

People's participation in local government at the grassroots level in Bangladesh: An exploratory analysis

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Abstract

An efficiently managed local government is characterized by active citizen participation and competent leadership that effectively steers the institutions under its jurisdiction toward their primary goal. In its pursuit of establishing itself as the economic center of South Asia, Bangladesh is diligently striving to establish a robust and dynamic municipal government. A new paradigm centered on grassroots democracy is supplanting the traditional mode of public participation in governance via elected officials. This research aims to identify the many avenues via which individuals from underrepresented groups might engage in local government in Bangladesh. It also seeks to evaluate the extent to which each of these avenues contributes to the empowerment of these groups. To gain a thorough grasp of the dynamics of participation without resorting to direct primary data collection, this study utilizes secondary data to conduct a qualitative investigation into people's involvement in grassroots local government in Bangladesh, specifically in the context of the Union Parishad. The study reveals that while Bangladesh's local government mechanisms promote public participation, engagement remains largely symbolic due to limited influence over decision-making. Despite efforts like elections and community meetings, active involvement is minimal. The results highlight a disconnect between the established public participation mechanisms and citizen engagement in Bangladesh. Despite efforts like local elections and public forums, participation remains largely symbolic due to a lack of perceived influence. This suggests a need for reforms to foster meaningful public involvement and strengthen local governance.

Keywords: *local government, Bangladesh, Union Parishad, people's participation, empowerment*

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1. Introduction

Public involvement is a crucial component of modern democracies since it allows citizens to be involved in addressing issues that have a direct impact on their lives. Local communities worldwide have embraced decentralized strategies as a sustainable approach to enhance service delivery, involve marginalized communities in the political process, and empower citizens to actively engage in decision-making, development planning, and policy implementation. These tactics are gaining popularity due to a worldwide shift towards decentralization. Andersson et al. (2004) argue that proponents of decentralization emphasize many benefits, including enhanced public access to decision-makers, more participation in decision-making by diverse socioeconomic groups, and heightened responsibility for policy developers. Decentralization empowers individuals at the grassroots level by including them and other civil society members in developing and implementing government programs and policies. The local population will now have more autonomy as a consequence of this (Roche, 2008; Uddin, 2017).

Incorporating the local population in development efforts is crucial as it promotes democratic values and considers their knowledge, skills, and beliefs (Panday & Rabbani, 2011). Individuals are seen as participating in decentralized governance as a dynamic mechanism to uphold their welfare in terms of financial resources, personal growth, autonomy, or other significant values they prioritize (Denhardt et al., 2009; Martinelli, 2005). When setting priorities and making choices, it is important to consider the needs of those with low incomes and those who belong to other marginalized groups, such as women. Therefore, it could be more effective to allocate the few public resources in a way that aligns with the needs and goals of the community (Bank, 1994). Active public participation in municipal decision-making has substantial benefits for both the community and its institutions. It seems that it can achieve both objectives, which are to disclose preferences and assist with budgeting (Bird, 1995). Active involvement of individuals not only grants them more authority but also equips local government officials with additional means to motivate them to use that authority (Koenig, 2005).

Local governments in Bangladesh have recently implemented democratic, citizen-engaging grassroots methods. To ensure that the local community has a say in the project's conception, implementation, and evaluation, a range of institutional frameworks have been established. It is expected that community members would engage in the development of

policies that will impact their lives, ensuring that elected officials are accountable for the community's tax contributions. If individuals are dissatisfied with the policies or services provided by their local government, they have the option to effect change by electing new officials rather than relocating from the area altogether. For the government to be convinced to modify its policies and services, a substantial number of people or firms would also need to relocate (Hamilton, 2013). The Union Parishad is a local government organization that promotes community empowerment, facilitates meaningful participation from all stakeholders, and results in enhanced service provision and greater long-term prospects. By implementing the option for public involvement, individuals who are not elected representatives may now be employed by institutions that fall under the authority of the local government. The incorporation of popular involvement mechanisms in Union Parishad is warranted due to the expectation that local citizens would engage in negotiations with Union Parishad officials and actively contribute to the identification and resolution of issues about their means of livelihood. Meanwhile, elected officials must possess the ability to identify places that have significant needs and implement long-term measures with the assistance of local specialists. Anticipated is the rise in the public's degree of trust in elected officials due to the simultaneous publication of data about revenue, expenditures, beneficiary lists, project lists, and other relevant matters.

Recent polls indicate a growing trend of citizens actively seeking to participate in and influence the decision-making processes of local government organizations (Ara et al. 2024). The notion that elected officials prioritize cost reduction above improving opportunities for public involvement is often subject to criticism (Zeemering, 2008). This is because traditionally, it has been difficult for common people to participate in matters that directly affect them in rural communities characterized by a patron-client dynamic. Furthermore, the organizational structure of the Union Parishad gives the chairman an excessive level of authority in policy-making, while diminishing the influence of normal ward members and women occupying reserved seats. The council exercises its autonomy in determining policy, regardless of any suggestions made by committees and ward assemblies. Regarding decision-making in the council, the chairman has ultimate authority (Sultan, 2018). Many participants have expressed dissatisfaction with the chairman's lack of consideration for their recommendations (Pranab Kumar Panday, 2008). Women's involvement and representation in local government are essential due to the role of local government as a subsidiary of the federal government, as well as its formal mission. These sources play a crucial role by providing a

platform for women's concerns and addressing their specific needs (Nazneen et al., 2014; Panday, 2013; Pranab Kumar Panday, 2008).

