

## Chapter 7

# Summary and Conclusion

### I. Context of the Study

Women constitute half of the total population. Their participation in different socio-economic, cultural, political and decision-making processes can lead to significant development of the country. In South Asia, women's role in the sphere of decision-making has not been insignificant so far. In most of the cases, women's participation in the political process is hindered due to various social, economic, historical, political and cultural factors. Women's participation in formal decision-making bodies has not increased over the years. Several studies have been conducted on women's participation in local government in individual South Asian countries. But there is a growing interest to know the level of participation of women in the political process of South Asian countries. In this context, the present research was an attempt to compare the participation of women in local government bodies of Bangladesh and the Indian State of West Bengal.

In Bangladesh and West Bengal, India, it has been seen that after independence, various initiatives and efforts were made to enhance the participation of women in local governments. The Governments of both the countries attempted to empower women politically through affirmative actions by providing one-third reservation for women in local bodies in order to ensure their participation at the local level. Women participate in the local bodies of both the countries as voters, candidates, and as elected members taking part in decision-making process, planning and implementation. In both the countries, it was found that although a large number of women were elected as local representatives,

obstacles emanating from women's gender identity hindered them from playing their roles with full effectiveness. It was found that patriarchal values, absence of proper socio-economic and political environment, lack of effective and timely planning, inadequate political background, dearth of skill and training put women behind in proving their competencies compared to their male colleagues. The aim of this chapter is to summarise the major findings elaborated in the previous chapters and to establish the key findings with regard to the research questions of this thesis. In this chapter, the findings have been summarised and an attempt has been made to place the key findings of the study in a comparative perspective.

## **II. General Findings of the Study**

The arrangement of analysis of this research was an articulation of the substance that emerged from the literature on women's participation in UPs of Bangladesh and GPs of West Bengal, India as well as the data from questionnaire survey and interviews. The general findings of the study are outlined below.

Chapter one concentrated on methodological and research issues of the study. It provided sufficient information from existing literature and identified some palpable research gaps in comparative status of women's participation in local governments of Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. The chapter presented an analytical framework which was used for comprehensively examining the comparable situation in chapters four, five and six. In this Chapter, the objectives and significance of the study, key questions pertaining to the study, and the limitations of the study were also outlined.

Chapter two analysed the evolution of women's participation in rural local government of South Asian countries. It revealed that, local governments in South Asian countries were active since the British colonial period but women's participation has long been ignored. Women's status was determined by the domestic sphere, where their main responsibilities involved raising children and household works. However, times have changed and many South Asian countries have enacted special provisions to ensure women's participation in rural local government. It has been observed that historical continuity played an essential part in reservation of seats for women in both Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. This chapter also explained the structure of local governments in South Asian countries in

detail, covering the present status in the context of women's participation. Chapter three discussed the profiles of the study areas in order to understand the status of women representatives in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. It analyzed the physical, demographic and general profiles of UPs of Bangladesh and GPs of West Bengal, which showed a good literacy rate and sufficient infrastructure in the study areas.

Chapter four dwelt on the socio-economic background of women representatives, which had direct influence on the participation of women representatives in rural local government in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. It examine variables like age, education, marital status, occupation, income level, land ownership, type and size of family, standard of living, availability of modern devices in households and husbands' education, occupation and income level, which were important factors in shaping women's ability to emerge as local leaders. From a comparative perspective, this chapter found that both in Bangladesh and West Bengal, a majority of women representatives were relatively young, married and from nuclear families. The level of education was quite inadequate for women representatives in both territories. Approximately 7% women representatives of Bangladesh and 12% women representatives of West Bengal could only sign their names properly. In the case of occupational status, majority of women representatives were housewives in both countries. However, in West Bengal, a significant number of women were involved in social work and teaching profession outside their home. In the perspective of earning income, it was found that a large number of women were housewives in both countries and only a few had personal incomes of their own.

Chapter five identified some specific factors which had effect on women's participation as candidates in election. It revealed that in both Bangladesh and West Bengal, a significant number of women contested in the UP and GP elections due to the reservation of seats. In some constituencies, some women contested in the seats which were represented earlier by their male family members. In fact they contested in the elections at the instance of their husbands/relatives with their support and help. In both countries, those male family members later carried out all required functions on behalf of the elected women. On the other hand, a small number of women came up with personal interest to work for the people, and in some cases, social organizations encouraged them to participate in elections in both the countries.

