



## **Gender Differences in Effective Participation of the Elected People's Representatives to the Union Parishads of Bangladesh: Token Presence or Effective Participation**

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### **Abstract**

Effective political participation was measured with a questionnaire that was completed by 680 (347 female, 333 male) representatives to the rural local governance of Bangladesh, Union Parishads. The questionnaire included four scales. Females scored significantly lower than males on the scales of having influence on political decisions, active political participation and initiatives, and political commissions of trust; and significantly higher on victimisation from faulty meeting procedures. Influence on political decisions varied according to age group for females but not for males. Of the males, 94.7% participated in meetings regularly compared to only 30.1% of the females. Of the females, 16.9 % reported they were not informed about the time of the meetings, while this was the case for only 3.7% of the males. None of the committees used voting at the monthly meetings. Of the males, 94.9% reported that meeting decisions were taken through mutual understanding, while only 15.3% of the females were of that opinion. Of the females, 64.8% reported that decisions were taken by the chairman alone, and 19.9% of them that decisions were taken by the chairman and male members only. It may be concluded that despite recent legislative measures, female political participation still needs to be improved in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Effective political participation; females; Union Parishads; Bangladesh

## Introduction

The aim of the present study was to compare female and male people's representatives to the rural local government of Bangladesh regarding their effective participation in the overall governance process in their jurisdiction.

The lowest tier of the rural local government, also called the Union Parishads, is the smallest of the rural administrative and local governmental units in Bangladesh. This old local governance system is still in place in about 4480 Union Parishads, each consisting of 13 members. Among the members, one is elected as chairperson, nine are councilors (members) from nine different smaller areas of the Union Parishads, and three seats are reserved for female councilors. The women occupying the reserved seats are elected with the same voting system as the men, but as the three smaller wards are represented by three male members, only one female member represents all the three wards together.

It has been claimed that as far as political participation in Bangladesh is concerned, women are lagging behind men due to psychosocial, institutional, legal, cultural, and other barriers, which prevent them from participating actively (Panday, 2008). The association between good governance and gender equality has been debated over the past decades (Morna, 2002), and it has been asserted that the inclusion of women in the political decision-making process is connected with both economic and social empowerment (Husain & Siddiqi, 2002).

With the view to include women in the governance of Bangladesh, the government has taken different measures. The most notable one has been reserving seats for women in the local government, which was decided in the Local Government Ordinance of 1983 (Government of Bangladesh, 1983). After this primary initiative, the government has also reformed the acts and provisions for further political empowerment of women (Begum, 2012). The Local Government Ordinance of 1983 was reformed in 1992 and 1997, which finally resulted in the Local Government Act of 2009 (Government of Bangladesh, 2009). The act has made it easier for women to step up the power structure of the Union Parishads (Begum, 2012), and since that, female political participation has been shown to have increased significantly (Zaman, 2012).

However, it is still a matter of concern whether women are actually effective participators in political decision making, resource and responsibility allocation, and other core arenas of the political governance.

## **Definitions of Effective Political Participation**

In the realm of development discourse, the concept of political participation has got momentum in recent decades (Rahman, 2014). For being a wide concept, political participation has been defined both generally and specifically according to different aspects of social, political, and administrative settings. Agarwal (2001) has discussed different types of political participation such as a purely nominal membership in contrast to having an actual voice and influence in decision making. He distinguishes between six levels of participation: nominal, passive, consultative, activity-specific, active, and interactive participation. In a later study (Agarwal, 2010) he differentiated between token participation and active participation, based on three parameters of participation: attendance at meetings, speaking up, and office bearing.

Hossain (2012) provides another definition which describes a general sense of participation. It denotes participation as people's involvement in policy making, and developing and implementing plans and programmes. It describes a dynamic process of collective effort to problem solving and decision making, and it includes both voice and choice of individuals within an organization or any other group setting, as well as democratic involvement of people in formulating, implementing, and evaluating different policies.

In regard to participation as a tool for women's political empowerment, Panday (2010) has described three levels of women's political participation: (1) having the right to political involvement, (2) to exercising the right of voting at both a household and a community level, and (3) having female representation in regional and national bodies of government.