Individuals participate in Union Parishad meetings, which take place in various public venues, where they engage in discussions about concerns related to preparedness, finances, project implementation, and selection of strategies (Sultan, 2018). Subsequent research has shown that women holding elected posts encounter several obstacles, including stereotyped views and tangible physical limitations (Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010; Pranab Kumar Panday, 2008). To address these difficulties effectively, it is essential to determine the extent to which the regime has embraced public involvement in Union Parishad. This study offers comprehensive explanations of the issue, drawing on secondary sources. The objective of this research is to evaluate the efficacy of widely used participation tactics in Union Parishad in Bangladesh in terms of empowering individuals at the local level. Given this context, this article first presents a comprehensive comprehension of the notions of empowerment and participation, followed by an in-depth analysis of the structural framework of Bangladesh's municipal government and a concise overview of the development of Union Parishad in the country. The study aims to evaluate the efficacy of the methods used in Union Parishad operations, with a particular focus on the involvement of women, to ensure that service providers remain accountable and transparent to their needs.

Civic participation is important to democratic systems. Inclusion is a strategy that involves maintaining active participation and exerting influence by distributing power and ownership between those in positions of authority and regular people. This refers to a scenario in which progress is achieved by evenly allocating resources between the privileged and the general population (Isham et al., 1995). There is growing interest among policymakers and development practitioners in promoting local, community-led, and participatory development. Another concern arises from the potential impact of the contributors. After gaining independence, Bangladesh placed a high importance on community-based development initiatives, focusing particularly on the Union Parishad level. The aim was to improve the living standards of rural inhabitants and include them into the overall development process. The Union Parishad development program has made little headway in fostering a participatory culture. The sustainability of development operations is at risk if the beneficiaries do not have ownership of the programs and projects being developed. The planning and policymaking community depend on the findings of research, such as the one presented here. The context is

of utmost importance, as the saying goes. The results and careful examination of the collected data shed light on local development administration. The study's conclusions provide policymakers with significant recommendations to consider. Furthermore, policymakers may find it advantageous to identify issues within the current system and then develop future policies to address these issues.

With the decentralization of the nation's power, several issues have been subjected to examination. These concerns include assessing whether local government organizations have fully embraced democratic principles and ensuring that all aspects of society have been included in the process of planning local development. The development of this study was motivated by the need to address these highly debated empirical difficulties. Hence, the study seeks to evaluate the level of residents' involvement in Union Parishad operations, identify factors that influence people's degree of participation in Union Parishad and the key barriers that stop them from doing so.

2. Literature Review

Citizen involvement encompasses any action undertaken by an individual or a collective entity to solve issues that are of public significance. It denotes the collective action of individuals via non-governmental community organizations to exert influence on policy, after their organization and establishment of goals at the local level. When provided with the opportunity to participate in decision-making, people, civil society organizations (CSOs), and other stakeholders possess a heightened influence in the development of laws and regulations that affect them. Renn et al. (1993) presented a conceptual framework for participatory decision-making and advocated for the inclusion of the public in the decision-making process. Similarly, Mazmanian and Nienaber (1979) highlight the need to include the public in the process of formulating policies. According to Day (1997), the U.S. political culture highly values and regards citizen engagement in public affairs as sacred. Environmental Protection, Citizen Participation, and The Corps of Engineers is a periodical located in Washington, DC that asserts this statement. The involvement of the general public in the functioning of the government and the belief that greater public participation would lead to decision-makers considering public preferences and a stronger public understanding of the broader community is a significant factor in the enthusiasm for citizen involvement in a Jeffersonian democracy (Stivers, 1990).

The Union Parishad, which is the lowest level of local government in Bangladesh, is well-equipped with resources to foster public involvement across the whole municipal system. Several different standing committees, local elections, Ward Shava, public budget debates, and other activities of a similar kind are examples of the kinds of systems that make it possible for citizens to participate directly in government. On the other hand, these procedures are not functioning very effectively in actual practice (Uddin, 2019). According to Panday (2019), who carried out a comprehensive investigation into several different procedures, there was a reasonably high level of voter participation in municipal elections between the years 1991 and 2013. Both Union Parishad and Upazila Parishad decided to use a voting system that was based on parties in 2016, which resulted in a considerable fall in the number of people who participated in municipal elections. It is of utmost importance that open budget debates are a vital platform for citizens to participate in the governance of their local government. According to Ahmed et al. (2016), following an examination of the minutes of the conversations, the primary reason why Union Parishad organized open budget discussion meetings was to fulfill their legal requirements, rather than to provide people the chance to voice their opinions on the proposed budget. Those individuals who have been elected to serve as representatives of the electorate are the ones who are tasked with the obligation of ensuring that the goals and aspirations of the electorate are successfully represented in the activities of the local government. As a result of the fact that the majority of standing committees are mostly ineffective, local representatives have limited access to the decision-making processes of these committees (Makhdum et al., 2022). The bulk of the standing committees do not deal with financial problems; thus, the local representatives do not want to attend meetings.

