

**EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH DIRECT
ELECTION IN RESERVED SEATS: A COMPARATIVE
STUDY OF RURAL AND URBAN LOCAL
GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS IN BANGLADESH**

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ABSTRACT

The thesis makes a contribution through a case study to investigate the way in which women candidates in Bangladesh are elected and the challenges that they face in striving to empower women through electoral representation. The study focuses on the grass-roots local government, in a comparative study between selected rural and urban local government institutions in different socio-economic, educational, and cultural contexts. Despite the achievements in terms of being elected and representing the needs of women, the elected representatives continue to face many challenges who face pressures within the domestic unit and from the local government administration that remains weighted in the favour of male candidates. Nevertheless the thesis shows how women make a contribution to changing the life chances of women through Local Government Ordinance 1997 with the provision of direct election in reserved seats. This study aims to explore the dynamics, challenges and the potential for women's empowerment through direct election under this Act.

Despite challenges, the findings of the study reveal some indications of women's agency and empowerment. *Firstly*, the findings show that women representatives of the survey area are able to develop agency and mobility starting from the decision to stand as candidates and to contest an election, continuing through the election campaign and then by performing roles in the LGIs. Women representatives show personal freedom as a result of their being able to talk to people beyond their immediate and extended family, to attend meetings with unknown officials and by visiting public places.

Secondly, the study evidences structural changes towards gender equity—at least in this study sample. The burden of domestic chores of many of the women representatives were eased after being elected. They were also more highly valued in the society and invited in community forums like school committees and to participate in Shalish¹.

Thirdly, the study shows how direct election can enhance well-being and empowerment of women in the wider community. The elected women representatives surveyed in this study appeared to be the very first people consulted for help by women in the community who face oppression, repression and injustice including dowry, rape, physical torture and fatwa. Women representatives also took on projects and training programs enhancing income generating activities for general women.

The study also identifies some critical hurdles that put restrictions achieving women's agency and empowerment in the local government institutions including non-cooperation from elected male representatives, lack of clear demarcation and overlapping of the constituency of the reserved seats with 3 general seats, non-identification of roles and responsibilities of the women representatives in the 1997 Act, religious and socio-cultural restrictions including restrictions on women's mobility outside home, etc. Findings of the study, thus, offer important policy implication in the endeavour of women's empowerment of the country.

¹ Shalish is the system of informal social adjudication in Bangladesh to solve petty disputes among villagers avoiding costly legal enforcement.

CANDIDATE DECLARATION

I certify that the thesis entitled

**“EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH DIRECT ELECTION IN
RESERVED SEATS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RURAL AND URBAN
LOCAL GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS IN BANGLADESH”**

submitted for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

is the result of my own work.

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

FULL NAME: SHAJEDA AKTAR

SIGNATURE:

DATE: OCTOBER 2014

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DEDICATION

*Dedicated to my hardworking parents
(it is because of you I am here today...)*

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADB:	Asian Development Bank
ASK:	Ayeen-O-Shalish Kendra
AUD:	Australian Dollar
BBC:	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBS:	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BPSC:	Bangladesh Public Service Commission
CAPWIP:	Centre for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics
CEDAW:	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
DFID:	Department For International Development
GAD:	Gender and Development
GOB:	Government of Bangladesh
HDR:	Human Development Report
HSC:	Higher Secondary Certificate
IDEA:	Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
LGI:	Local Government Institution
LGRD:	Local Government and Rural Development
MDG:	Millennium Development Goals
MP:	Member of Parliament
NGO:	Non Government Organization
PR:	Proportionate Representation
RCC:	Rajshahi City Corporation
SSC:	Secondary School Certificate
TK:	Taka (currency of Bangladesh)

ULGI:	Urban Local Government Institution
UN:	United Nations
UNDAW:	United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women
UNDP:	United Nation Development Programme
UNICEF:	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNIFEM:	United Nations Fund for Women
UP:	Union Parishad
USD:	United States Dollar
VGD:	Vulnerable Group Development
VGf:	Vulnerable Group Feeding
WAD:	Women and Development
WDR:	World Development Report
WFP:	World Food Programme
WID:	Women in Development

GLOSSARY

Apa:	sister
Ayeen:	law
Azaan:	call for prayer (in Islam)
Baba:	papa
Babosthya:	system
Bazaar:	market
Begum:	Mrs
Biruddhe:	against
Burqa:	veil to cover woman's body to obey Purdah
Fatwa:	religious decree by Islamic leaders
Gram:	village
Grameen:	rural
Hilla:	interim marriage after divorce (a pre-condition to reunite)
Jatiyo:	national
Jomi:	land
Kendra:	centre
Madrasha:	Islamic school
Nari:	woman
Neqab:	scarf to cover head by woman
Nirbahi:	executive
Parishad:	council

Pouroshova:	municipality
Purdah:	covering body and face with veil by women (in Islam)
Salam:	Islamic way of greetings
Sangsad:	parliament
Sarkar:	government
Shaheb:	Sir/Madam
Shohor:	town
Shalish:	informal social adjudication
Sochibaloy:	secretariat
Sohinghsota:	violence
Sthaniyo:	local
Taka:	unit of Bangladeshi currency
Talak:	divorce
Upazilla:	sub-district
Zilla:	district