Many studies have defined participation as taking part in the decision-making process of the local governance institutions of the country. Without providing an in-depth definition, Panday (2008) has pointed out the difference between representation and participation, in an article titled 'Representation without participation', showing that representation in the governance process does not necessarily ensure participation. Hossain (2012) and Prodip (2014) have included implementation of development activities and taking part in the policy making process respectively as participation. Participation in activities like rural arbitration and regular meetings as a people's representative is also defined as participation (Hossain, 2012). Begum (2012) coined the term 'genuine participation' in her study, but no further definition was included.

## **Gender Differences in Effective Political Participation in Bangladesh**

Studies on gender differences in the political governance of Bangladesh have generally been qualitative by nature, except for two studies: one by Zaman (2012) and one by Shamim and Kumari (2002), which used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Gender differences have been studied regarding activities in the meetings

such as low attendance rate, causes for not attending meetings, reluctance to raise one's voice, and not having one's opinion treated with respect by other members.

In a study of 60 male and female representatives from the Dhaka Municipal Corporation and the Narayanganj municipality, it was found that female councilors had a higher attendance rate in the meetings than male councilors (Zaman, 2007). Common causes for not attending meetings for males were forgetting the schedule, being abroad, and not getting informed in time. In the case of females, the main causes were illness, and not getting floor time to talk in the meetings (Zaman, 2007). Moreover, male members were found to fully participate in meeting discussions, but in the case of female members, some participated partially and some did not participate at all in the discussion at the meetings (Zaman, 2007). It has been argued (Zaman, 2012) that gender differences regarding reluctance to raise one's voice in meetings occur due to faulty meeting procedures.

Another study conducted on Union Parishads from six districts of Bangladesh and two districts of India, with 602 women and 399 men (Shamim & Kumari, 2002) found that in addition to not getting informed of the meetings, the women members reported that their opinions were not duly accepted at the meetings.

Other gender differences have also been identified, such as problems related to the low number of female councilors, gender based allocation of responsibilities and exclusion, being forced to pay money in order to get one's rights, and proxy participation. One study investigated a particular problem affecting females connected to the ratio of male-female members. It was found that decisions were taken according to a coram of 60% of members. Since females were a minority in number, they could not as a group influence any decision taken in the meetings (Khan & Ara, 2006).

Perceived possibilities of influencing decisions have been addressed in many studies. Prodip (2014) found women to be systematically excluded from the activities of the councils. Zaman (2012) describes discrimination in allocation of responsibilities between male and female council members. The chairmen, who managed the work distribution to council members, assigned less responsibilities to women, they ignored women in financial affairs, and instead gave them unimportant tasks. Zaman (2012) also reported that in the case of the Narayanganj municipality, no female was assigned to be the head of a standing committee.

A study conducted on 19 Union Parishads found that women were forced to pay money to the chairmen in order to get involved in political projects (Rahman, 2014). In the same study, it was found that the members and the chairman were sharing the profit of various projects they were in charge of. Ultimately, a study conducted by Hossain (2012) on two Union Parishads and one Upazila (a sub-district of UP) revealed proxy participation, that is, husbands were found to attend meetings on behalf of their wives.

## **Age and Political Participation**

Age and political well-being have been interlinked in a number of studies. Involvement in civic political participation such as attending meetings, and investing time in volunteering, has been found to be one form of productive aging (Burr, Jeffrey, Caro, & Moorhead, 2002). Older party members, women included, have been shown to be valuable to the political parties due to their experience, flexibility regarding time, and contributions to local fund raising (Hudson & Gonyea, 1990). Similarly, a study by Schneider and Ingram (1993) showed that political contributions of elderly members were significant, and that their presence was experienced in a positive way.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The aim of the present study was to investigate gender differences in active political participation of elected people's representatives to the Union Parishads. Sex differences in four core areas of political participation were included: (1) influence on political decisions, (2) active political participation and initiatives, (3) political commissions of trust, and (4) victimisation from faulty meeting procedures. *Despite many studies addressing age and political participation have been conducted worldwide, no such study has to the knowledge of the authors been carried out in Bangladesh.* The study also endeavors to apply more advanced statistical analyses than previous studies on the issue from Bangladesh.

### **Method**

#### **Sample**

A questionnaire was completed by 680 representatives (347 females, 333 males) from eight Union Parishads (UP), the rural local governance, of Bangladesh. The mean age was 42.6 years ( $SD = 6.4$ ) for females and 43.9 ( $SD = 6.2$ ) for males; the age difference was significant [ $t_{(678)} = 2.6, p = .009$ ].