In line with the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009, citizens in Bangladesh are obliged to have a voice in the choices and assessments that are made on development planning. Razzaque (2014) researched citizen engagement in these processes and discovered that ward meetings, ward committees, and open budget meetings were all successful techniques, citing ward committees as effective. The identification of best practices that demonstrate effective local participation by the principles of inclusion and effective participation is compelling evidence that it is possible to effectively involve locals in decision-making processes. This can be accomplished through actions such as listening to the voices of victims or beneficiaries, taking into consideration ideas from the ground up, and involving locals in a variety of committees. While individuals were eager to attend the meetings where

choices were made, they were relatively hesitant to engage in the implementation or monitoring of development activities even though they were passionate about attending the meetings. It was also suggested to form a legislative framework to increase the effective involvement of local inhabitants and maintain a cooperative, friendly socio-cultural-political milieu throughout the many stages of the development process (Razzaque, 2014). This action was carried out to make it possible for members of the public to actively participate in the design process.

The study of Mohammad (2010) on local engagement in the Ward Shava at the Union Parishad Act 2009 level discovered a low degree of local participation in the drafting of development programs and plans. This is in contrast to the fact that the socio-economic and political elites of the territory are allowed to take part in the decision-making processes for the territory. The interference of political authorities, the self-interest of elected officials, the absence of information transfer, and other issues were all factors that contributed to the lackluster participation of locals. On the other hand, Uddin (2019) researched several different initiatives that were used at the Union Parishad level to ensure public participation. Local courts, ongoing committees, neighborhood councils, public budgets, and even simple elections are all examples of these types of institutions. The ineffective engagement of the Union Parishad due to the lack of empowerment in this area in Bangladesh is the reason for the ineffectiveness of the engagement, and he also argues that involvement in the decision-making process provides participants greater authority (Uddin, 2019).

Haque (2009) argues that engagement in politics is feasible via the Union Parishad's Standing Committees, citing people's limited access to the decision-making process of the Standing Committee is attributed to the ineffectiveness of committees and faults in the procedures. Similarly, Sowdagar (2013) found low level of engagement from rural peasants in the decision-making and project execution processes of the Upazila Parishad, citing several factors, including the absence of agro-based microplanning, the farmers' lack of political allegiance and financial hardship, and the Chairman of the Upazila Parishad's reluctance to involve people with opposing political ideologies. While the Union Parishad Act 2009, which was passed into law in 2009, provides the legal basis for the public's involvement in the Union Parishad's planning and budgeting operations (Chowdhury, 2018), the actual practice shows otherwise.

2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore people's participation in local government at the grassroots level, with a specific focus on the Union Parishad in Bangladesh. By using secondary data, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of participation without directly involving primary data collection. The research employs an exploratory approach to examine existing knowledge and insights derived from previously published studies, reports, and official documents. This method is suitable for identifying trends, patterns, and gaps in people's participation in Union Parishad activities.

Secondary data sources were utilized to gather information relevant to the research topic. The primary methods for data collection include:

Literature review. A thorough review of academic articles, books, and research papers on local governance, people's participation, and the Union Parishad system in Bangladesh.

Document Analysis. Examination of official documents such as government reports, policy guidelines, Union Parishad meeting minutes, and project implementation records.

Media Analysis. Analysis of news articles, editorials, and features from credible media outlets that discuss issues related to grassroots governance and public participation.

NGO Reports. Review of reports and publications by non-governmental organizations and development agencies working on local governance in Bangladesh.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the secondary data. The steps involved are:

Data identification. Identifying and collecting relevant secondary data from credible sources.

Data organization. Categorizing data based on key themes such as public participation, decision-making processes, and challenges faced by the Union Parishad.

Thematic coding. Applying codes to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data.

Synthesis. Integrating findings from various sources to draw comprehensive conclusions about people's participation in local governance.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Union Parishad Governance

Regional or municipal public affairs are under the jurisdiction of the local government. To ensure that local governments function as participatory institutions that effectively address

the needs and expectations of all people, it is necessary to enhance their authority, resources, and responsiveness to the issues that affect all citizens (Barkat et al., 2015). Furthermore, it is linked to the empowerment of local communities and residents via increased government participation. Effective local development requires collaboration among government agencies, civil society organizations, and the corporate sector to ensure inclusivity, responsiveness, accountability, and fairness (Barkat et al., 2015). In Bangladesh, the Union Parishad is a locally elected governing body that has deep connections with the rural populace. The citizens have developed a habit of trusting that their requirements will be fulfilled by a government that is proactive, responsive, and takes action when necessary. The Union Parishad position and governance status can be assessed through various indicators such as development planning, efforts to reduce corruption, ability to handle conflicts and accommodate different interests, initiatives to raise social awareness, active participation in development programs, effective management of disasters, commitment to environmental protection, collaboration with NGOs as development partners, engagement of civil society, and adherence to legal procedures. The degree of political dedication and integrity shown by public officials is a crucial factor in determining the effectiveness of governance by the Union Parishad.