From a comparative perspective, it was found that women candidates of West Bengal had more political connections than those from Bangladesh. It was found that an overwhelming proportion of candidates were housewives; so they had to collect money from different sources to meet the electoral expenditure. During election campaign, their pledges on various issues were almost similar in both countries. It was found that 2.88 women candidates on an average contested against each reserved seat in UP election of Bangladesh, whereas in West Bengal 2.49 women candidates on an average contested against each reserved seat in the GP election. In the context of the level of competition, it was observed that a large number of women candidates contested against two candidates in Bangladesh and a majority of the women candidates contested against one candidate in West Bengal. Furthermore, some constraints faced by women while participating in elections were identified. In both countries, women candidates who participated in elections also carried the burden of domestic duties. An overwhelming majority of the women candidates identified some common constraints which inhibited women's participation as candidates in election, such as patriarchal outlook, scarcity of finance, socio-cultural values, lack of confidence, low education and non-cooperation from family members.

Chapter six found that the women representatives of both the countries lacked education and awareness needed for performing their duties properly. In both countries, most women attended meetings regularly, but very few had any influence on decision making. A majority of them neither spoke, nor cast votes. Only a few participated in the deliberations and those who were educated or had a political background were more vocal than others. It was found that the women members usually involved themselves with mass education, family planning, *shalish* (mediation in the village court), immunisation, handicrafts, and relief activity in both countries. Moreover, it was found that due to lack of social support, women could not work together with male members in an integrated manner and with a democratic spirit, which hampered the implementation of development schemes in both countries. Also women of both countries appeared to face non-cooperation from male members, inadequate honorarium and gender discrimination in every step of their activities.

Women members felt challenges more in the family and social spheres, because of their proximity. A clearer picture emerged when each set of problems was examined

separately. In Bangladesh, each of the women members had three male counterparts in each UP. Therefore, it was difficult for them to visit their large constituency and meet the transportation expenses. Some other constraints that women representatives faced in the UPs were inappropriate implementation of the local government ordinance related to allocation of development schemes among female members, lack of advance notices about the meetings, occasional insistence by the Chairman to sign the minutes of a meeting even when female members were absent, and abuses by the male counterparts. In West Bengal, despite reservations for women, their effective participation is hindered due to manipulations by the local power elites. This chapter found that the political parties were working as facilitators of women's participation in GPs. Sometimes however they were also creating obstruction on the path of decision-making by women. In West Bengal, women representatives faced problems like non-cooperation from male members, inadequate honorarium, lack of need based training, gender discrimination, lack of education and awareness, discrimination based on caste-class factors, and lack of support from local elites.

Chapter seven contains a conclusive summary, which addresses the general findings of the research. Moreover, it examines key findings of the research which were drawn by the researcher from the literature review. In fact, the key findings establish the conclusion of the research. Further researches have also been proposed against the challenges that are being faced by the women representatives in local governments of South Asia. This chapter provides an opportunity to present informed views about the outcomes of this research and further scope for newer research in this area.

### **III. Key Findings and Conclusion**

The main focus of the present research was to examine the participation of women in local governments of South Asia. Here, women's participation has been studied in the UPs of Bangladesh and GPs of West Bengal, India within a comparative framework. However, it should be noted that only the main questions that arose from the research will be discussed in this section. Since the preceding chapters have provided the information necessary to fulfil the objectives of the research as well as to provide answers to the research questions, all aspects of the research findings from previous chapters will not be

discussed here in detail. Key questions pertaining to this research are being discussed in the following paragraphs.

**The first research question** dealt with the significance of socio-economic background of women representatives while participating in UPs of Bangladesh and GPs of West Bengal. Chapter four explored its subsequent implications and the present researcher identified some dominant variables that had impact on women's participation as candidates as well as representatives in UPs of Bangladesh and GPs of West Bengal.

It was found that the provision of reserved seats for women led to increasing participation by young women and a large number of them undertook the responsibilities of UPs and GPs, which is in agreement with some earlier studies. The study showed that the religious distribution of women representatives represented the existing proportion of religious beliefs in their societies. It found that the majority of women representatives in both the countries were married and came from nuclear families. From the comparative perspective of education, it was found that a majority of the women had below secondary level education. It was also observed that a large number of women representatives were housewives in both countries, of which the figure for Bangladesh was greater than West Bengal. There were sharp distinctions between income levels of women representatives in the two countries. The present research found that women representatives came from lower to higher level income groups in West Bengal, whereas higher level income groups were almost absent in Bangladesh. It revealed that very few women had own land in both countries; but where they did hold land, sometimes land ownership helped them emerge as local leaders and participate in election. During survey, it was found that the standard of living of women representatives was average and most of them were acquainted with modern devices and equipments. From the study of family status of women members, it was found that a majority of women came from the middle class families and their husbands were involved in diverse occupations such as business, private service, teaching, social work etc. in both countries. As outlined in chapter four, socio-economic background was identified as an indicator of women's social status. It was an influential factor, which enhanced their capacity of leadership and participation in electoral process. Thus, with regard to the first research question, it was found that socio-economic background extensively impacted on women's participation as candidates and representatives in the UPs of Bangladesh and GPs of West Bengal.