#### **Instrument**

Four scales measuring influence on political decisions, active political participation and initiatives, political commissions of trust, and victimisation from faulty meeting procedures, were constructed for the study. Response alternatives for all the items were on a five-point scale (never = 0, seldom = 1, sometimes = 2, very often = 3, always = 4). Single items of the scales and Cronbach's alphas are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Single Items and Cronbach's Alphas for the Four Scales in the Study (N = 680)**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <i>Influence on Political Decisions</i> (6 items, $\alpha = .97$ )               |   |
|  | a) I experience that I can influence decisions if I want to, b) My opinion is asked in specific matters, but I cannot influence decisions directly *), c) When I make an initiative, it is received well, d) My opinion is valued in standing committees, e) I am being asked to undertake specific tasks, f) I have selected and decided about beneficiaries.  |
| <i>Active Political Participation and Initiatives</i> (7 items, $\alpha = .96$ ) |   |
|  | a) In meetings, I express my opinion freely, whether or not solicited, b) I have expressed my disagreement verbally at a meeting, c) I have participated actively in project implementations, d) I have participated actively in relief allocations, e) I volunteer to undertake specific tasks, f) I make initiatives of different kinds, g) My initiatives have led to concrete actions or decisions. |
| <i>Political Commissions of Trust</i> (6 items, $\alpha = .79$ )                 |   |
|  | a) I became the convener of a tender committee, b) I became a member of a tender committee, c) I have signed to the monthly account statement, d) I became chairman of any village court arranged by the union council, e) I became a member of any village court arranged by the union council, f) I have been a convener of project preparation and implementation committee.                         |
| <i>Victimisation from Faulty Meeting Procedures</i> (6 items, $\alpha = .89$ )   |   |
|  | a) I don't get informed of the monthly meetings, b) My divergent opinion has been duly included in the minutes of the meeting *), c) I get informed about decisions only after then meetings, d) I have signed the resolution of a meetings without having attended, e) I have been forced to sign to the resolution of a meeting, f) Someone else has attended meetings for me.                        |

\*) recoded item

## Procedure

Two versions of a paper-and pencil questionnaire were constructed, one for females and one for males. Purposive sampling was used for selecting participants within the governance in order to secure an even distribution between female and male participants.

Data were collected in three phases. The data of the first phase, the pilot, were collected between January and July 2015. It included 141 (76 male and 65 female) participants from the Union Parishads of Jamalpur Sadar Upazila and Islampur Upazila. The second phase data were collected between September 2015 and January 2016, immediately before the UP elections which were held between March and June, 2016. It included 516 participants (260 females and 257 males) from Dewangonj, Sarishabari, Bakshigonj, Melandah, Madargonj Upazila of the Jamalpur district, Nakla,

Nalitabari, Sreebardi, Jhinaigati and Sherpur Sadar Upazila of the Sherpur district, and Dhanbari Upazila of the Tangail district. The third phase data were collected from Dhanbari and Modhupur Upazila of the Tangail district, and Muktagacha and Mymensingh Sadar Upazila of the Mymensingh district. It included 164 participants (88 females and 76 males) who retrieved their experiences of the previous term, most of them were also re-elected in the new elections.

### Ethical Considerations

The study was supported by the Upazila Nirbahi Office, and the National Institute of Local Government (NILG), Dhaka, Bangladesh. It adheres to the principles concerning human research ethics of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013), as well as the guidelines for responsible conduct of research of The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012).

### Results

#### Correlations between the Scales

It was found that all four scales correlated highly with each other for both females and males (Table 2) (all  $p < .001$ ). Victimization from faulty meeting procedures correlated significantly negatively with the other three scales for both females and males. The highest correlation for females was found between perceived influence on political decisions and possessing political commissions of trust ( $r = .93, p < .001$ ). For males, the highest correlation was a negative correlation between perceived influence on political decisions and victimisation from faulty meeting procedures ( $r = -.89, p < .001$ ).