Union Parishad governance framework includes mechanisms for both horizontal and vertical accountability. The Upazila Parishad, together with the Deputy Commissioner and Local Government Division, has the duty for both vertical and horizontal administration. Five mechanisms provide vertical accountability: the standing committee, Wardshava, ward committee meeting, participatory planning and budget, and the project implementation committee. The Union Development Coordination Committee (UDCC) has the responsibility of overseeing internal accountability and openness. An open government will be prioritized by installing a board displaying the citizen's charter (Barkat et al., 2015).

3.2. People's Participation in Union Parishad: A Historical Perspective

In the subcontinent, Bangladesh's local government has a longstanding history, although it only gained recognition as a distinct legal body during the British colonization of India (Barkat et al., 2015). Local government organizations and how citizens participate in their operations have changed to align with the evolving social context. Village republics, also known as autonomous societies, were ancient communities that provided ordinary people with the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process (Litvack et al., 1998; Siddiqui,

1994). The concept of a village republic ultimately transitioned into the village panchayet, enabling locals to express their complaints to the authorities.

During British rule in India, many initiatives were implemented to encourage public participation in local government affairs. The Village Panchayet Act of 1870 granted a committee consisting of five local individuals the authority to choose the village police, and they made the first attempt in this regard. Starting from 2005 (Siddiqui, 1994). The enactment of the Bengal Village Self-Government Act of 1919 and the Bengal Local Self-Government Act of 1885 facilitated the involvement of the general people at the local level via the formation of the union committee and union board, respectively. The organizations established by these Acts were supervised by the central government, either by direct or indirect means (Elias Sarker, 2006). The local administration exhibited a deficiency in both organization and structure, which therefore hindered the possibility of public engagement or representation (Rahman et al., 2004). During its tenure, the government established Pakistan's present multi-tiered local government system, by the nation's democratic constitution from 1959. The union council, with delegates from each unit, represented the fundamental level of popular involvement in governance. Nevertheless, to preserve their positions of authority, these elected officials prioritize the welfare of government officials above the concerns of the constituents they were intended to serve (Elias Sarker, 2006; Siddiqui, 1994).

Since Bangladesh achieved independence in 1971, there have been many changes in the structure and duties of the local government. All of these reforms have been implemented by the constitution, and the government of Bangladesh has made additional adjustments throughout the years under different administrations to promote more public participation in municipal issues (Panday & Rabbani, 2011). From 1976 to 2006, the inauguration of each new administration led to significant changes in both local government structures and the nature of public participation (Waheduzzaman, 2010). Despite this, the Bangladeshi government consistently seeks methods to enhance public engagement in local government operations and enhance their operational effectiveness. The Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009, which was subsequently modified, was a significant milestone in the history of Uttar Pradesh. This act was one of the many changes implemented by the government.

3.3 Empowerment through Participation: An Assessment

The Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009 provided guidelines on how to include local citizens and elected officials in various committees, meetings, Ward Shava, and other council events as shown in table 1. Participating in decision-making processes and development initiatives that have an impact on people's lives instills them with the confidence to actively engage in government decision-making, so empowering them (Denhardt et al., 2009; Holzer & Kloby, 2005).

Table 1

Participation pathways for the general public in Union Parishad

Avenues	Meeting and Composition	Responsibilities and Governing Bodies
Open budget session	Yearly meetings of the final and pre-budgets that are open to the public and include locals; sixty days before the beginning of the fiscal year	The primary responsibilities include the discussion and debate on fiscal priorities, the preparation of a budget for the next year, and the approval of the budget for the year before.
Ward Shava	Each ward is responsible for planning at least two meetings annually, and a quorum is defined as five percent of the total number of voters in that ward. Each ward and every voter comprise a Ward Shava, which is led by the applicable UP member and advised by a female UP member.	The following are a few of the seven duties and four responsibilities: assessing all development-related activities and offering the required assistance; enabling development planning; creating and transmitting final beneficiary lists; and monitoring the development of programs. Additionally, organizing sports and cultural events, creating organizations and social awareness campaigns, and bringing the residents of the ward together.
Village Court	A court is made up of a chairman, four more members, and two community members who are not from UP. Meetings occur at least once each week.	If the amount of compensation sought is BDT 75,000 or less (about \$900), a court has the power to handle cases that are both criminal and civil in nature.
Standing committees and others	Each of the 13 permanent committees has five to seven members, plus one or more co-opted members, and is led by a member of the UP. Meetings are conducted at least twice a month.	Assisting service providers with planning, monitoring the implementation process, reporting regularly to the UP, keeping an eye on service provider behavior, and providing feedback to the public.
Local election	UP elections occur regularly, once every five years.	Methods to hold the representative directly responsible
Access to information	Everyone has the privilege and the right to access the UP whenever they see fit.	The Citizen's Charter will be published by UP upon request and submission of the required data.

Source: Uddin (2019)

3.4 Open Budget Session

During a participatory budgeting process, community members are sent an invitation to attend a public meeting where they may express their opinions on financial objectives. Participatory budgeting refers to the process in which individuals within a community exercise their right to vote and make decisions on the allocation of tax resources. This approach facilitates more informed assessments about the allocation of financial resources. Participatory budgeting is a method used by local and state governments to include public input into the process of planning and allocating budgets (Vergara, 2002).