**The second research question** was on the dominant factors behind participation of women as candidates in elections of UPs in Bangladesh and GPs in West Bengal. The first observation in this matter is that in both countries there were significant similarities with regard to these factors. In the opinion of the researcher, there were many similarities between the present survey and the literature review about women's participation as candidates in election. This was particularly evident from numerous factors that emerged from this contextual analysis.

As outlined in Chapter five, it was observed that in both Bangladesh and West Bengal, sometimes local people inspired women candidates to participate in election. It was found that in both countries, most of the women candidates stated that they contested in the election due to reservation of seats for women. Some candidates of both countries were personally interested to contest in UP and GP elections. As outlined in Chapter five, women candidates of both countries informed that social organizations sufficiently encouraged them to participate in UP and GP elections. It was found that political affiliation in contesting election was a predominant factor and political affiliation was important for being elected in West Bengal. But in Bangladesh, a majority of respondents among the candidates had no political affiliation. From a comparative context, it appeared that participation of the politically affiliated candidates was higher in West Bengal than the candidates of Bangladesh. The present research discussed women candidate's election experiences in terms of their success and failure in both countries. A large number of candidates contested in the election without previous election experience. In fact, it was because of reservation that the rural women were inspired to contest in election. In both countries, election commitments were closely linked to priority areas which emphasized on women-related issues.

Campaigning strategy of the women candidates was almost similar for getting the support of villagers in both countries. Majority of women candidates had no income and they were economically dependent on their families. So they got financial support from various sources to meet their electoral expenses. However, it was apparent that the number of candidates financed by self was higher in Bangladesh than in West Bengal. The present research found that the extent of competition against each reserved seat was 2.88 in UPs of Bangladesh and 2.49 in GPs of West Bengal. Moreover, it was noted that

in Bangladesh, majority of women candidates contested against two candidates and in West Bengal, a majority contested against one candidate. With regard to factors behind success in election, close similarities were observed in Bangladesh and West Bengal.

Through the discussion of constraints, the present research found close similarities between the issues raised by the candidates of Bangladesh and West Bengal. During participation in elections, women candidates of both countries faced some common constraints like lower level of education, lack of self-confidence, lack of previous election experience, patriarchal outlook, problems with campaigning at night, inadequacy of finance, non-cooperation from local elites and socio-cultural constraints. Likewise, discussions on individual constraints showed that in Bangladesh, major constraints were large constituency, and religious values like *purdah*. On the other hand, the typical constraints in West Bengal were patterns of exclusion relating to caste-class factors, and political factionalism. In fact, the second research question explored the factors behind women's participation in election, which determined their political engagement and the above were the main findings.

**The third research question** dwelt on the level of participation of women as representatives and what were the constraints that inhibited their participation in UPs of Bangladesh and GPs of West Bengal; it was discussed elaborately in Chapter six. It examined the participation of women representatives and their performance, which resulted in almost similar findings in both the countries. Similar to the discussion on constraints, there were close similarities between the issues raised by the respondents in the two countries.

The present research found that an overwhelming majority of women attended the meetings regularly even though they could not play active role in discussions compared to their male counterparts in UPs of Bangladesh and GPs of West Bengal. With regard to the importance of their opinion, women representatives claimed that they could sometimes express their views during discussions. It was found that women's participation in decision making was better in West Bengal compared to Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, some women members could not contribute to the decision making process because they were not educated enough to express their opinion. Other factors that limited the ability of women members to contribute in decision making included hesitation to participate in

discussions in presence of male colleagues. However, these types of women members were comparatively fewer in West Bengal.

The present research found that a majority of women UP members in Bangladesh had partial involvement in managing development projects, whereas in West Bengal, majority of women GP members had full involvement. It was found that in both countries, women members were very much involved in the development of agriculture, education, health and sanitation, construction and relief distribution. In Bangladesh, women members frequently engaged themselves in VGF activities, VGD (Vulnerable Group Development) projects, FFW (Food for Works) programme, TR (Test Relief) project and RMP (Regular Maintenance Project) in order to generate employment and income for disadvantaged women in their respective areas. In West Bengal, it was seen that women representatives engaged in National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), rural housing scheme – Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY), Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS), Social Welfare Pension like - Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme, Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme, Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme, Provident Fund for Landless (PROFLAL) Scheme, Backward Classes Pension Scheme, Annapurna Yojana (Food Security) and Sanitation programme. In both countries, some women were found who did not participate in any development activities.