**Table 2: Pearson’s Correlations between the Scales in the Study, for Females (below the Diagonal) and Males (above the Diagonal), N = 680**

|   | 1.       | 2.       | 3.       | 4.       |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 1. Influence on Political Decisions               | -        | .74 ***  | .67 ***  | -.89 *** |
| 2. Active Political Participation and Initiatives | .90 ***  | -        | .50 ***  | -.74 *** |
| 3. Political Commissions of Trust                 | .93 ***  | .82 ***  | -        | -.68 *** |
| 4. Victimization from Faulty Meeting Procedures   | -.84 *** | -.80 *** | -.72 *** | -        |

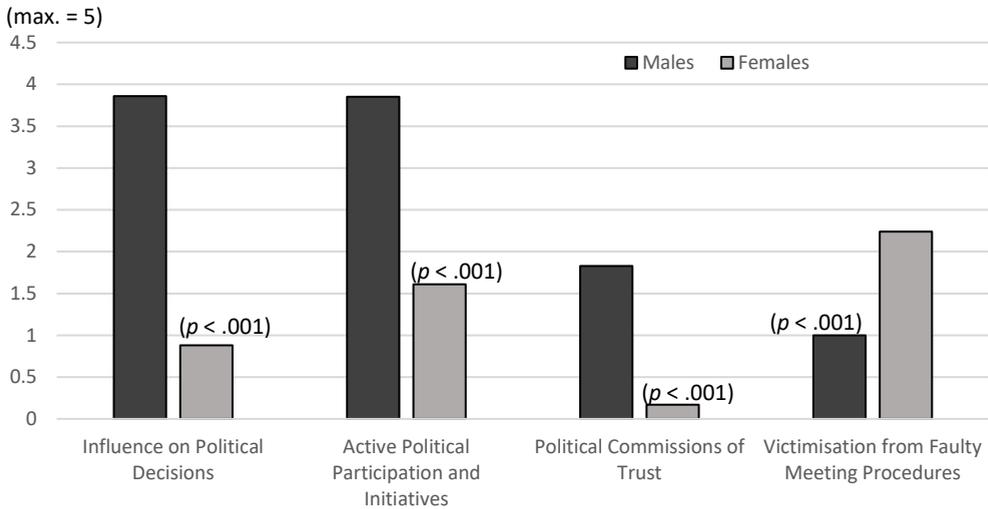
\*\*\*  $p < .001$

### Sex and Age Group

A multivariate analysis of variance (2 x 6 MANOVA) was conducted with sex and age group as independent variables and the four scales as dependent variables. The multivariate analyses were significant (Table 3). The univariate analyses showed significant differences for sex, age group, and the interaction between them.

**Table 3: Results of a Sex x Age Group (2 x 6) Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with Four Scales as Dependent Variables (N = 680)**

|                             |  | <i>F</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> ≤ | $\eta^2$ |
|-----------------------------|--|----------|-----------|------------|----------|
| Effect of Sex               |  |          |           |            |          |
|                             | Multivariate analysis                          | 310.60   | 4, 665    | .001       | .651     |
|                             | Univariate analyses                            |          |           |            |          |
|                             | Influence on Political Decisions               | 843.92   | 1, 668    | .001       | .558     |
|                             | Active Political Participation and Initiatives | 703.12   | "         | .001       | .513     |
|                             | Political Commissions of Trust                 | 1118.99  | "         | .001       | .626     |
|                             | Victimisation from Faulty Meeting Procedures   | 847.62   | "         | .001       | .559     |
| Effect of Age Group         |  |          |           |            |          |
|                             | Multivariate analysis                          | 6.84     | 20, 2672  | .001       | .049     |
|                             | Univariate analyses                            |          |           |            |          |
|                             | Influence on Political Decisions               | 28.53    | 5, 668    | .001       | .176     |
|                             | Active Political Participation and Initiatives | 21.61    | "         | .001       | .139     |
|                             | Political Commissions of Trust                 | 18.85    | "         | .001       | .124     |
|                             | Victimisation from Faulty Meeting Procedures   | 19.01    | "         | .001       | .125     |
| Effect of Sex and Age Group |  |          |           |            |          |
|                             | Multivariate analysis                          | 6.63     | 20, 2672  | .001       | .047     |
|                             | Univariate analyses                            |          |           |            |          |
|                             | Influence on Political Decisions               | 21.10    | 5, 668    | .001       | .136     |
|                             | Active Political Participation and Initiatives | 20.73    | "         | .001       | .134     |
|                             | Political Commissions of Trust                 | 12.28    | "         | .001       | .084     |
|                             | Victimisation from Faulty Meeting Procedures   | 12.93    | "         | .001       | .088     |