In previous years, Union Parishad budgeting mechanism was highly centralized. There was a lack of public participation. However, the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009 establishes a legal structure for including the public in decision-making and budget planning at the local government level. Accordingly, the Union Parishad is required to have at least two open budget sessions each year every February and April. The Union Parishad is open to all community members, irrespective of their gender, sexual orientation, caste, or socioeconomic status, who have a desire to gain knowledge about the matter and take part. During the budget session, the Union Parishad will present the proposed budget, which includes several income and expenditure categories, as well as the revised budget, requesting feedback from the public. It is crucial to acknowledge that Ward Shava's participation had a substantial impact on the development of the proposed budget. Subsequently, the participants engage in a roundtable discourse about the proposed budget, whereby they provide recommendations for improvement. Following the analysis of the feedback gathered during the open budget session, the Union Parishad will cast their votes on the final budget at their complete meeting. Subsequently, a noticeboard is used to publicly display the finalized budget.

A public budget session is intended to ensure that legislators are held responsible for the expression of public opinion, facilitated by discussions and debates on the Union Parishad budget. One of the primary duties of the Union Parishad is to predict the revenue and spending levels publicly during an open budget session. An open forum will be held to discuss and gather input on the proposed budget and plan (Ahmed et al., 2016). At public meetings, residents have the opportunity to voice their concerns, participate in council deliberations and other activities related to community development, and hold council members accountable for their actions (Chowdhury, 2018). Community members see access to local institutions as a privilege. By increasing public knowledge and incentivizing people to fulfill their tax obligations, the Union

Parishad is able to accumulate a greater amount of local resources. They may establish their credibility by being transparent and responsible for their activities, so garnering the support of the community while they pursue their development objectives. Hence, it is essential for budget committees to hold their meetings in a transparent manner (Rahman et al., 2004).

3.5 Ward Shava

The Ward Shava, a well-established approach to engage in the governance of Uttar Pradesh, was also defined and established as part of the Act (Articles 4–6). A Ward Shava is a gathering of all registered voters in a ward. Meetings are conducted by the relevant ward member, who is responsible for overseeing the proceedings, while female members provide guidance and advice. To achieve one of its objectives, the Act mandates a minimum of two open meetings at the ward level each year, with a substantial attendance of at least 5 percent of the total voters. The Union Party requires a minimum of seven days advance notice for each meeting to maximize attendance among Ward Shava inhabitants. Residents are provided with information about current Union Parishad operations during these sessions, including development efforts, budgetary challenges, and programs, to assist them in making informed choices. In addition, the Ward Shava has the authority to provide suggestions, coordinate the implementation of plans and development initiatives in a certain order, choose and organize the recipients of social safety net programs, examine Union Parishad reports, and identify areas that need improvement (Ahmed et al., 2016). After carefully evaluating the feedback from all parties involved, Ward Shava compiled a comprehensive report for Union Parishad.

The objective of the Ward Shava strategy is to motivate individuals to express their ideas and perspectives about Union Parishad events. In other words, it ensures that the general public will be included in the process of planning new projects and that local governments will be responsible for their choices. The Ward Shava has a long tradition of providing a venue for the expression of marginalized communities, particularly rural women. The objective of this forum is to provide individuals with a venue to express their grievances with the Union Parishad administration. There will be a chance for unrestricted dialogue and exchange of information on topics that have significance for the community. Public hearings often address matters related to municipal budgets. This approach is generally recognized as an effective method for highlighting individuals' concerns to decision-makers and authorities. As a result, the government obtains vital data on the perspectives and encounters of its citizens.

3.6 Village Court

According to the Village Courts Act of 2006, the Union Parishad is obligated to use a village court for the local resolution of civil and criminal disputes. The village court functions as a replacement for comprehensive legal procedures. The Union Parishad consists of at least two members and is headed by the Chairman of the Village Court. The Chairman appoints the remaining four judges of the Supreme Court. Additionally, a provision mandates that the parties choose two persons, one from each side, to establish a five-person judicial panel that would oversee the proceedings and act as representatives for the parties involved. This body is separate from the elected lawmakers and oversee and advocate for the parties. Before rendering decisions, the two courts within the community may consult with solicitors. Hence, the regulation prohibits any kind of arbitrariness and prohibits community leaders from intervening (Islam, 2009). By implementing an open forum hearing system, the community is fostering a stronger sense of ownership in the local peacebuilding process and improving its ability to interact to tackle various concerns. Considering that this act was established to safeguard the rights of marginalized groups such as minorities and women, it is imperative to have a female representation. There is a belief held by some that the Shalish institutions are inherently inequitable, biased, and discriminatory against those who are economically disadvantaged and susceptible to harm. The village court was formed some years ago to facilitate economically disadvantaged and vulnerable rural populations in accessing alternative modes of justice and to provide an alternative to the Shalish system, which was notorious for its inherent partiality and discrimination (Islam, 2009).

