ward commissioners.

### Profiles in Disillusionment

When she was elected a ward commissioner of the DCC in the city corporation elections of 2002, Shahida Tareq Dipti prepared to fulfill the pledges she had made to her voters. Today, Dipti, a housewife

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### Comparison of Men and Women elected Ward Commissioners

City Corporations	Number of men elected as Ward Commissioners	Number of women elected as Ward Commissioners
Dhaka	90	30
Chittagong	41	13
Rajshahi	30	10
Khulna	31	10

turned politician, is not as happy as she was after winning the polls. She has found that her powers are far less than those held by the male ward commissioners. As she said, “I am not allowed to perform certain responsibilities, which are carried out only by my male colleagues. Why this discrimination? We are also elected commissioners; why are we not allowed to perform the same functions and have similar responsibilities?”

We surveyed fifteen of the thirty women members of the DCC. Our analysis of the socio-economic profile of these women reflected upon the following aspects:

- The power bases of the elected women;
- An assessment of their development perceptions, in particular, those concerning poverty alleviation and women’s issues;
- Their empowerment and participation in development activities;
- The constraints in the discharge of their duties and their effective involvement.

Out of the fifteen ward commissioners interviewed, all were married, except for one who is a widow. About two-thirds belong to the 30 to 50 age group and the rest belong to the 50 to 60 age group. Most live in nuclear families.

Most of the elected women were graduates, though their husbands

usually had higher levels of education than the women themselves. In Bangladesh, formal education and income are positively correlated. The husband’s level of education is an indicator of his socio-economic status and is usually considered a basis of his wife’s power and an important determinant of his level of support for her activities outside the home. However, in contrast to their educational performance, almost none of those interviewed are involved in any formal occupation. All of them are housewives.

### Untapped Capacities

However, despite their lack of experience in the professional sphere, most of the women ward commissioners had had considerable social involvement, not only at the time of election but in the past as well. This was the single most important factor in their socio-economic profile, and it was one that contributed greatly to their election success. Almost all these women had participated in a range of socio-cultural and political activities, which included functioning as indirectly-elected members of city corporations, board membership in educational institutions, work with non-government organisations and active membership of political parties and socio-cultural organisations. Involvement in such organisations involves networking and extensive

social interaction. The women's exposure to these skills enhanced their social recognition and gave them credibility in their constituencies.

The elected women ward commissioners are highly aware of local issues, due to their long involvement with the problems of their neighbourhoods. According to them the critical concerns of development affecting their areas are:

- Poor roads and the absence of better communication;
- The proliferation of urban slums and the rise in the urban population and in urban poverty, due to rural-urban migration;
- The lack of women's education, their limited participation in development activities, increased violence against women, dowry demands, child abuse and the non-implementation of laws protecting women's rights.

### **Limited Involvement**

There is, of course, much scope for women's involvement in development activities at the municipal level. However, through our discussions with the women members of the DCC, it became very clear that their role in the activities of the city corporations is far more restricted than it should be. In fact, their participation has been rendered marginal as they are deprived of important responsibilities and financial allocations.

According to government circulars, roads, environment, transport, health and other such works are, on the one hand, the responsibility of all ward commissioners. Yet, in practice, it was also decided that the role of the women ward commissioners be restricted to that of "advisors", thus significantly curtailing their effective contribution. In addition to this, the government is yet to

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finalise remuneration for the women members of its city corporations. Expenses incurred by these women for any community work have to be borne from their own pockets – costs which many of their families are unwilling or unable to bear. Above all, they do not even have necessary facilities, such as transport or designated office spaces. The men, on the other hand, are provided space and other logistical support; to add to the imbalance, male commissioners are elected from only one ward, whereas women commissioners are elected from three. As one commissioner rightly pointed out, "A single woman commissioner represents three wards but we still do not have any permanent offices where we can sit and discharge our responsibilities."

Whereas women commissioners could make a valuable contribution to such areas as girls' education, health, environment, NGO activities and the Post-Monsoon Road Repair Programme, discussions with

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corporation members indicated that the women are not vigorously involved in any of these activities. Instead, they are usually given charge of family planning and child welfare, while their male counterparts play the leading role in all other areas. Owing to a lack of any training provision on corporation activities, functioning women commissioners have been left ignorant even of their own roles and responsibilities. About half of the respondents could name only three activities that the city corporation implements. The rest of them could not manage to identify what, specifically, were their duties. Compounding matters, a government notification has actually barred women commissioners from jobs relating to the issuance of character certificates, birth registration and the maintenance of law and order. As one of the respondents pointed out, "This order is totally discriminatory; women are elected from areas three times bigger than those from where the men are elected, but in the distribution of duties and responsibilities they are considered least important."

### **Subordination Internalised**

There is no lack of dynamism or leadership qualities among the elected women commissioners, nor is it true that they are unaware of either their own needs or those of development. Culturally imposed constraints and the internalisation of their subordinate status have made them diffident and fearful of asserting themselves in their public role. Instead, they end up considering themselves as mere "social workers" and not as empowered partners in governance. In addition, they have been systematically passed over by State agencies and power structures. "Women members usually attend

meetings but they have no participation in the policy-making process. Sometimes they do not even attend meetings because they are often not properly informed or because their presence is simply not wanted by the men," remarked one frustrated woman ward commissioner. Another alleged that women commissioners would lose their credibility and popularity if they were not allowed to work for their voters. As she put it, "It has been quite some months since we have been elected. So far, we have been unable to do anything important. This is discriminatory as well as disappointing."

### Prejudices Die Hard

The feeling of the majority of the elected women commissioners is that men do not like them to play a role in proceedings that were once a male monopoly. Politics, in Bangladesh, is regarded as a man's domain, and women who enter politics are frowned upon. To be an elected member of the city corporation, every woman has to go through the usual processes of electoral politics, including campaign meetings and rallies, which are considered unseemly for women to participate in. In addition, campaigns are usually conducted at night, again preventing women from playing an active role. Instead, their husbands or male relatives often carry out campaigns on their behalf. Thus, voters often do not know who the real candidate actually is. Social and cultural norms impose restraints on the selection of a woman as a candidate, and on her performance and participation. Consequently, women tend to remain in peripheral roles even when they have managed to enter the political arena.

Many men who have permitted their wives to become ward

commissioners are in fact against their taking active roles in politics. On many occasions, women ward commissioners are not allowed by their husbands to attend meetings and participate in the workings of the corporation. Hence, women's representation in Bangladeshi politics has come to be characterised by tokenism and not by meaningful participation.

In addition, women ward commissioners are not treated at par with the men either by their male colleagues or by other officials. Two highly active and articulate women ward commissioners stated that, on many occasions, their views were not given any importance, only because they came from women.



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They said further that this attitude of their male colleagues so disillusioned and demoralised them, that on several occasions they chose to remain silent and not express their opinions.

About eighty per cent of the women commissioners perceived that their male colleagues would not accept their participation in the activities of the city corporation. However twenty per cent of them saw no problem in working with men despite their negative attitudes and behaviour. This is mainly because these women have understood their

position as one full of great challenges.

### Conclusion

In order to improve the status of women and make their involvement and integration in development effective, women need a voice at all levels of the planning and policy making process. Women's participation in local governance is essential for democratisation because, through it, women are able to not only develop their individual and group capacities but also to gain the means to participate in economic and political life. Such participation is very much a condition and indication of women's own present power and status; it is also a requirement for influencing any future promotion of women's rights and development.

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