The research found that women representatives' participation in both the countries was at a satisfactory level in the domain of women's issues related to health, welfare, violence against women, prevention of crimes like dowry and violation of human rights, and increase of female education. In both countries, women representatives mostly played their due roles as chairperson or member of school committees, committees for resisting violence against women, tender committees, relief distribution committees, health and family planning committees, and as members in the committees on judiciary, recruitment, purchase and *haat* (market) of the local areas. It was also observed that the scope of their participation and involvement in financial committees and their decision-making was limited. In some cases, some women representatives were given memberships in more than one committee at a time. Sometimes, women representatives of Bangladesh and West Bengal did not know about their memberships in committees.

Elected female representatives played an important role in conflict resolution in a number of contexts in their respective areas. They tried to take necessary steps through mediation in *shalish*, discussions with family members, advice for legal action or help through UP meetings. Some women did not give any response on this subject. In both the countries, women representatives conceded that they received cooperation from secretaries, officers, political parties, male and female members, husbands, family members and villagers in the discharge of their duties. Although the issue of non-cooperation from male colleagues was previously discussed as a limitation, sometimes they also got some support from them. It was also found that training programmes by government organizations and NGOs, local organizations, guidance by ex-members, reading materials and field visits also helped them to work properly. Regarding fulfilment of election pledges, women representatives in both countries, disclosed that they could partially keep their pladges. According to them, they could not meet all the demands in accordance with the local people's requirements. Women members who could not fulfil their election pledges reported that they had to face many hostile situations for not being able to keep all their promises.

To evaluate the level of participation of women representatives, the present research tried to know the perception of male members and villagers regarding the performance of women members of UPs in Bangladesh and GPs in West Bengal. During the survey, male colleagues and villagers who spoke about women members' performance stated that in some cases services provided by the women members were well delivered. It was evident during discussions that a majority of respondents believed that though women members were not fully successful in their position, a positive change had occurred in the locality due to their participation in UPs and GPs.

It was found in chapter six that women members' performance in UPs and GPs were limited by some constraints. In analyzing the barriers to women members playing their role, relevant literature and the views of the respondents were considered. In Bangladesh, significant barrier to women UP members playing their due role included lack of education and knowledge, non-cooperation from male members, socio-cultural values, religious constraints (*purdah*), discrimination by the chairman, large constituency, inadequate honorarium, lack of need-based training, gender discrimination, lack of support from local elites and lack of economic resources. In West Bengal, women

members mentioned that their constraints were lack of education and awareness, lack of support from family, non-cooperation from male colleagues, inadequate honorarium, lack of need-based training, gender discrimination, lack of support from local elites, discrimination based on caste-class factors, and socio-cultural constraints. Indeed, both in Bangladesh and West Bengal, women had to face various challenges both from their families and outside. The present research found that there were no women representatives who did not face any problem in performing their duties in UPs and GPs.

## **IX. Concluding Remarks**

The women representatives are designated as change agents for rural development, but unfortunately in Bangladesh and West Bengal they did not have adequate knowledge or training on development and organizational issues in order to play an effective role in the rural areas. They need to gain the confidence and capabilities for contesting in elections in order to enhance their overall representation. At the end, it can be said that 33 per cent reservations for women in UPs of Bangladesh and GPs of West Bengal is a good step, but it should be supplemented with effective measures that ensures the qualitative improvement of women's participation and enhanced confidence and ability of women to perform their functions independently and effectively. The Government of West Bengal has recently recognized that even 'not less than one-third' reservation is not adequate and has passed the provision of 50% reserved seats for women in Panchayat Raj institutions, though no election has yet been held under this act.<sup>1</sup> In addition, India has introduced all-women panchayats in West Bengal, which are absent in Bangladesh. Therefore, efforts should be made by the Government of Bangladesh to reserve 50% seats for women in the local government bodies like India. In addition, this kind of research and follow-up actions are vital to ensure effective participation of women in local government bodies of Bangladesh, West Bengal and South Asia as a whole and to prepare these bodies adequately to deal with any challenges that emerge on the path of women's participation. This is why further research and future investigations on women's participation in local government are needed in a comparative framework. Further research will generate innovative ideas and approaches which will make South Asia a better place for women's empowerment at the grassroots level.

## **Endnotes**

1. Government of West Bengal, *West Bengal Panchayat (Second Amendment) Act, 2010*, Government of West Bengal: Kolkata, 2011, pp.1-3.