A village court operates on the principle that those involved in a conflict may freely and honestly discuss their difficulties without concern for criticism or revenge. The objective is to reach a mutually acceptable resolution that not only resolves the disagreement but also facilitates the restoration of strained relationships. Simplifying access to the local court system is a vital measure in empowering individuals. The most optimal choice for citizens is the village court since it provides affordable justice in a hospitable and leisurely setting. The reason for this is that the official court system is excessively overwhelmed, making it challenging for individuals with modest incomes to get support from it. Village courts may serve as an alternative means of resolving various problems that are often not brought before the formal legal system owing to the complexities and expenses associated with it. This would significantly contribute to the promotion and enforcement of the rule of law. The village courts

are not subject to the stringent procedural regulations that apply to courts at higher levels as stated by the Local Government Division in 2010. A further argument might be made that the proximity of the village court to the Union Parishad complex, which is often located near the center of the union, allows the villages to have convenient physical access to it. The village court is easily accessible to the destitute and oppressed citizens of rural areas.

3.7 Standing Committees and other Committees

Another official avenue for program involvement is provided via the Union Parishad committee structure. According to Article 45 of the Union Parishad Act, it is possible to establish 13 permanent committees to address certain issues. Every standing committee consisting of more than five members must have a chairman who is a member of the Union Parishad. Furthermore, the Union Parishad has other committees, including standing committees that have established procedures for recruiting members from the general public via cooption. Members from different government branches may be part of the same committees. While it is permissible and recommended to plan additional impromptu meetings as needed, committees must convene at least once every two months. Typically, the responsibility for organizing and conducting regular meetings lies with the members of a standing committee. During these meetings, committee members have the opportunity to discuss the challenges they encounter in their respective areas of expertise and work together to develop systematic answers. The chairman is responsible for issuing invites to prospective committee members, who have the option to either accept or decline the invitation. The Union Parishad must thoroughly evaluate and take into account the suggestions and opinions provided by the standing committee (Ahmed et al., 2016) throughout their deliberations. Project implementation committees and local management committees, such as the market management committee and the school management committee, let community members engage in and oversee the development operations. Local citizens often volunteer their time to serve on these boards.

The primary role of standing committees, in addition to aiding in the planning process, is to monitor the implementation of plans by the service providers. In addition, it provides monthly updates to the Union Parishad and considers public comments when developing policy (Local Government Division, 2012). An individual from the community who has been co-opted may be assimilated into the organization via a structured process, thus increasing the

group's power and the community's sense of empowerment. The votes of the participants will be included in the ultimate result. To promote gender equality on campus, the University of Pennsylvania reserves one-third of the chairperson posts on its standing committees for women. Furthermore, within the realm of local governance, the Public Interest Committee (PIC) and other management committees serve as institutional frameworks through which local inhabitants might potentially gain empowerment. These are implemented to enable Union Parishad to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of its many construction endeavors.

3.8 Access to Information

By the constitution of the nation, citizens of Bangladesh have the legal entitlement to get any information that pertains to them. Article 39 of the Bangladeshi Constitution guarantees the fundamental right to freedom of thought, conscience, speech, and expression for all individuals. The Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009 recognizes and safeguards the implementation of legislative measures that promote the unrestricted movement of information, as embodied in articles 78 to 81. The Right to Know Act encompasses these two pieces of legislation. Currently, no legislation restricts the availability or dissemination of information. Every person has the entitlement to seek information from the governing body, and the governing body is legally bound to uphold this entitlement and responsibility by responding to all information inquiries.

Due to local government legislation in Bangladesh, all levels of local government are legally obligated to create a citizen's charter. As to Article 49 of the Act, Union Parishad must prepare a citizen's charter that clearly specifies their services, the terms and deadlines for delivering these services, a service guarantee, procedures for filing complaints in case of inadequate service, and other relevant information. The fundamental tenet of the citizen's charter is to empower individuals with more control over the provision of public services and facilities. Individuals get a comprehensive education of their rights and benefits via the Citizen's Charter. They may influence service providers to improve their performance by using their substantial influence. The accessibility and unrestricted dissemination of knowledge have empowered individuals to exert more autonomy over their own lives. To ensure that the residents of the Republic can effectively hold the institution responsible for its actions, it is imperative to safeguard their right to access information by providing them with the required

instruments. The citizens of the Republic possess all political authority, thereby explaining the situation.

3.9 Local Election

Election voting is often considered to be the most influential type of indirect participation since it allows individuals to directly influence the functioning of a system based on their views. In a democratic system, voters use their right to cast ballots to choose individuals who will serve as their representatives at various levels of government, ranging from the local council to the federal government. These individuals will have the responsibility of making decisions, overseeing their execution, and developing policy (Uddin, 2017). In the Republic of Bangladesh, citizens possess the fundamental entitlement to vote in governmental elections, as well as the right to participate in other methods of national decision-making. The Union Parishad election in Bangladesh has paramount significance because of its large unit count and high voter engagement. Over 60 million citizens participated in the 2015 election by casting their ballots. Uddin (2017) saw a significant number of voters from various age groups, genders, abilities, and races at the polling stations. Voters exhibited a favorable response, with around 76.66 percent of the electorate casting their ballots. By contrast, the voter turnout for the 2011 Union Parishad election was 70% among eligible voters. The voter participation in the last municipal elections surpassed that of previous ones. According to FEMA (1998), about 60% of eligible voters took part in the 1997 UP elections.