**Figure 1. Mean values for females and males on the four scales of the study (N = 680).**

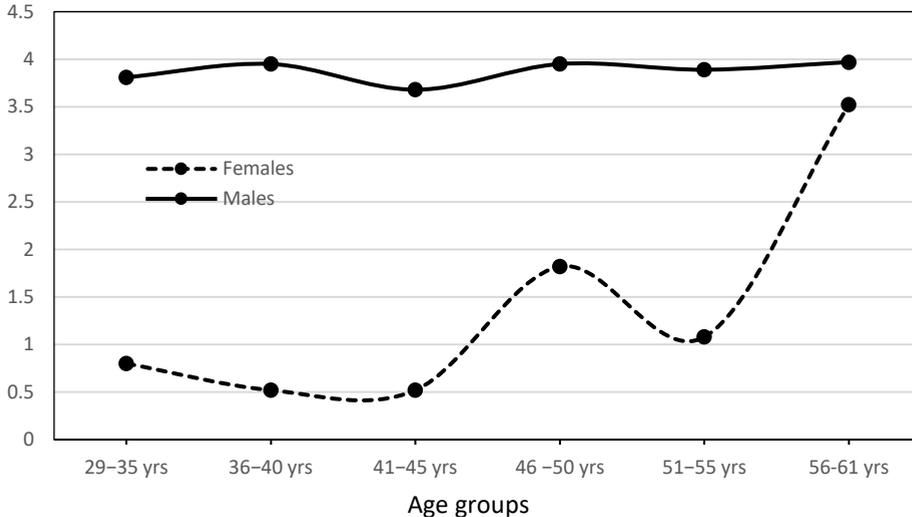
Females scored significantly lower than males on influence on political decisions, active political participation and initiatives, and political commissions of trust, and higher on victimisation from faulty meeting procedures (Fig. 1).

Scheffé's test revealed that for females, influence on political decisions varied according to age group (Table 4). The oldest age group, those who were 56–61 of age, scored significantly higher than all the other age groups, followed by participants 46–50 years of age. The second oldest age group, 51–55 years old, deviated from the pattern; they scored higher only than those who were 36–40 years old. For males, only two age group differences were found; for political decision making, respondents 41–45 years of age scored significantly lower than the age group younger than them (36–40 years), and the age group after them (46–50 years). Interaction effects between sex and age groups were found for influence on political decisions (Fig. 2). While age group differences were overall small for males, females 56–61 years of age showed a marked peak, while females 51–55 years of age showed a sharp decrease deviating from the pattern. It has, however, to be noticed that there were only seven females in the oldest age group.

**Table 4: Influence on Political Decisions. Significant Differences between Age Groups According to Scheffé’s Test (N = 680). All p < .05. Cf. Fig. 2**

| Age Groups      | Females              | Males        |
|-----------------|----------------------|--------------|
| I = 29–35 yrs   | I < IV, VI           |              |
| II = 36–40 yrs  | II < IV, V, VI       |              |
| III = 41–45 yrs | III < IV, VI         | III < II, IV |
| IV = 46 –50 yrs | IV > I –III; IV < VI |              |
| V = 51–55 yrs   | V > II; V < IV, VI   |              |
| VI = 56–61 yrs  | VI > all others      |              |

(max. = 4)



**Figure 2. Mean values for females and males of different age groups on perceived influence on political decisions (N = 680).**

## **Attendance and Voting at Meetings**

It was found that 94.7% of the males participated in meetings regularly compared to only 30.1% of the females. When asked why they did not attend the monthly meetings regularly, 16.9 % of the females reported that they were not informed about the meetings, while only 3.7% of the males reported the same. Of the females, 46.2% also said that the meetings were not held regularly, while only 0.5 % of the males said so.

Of the females, 10.4 % did not attend meetings. When asked about the reason for this, 8.5% reported that they were not able to raise their voice in the meetings, 1.5% said that their husband liked to participate in meetings instead of them, and 0.4% were busy with household chores.

The committees did not use voting at the monthly meetings. When asked about the reason for this, 94.9% of the males, and 15.3% of the females, reported that at meetings, decisions were taken through mutual understanding. Of the females, 64.8% reported that decisions were taken by the chairman alone, and 19.9% of them that decisions were taken by the chairman and male members only. In the case of males, these percentages were 2.4% and 2.7% respectively.