Through the act of electing a representative, individuals may not only exercise their right to participate in the decision-making process of the local government but also influence the trajectory of their own life. Bangladeshi individuals have gained more recognition compared to previous times, as seen by the rise in voter participation and active involvement in civic affairs. The number of voters in the Union Parishad election fluctuates significantly from year to year. Furthermore, the turnover rate for elections held at different periods of the year within the same institution varies. During the Union Parishad elections, the voter turnout consistently exceeds 50%, with some occasions even surpassing 85%. The most transparent means of ensuring accountability is via the conduct of free and fair elections. However, this technique has limited effectiveness since it can only be carried out periodically and gives voters little direct control over the governance of their country. Council members often face the need to seek reelection. Voters may thereafter evaluate both the council's overall achievement and

the individual performance of each member. Electors will be presented with the choice of retaining or dismissing the incumbent governor. Due to their ambition to advance in politics, elected officials are more aware of their responsibilities.

3.10 Female Participation and Empowerment

Following Bangladesh's declaration of independence, women were bestowed with the freedom to vote and engage in several aspects of public life. The Constitution of Bangladesh ensures gender equality and actively encourages women's involvement in all aspects of Bangladeshi society. The constitution explicitly prohibits the state from granting preferential treatment to women, children, or any other group that has been historically considered socially disadvantaged. Since 1997, women have been guaranteed the right to directly vote for reserved municipal seats. Women's active participation and leadership in local governments are essential for the emancipation, organization, and empowerment of women at the grassroots level, as well as for increasing their involvement in decision-making processes.

Government authorities in Uttar Pradesh enforce a policy that mandates the allocation of one-third of the available seats to women. All posts are open to female candidates, regardless of whether they are specifically allocated for women or not (Pal, 2001). The implementation of designated seating for women has led to a significant rise in the female workforce within municipal administration. This event signifies a pivotal moment in the history of women's political involvement in Bangladesh. The government has already issued many executive decrees to ensure the representation of women on different boards and commissions. The panel chairman, standing committees, and other Union Parishad committees are a few examples of the several committees that exist.

3.11. Key Challenges

An effective method for encouraging public participation in municipal planning is via the use of open budget meetings. The current budgeting approach has shown its efficacy and transparency, allowing marginalized groups such as the impoverished, women, and the voiceless to actively engage in the process of budget formulation. However, this method is used in limited situations and is not implemented on a broader scale. Union Parishad engages in confidential deliberations with a limited group of influential local figures and political leaders, thereafter using the outcomes to produce a proposed budget. In addition, while

obtaining supporting statistics and research may be difficult, the Union Parishad often claim that Ward Shavas are routinely conducted in the vast majority of wards (Ahmed et al., 2016). According to the legislation, the Ward Shava system is not functioning as it should. Although the Ward Shava has the potential to become a vital hub for individuals, there is presently a lack of legislation dictating its operational framework (Ahmed et al., 2016). Ward Shava should be highly credited for his efforts in increasing knowledge about the Union Parishad budget and planning, as well as the entitlements of the most disadvantaged residents. Several obstacles discourage individuals from attending the Ward Shava, such as job commitments, apathy or ignorance, fear of causing offense, political considerations, or inconvenient meeting schedules (Chowdhury, 2018).

Representatives from the majority of the Union Parishad districts expressed that, except for the establishment of ad hoc committees, no additional actions had been taken. Despite their intended purpose, committees often fall short in facilitating the accomplishment of tasks. Less than 50% of the members attend meetings of the standing committee, and a significant number are unaware of the existence of these committees. Another issue arises from the fact that many committees perform identical functions (Ahmed et al., 2016). The main obstacles encountered by standing committees are shortage of staff, ambiguous or non-existent job duties, limited prospects for career progression, and a dearth of motivation among Union Parishad secretaries (Islam, 2016).

Members of the village court possess just a rudimentary understanding of its powers and processes. There is currently no regular introductory training session provided for Union Parishad personnel who want to have a deeper understanding of the regional court system. In addition, village courts are not provided with funding, resulting in reduced administrative expenses. Furthermore, the extent to which the panel's judgments will be biased is uncertain, since the majority of its members are politicians. Nevertheless, they may hesitate to make decisions against those who have political power, even if it is probable that local elections would hold them responsible to the public for making rational decisions.

Union Parishad is the only destination for regionally oriented information providers. The Union Parishad chairman or secretary may provide information on the organization's many services, however, only a small fraction of individuals who claim to do so really fulfill this responsibility. Panday and Rabbani (2011) noted that the chairmen and secretaries often showed reluctance in sharing the information they knew with the members. Moreover, the

information provided by Union Parishad websites is too ambiguous and seldom updated with recent data. In addition, even more troubling, the overwhelming majority of persons, especially those who are most marginalized in society, are ignorant of this notion. Regrettably, a significant number of individuals fail to comprehend how education might improve their overall well-being and opportunities for work.