## **Discussion**

The aim of the study was to compare females and males regarding their effective political participation in the local governance of Bangladesh. Despite the legislative measures taken in order to enhance female effective political participation, it was found that female representatives to the local rural government rated their ability to influence political decisions to be significantly lesser than males. This included being asked about one's opinion in specific matters, initiatives being positively received, and being asked to undertake specific tasks like selecting and deciding about beneficiaries. Shamim and Kumari (2002) also found that the opinions of female representatives were not duly accepted at the meetings.

For both females and males, their perceived influence on political decisions correlated highly with the number of political commissions of trust that had been given to them, as well as with their own active political participation.

## **Political Participation**

Females also scored lower than males on active political participation and initiatives. This included being able to freely express opinions and disagreement at a meeting, to participate in project implementations and relief allocations, to volunteer to undertake specific tasks and initiatives, as well as experiencing that one's initiatives lead to concrete actions or decisions. Zaman (2007) has also found that some females did not speak at all during the meetings.

Regarding attendance at meetings, it was found that almost all (95%) of the males participated in meetings regularly, while only one third of the females did so. One

reason why females did not attend meetings was that they were not informed about them (17%), and as a consequence, almost half of them assumed that meetings were not held regularly. This is in line with findings by Shamim and Kumari (2002), who also found that female representatives were not informed about dates of the meetings. Another reason for not attending meetings was that they were not able to raise their voice there (8%). Zaman (2007) has also reported that one of the main reasons for females not to attend meetings was not getting floor time to speak at the meetings.

Females also scored lower than males on having been given political commissions of trust. This included not having been selected to be a member or a convener of a committee, not having been asked to sign the monthly account statement, not being member or chairman of a village court, or a convener of a project preparation and implementation committee. This result is in accordance with Zaman's (2012), who found that in the Narayanganj municipality in central Bangladesh, no female was assigned to be the head of a standing committee. He also found that the chairmen in general assigned less responsibilities to women. Systematic exclusion of women from council activities was found also by Prodip (2014).

Age group differences in political participation were overall small for males, while females 56–61 years of age showed a marked rise in activity. Previous studies have found a positive impact of age on political well-being (Burr, Jeffrey, Caro, & Moorhead, 2002; Hudson & Gonyea, 1990; Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

### **Faulty Meeting Procedures**

Influence on political decisions as well as active participation and commissions of trust correlated significantly negatively with how much the representatives were subjected to faulty meeting procedures. This was the case for both females and males.

Females rated themselves higher than males on being victimised from faulty meeting procedures. Such procedures included, e.g., not having one's divergent opinion included in the minutes of the meeting, getting informed about decisions only after the meetings, having been forced against one's will to sign the resolution of a meeting, or even having to sign the resolution of a meeting without having attended. Zaman (2012) has argued that females' reluctance to raise their voice in meetings is largely due to faulty meeting procedures.

It was further found that the committees did not use voting at the monthly meetings, and that almost all the males (95%) reported that decisions were taken through mutual understanding. In sharp contrast to this, over half of the females (65%) reported that decisions were taken by the chairman alone, or by the chairman and male members only (20%). Panday (2010) has pointed out that exercising the right to vote at a community level is as a tool for women's political empowerment.

A study by Hossain (2012) revealed proxy participation, i.e. that husbands or fathers participated instead of the women in meetings. In this study, only 1.5% of the females reported proxy participation by the husband; the percentage was low, but not zero.

### **Methodological Issues**

The study was quantitative by nature, in contrast to previous studies on the same topic in Bangladesh, which mostly have been qualitative. The scales of the study had high internal consistencies (Cronbach's alpha). The female respondents of the study were assisted by a female research assistant, in order to ensure that they would feel free to respond honestly and not embellish matters. The participants' command of their language was at times limited, which made it difficult for them to understand the questions, and response alternatives in the form of a Likert scale was also a new experience for many. Therefore, much time was spent explaining the questions to the respondents, with a male researcher assisting the males, and a female assisting the females.

### **Conclusions**

The study reveals that despite recent legislative measures, female political participation in Bangladesh still needs to be improved. As pointed out by Panday (2008), mere representation in the governance process does not necessarily ensure participation; therefore, female effective participation could be enhanced e.g. by diminishing faulty meeting procedures. If female representatives would be informed correctly about meetings, have their divergent opinions included in the minutes of the meetings, and if voting at meetings was introduced on a regular basis, female representatives could be encouraged to attend the meetings regularly and raise their voices without being embarrassed or afraid not to be accepted. By educating all members of the rural governance in sound meeting proceedings, a change in female effective participation could be brought about.

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