Despite some progress in recent years, women in the Union Parishad continue to face marginalization in decision-making processes. While their views have gained recognition at the local level and have been given social legitimacy in addressing specific women's issues, they still encounter barriers in higher-level decision-making. Several factors hinder women's effective representation and participation in local politics, including the gendered nature of politics, mobility restrictions, lack of awareness about local government responsibilities, male resistance, conservative social values, educational disparities, and a lack of education (Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

An efficient municipal administration is often cited as a fundamental need for a well-functioning community with reliable services. The involvement of citizens in the functioning of local governments is considered crucial for ensuring effective governance and ensuring that public officials are accountable to the constituents they serve. The involvement of the general public on a significant level has always been seen as a crucial element of efficient governance and as a potent tool for addressing urgent societal issues. Recently, experts in all fields of social sciences have highlighted the vital importance of ordinary persons actively participating in all aspects of democratic governance. The field of public administration is similar in that it offers insights into how individuals impact the creation of policies, the structures of government, the methods of management, and the implementation of development projects at all stages. By this framework, the diverse rural and urban local government bodies in Bangladesh facilitated public participation in the decision-making process via their local government legislation. Various levels of involvement ranging from mild to severe were offered, along with the choice to completely refrain from participating.

The Union Parishad is widely regarded in Bangladesh as the primary entity with the greatest potential to significantly promote social transformation at the local level. It maintains open channels of contact with the wider public. This organization was founded to enhance the

provision of healthcare services in rural areas via increased accountability and transparency. The Bangladeshi government aims to promote good governance by encouraging public engagement in various local government responsibilities. However, Bangladeshi inhabitants are not significantly engaged in the day-to-day operations of local government administration. Residents have very limited opportunities to engage in the decision-making process via these channels, even though the government has formed many organizations to ensure people's involvement in the administration of local governments. When residents perceive a lack of influence over local decision-making, their participation in government operations is diminished. Regarding the awareness aspect, this is crucial. The administration has established many mechanisms, including local elections, Ward Shava, open budget debates, and multiple standing committees, to create the perception that residents are actively engaged in local government activities. Nevertheless, this engagement is mostly symbolic. These strategies aim to demonstrate that residents in Bangladesh have the chance to engage in local governance, but they do not ensure popular engagement.

Citizens must actively participate in local government to achieve successful governance. Despite specialized processes, local government public participation is poor. It shows that existing interaction strategies persuade individuals they can participate but do not ensure involvement. Bangladeshi citizens must be involved in local government in certain ways. These suggestions are vital for improving citizen participation.

Strong political will. It is widely believed that the primary political parties in the nation must want to promote public participation in the municipal government of Bangladesh.

Capacity building of the Union Parishad: The Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009 was implemented to guarantee the active involvement of the general people in the processes of planning and budgeting. No matter how diligently someone works on the World Cup and in the World Markets, their efforts will not yield any results. At the World Cup, there is an anticipation that a wide variety of Ward communities will be present. They will have the opportunity to communicate their goals for the advancement of the nation to the electorate. Continuous monitoring is necessary for the production of these panels. Several issues contribute to the improper execution of the Union Parishad, including insufficient knowledge, inadequate education and training, and a lack of professionalism among Union Parishad staff.

Bottom-up decision-making. Despite their lack of education and disadvantaged circumstances, persons living in rural regions possess a keen awareness of the challenges they

encounter. Given that residents have direct connections with workers at the lowest level, the success of the Union Parishad must include decision-making that starts from the bottom and moves upwards.

Quality education and political awareness: To facilitate participatory government, it is essential to ensure that individuals residing in rural areas of Bangladesh have access to education of superior quality and that their political consciousness is heightened. The federal government should implement the necessary steps to ensure efficient local governance and quality education in rural areas. Training and sensitizing local elected and government officials will significantly enhance their ability to assist in organizing a local peoples' convention, developing their networks, and utilizing village-to-village peer education and support methods to strengthen their capacities.

Negotiation between GO-NGO: To facilitate the establishment and convening of committees, it is necessary to disseminate the appropriate regulations at every stage of Union Parishad planning and budgeting cycle. Public officials must be held responsible for their failure to fulfill their obligations, including their negligence in scheduling and attending committee meetings. To streamline its operations at the local level of government, the Union Parishad must establish collaborations with various federal agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), LGIs such as Pourashava, commercial businesses from the City Corporation, and other relevant stakeholders. NGOs, community-based groups, and civil society should collaborate to establish effective coordinating structures that promote good governance and educate the public about the advantages of engaging in local government. Furthermore, they need to advise the populace against using coercion and assist them in acquiring the necessary skills for effective lobbying and influencing policies.

Mitigate all the odds. The objective of Union Parishad was to eliminate the chairman and Upazila Nirbahi Officer monopoly on planning and execution decisions by implementing a democratic process. Legislative endeavors aimed at eradicating prejudice provide a potential answer, however, democracy must be founded on the principle of guaranteeing that the viewpoints of all members are acknowledged and taken into account. Due to their discriminatory behavior and failure to assist women in the Union Parishad, the chairmen and general members are expendable. Given that political pressure exerted on Union Parishad members poses a substantial obstacle to the advancement of local governance, the government must develop a system to tackle this issue.

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