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Executive Summary

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Introduction

In Bangladesh, the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) is the Chief Executive of the Upazila administration, the second lowest tier of field administration. Senior Assistant Secretary of administration cadre of Bangladesh Civil Service is posted as UNO at the Upazilla level. According to the provisions of Upazila Administrative Reorganization (Second Amendment) Ordinance-1973, the Chairperson is elected through direct election. However, until the Chairperson is not elected, the UNO or a person nominated by the Government shall act as the Chairperson. In the absence of an elected Chairperson, the UNO will cooperate with the nominated Chairperson in all respects and act in accordance with his advice. In addition, the UNO will be responsible to the Chairperson for performing the functions.

1.2 Main responsibilities of the UNO

As the chief of the upazila administration, the main responsibility of the UNO is to provide support to the activities of the Upazila Parishad and to inform the central government about the activities of the Upazila Parishad. According to the Upazila Parishad Manual 2013, the UNO will perform the following responsibilities.

- Provide assistance to the Chairperson regarding exercising the executive power. As an official, s/he may attend meetings of the Council and, if necessary, but does not exercise the right to vote. The UNO will inform the local government department if s/he feels the need to send any decision taken at the Upazila Parishad meeting to the government.
- Assist the council in carrying out all the functions of the council as well as take measures to implement the decisions of the council meeting. However, if the decision of the meeting is not taken in accordance with the law and if the decision or implementation of the decision will endanger the life and health and public safety of the people, then request the council in writing to reconsider it. If the Council upholds its earlier decision, the UNO shall inform the Government or the designated authority and take necessary steps.
- Play the role of coordinator in performing the duties of the officers assigned to the Upazila Parishad.
- Assist the Chairperson in overseeing all developmental and administrative activities at the upazila level. Also supervise developmental and administrative functions. The UNO contributes in formulating and implementing the integrated development plan of the upazila and keep track of the progress and expenditure of development projects under the upazila.
- Verify the appropriateness of expenditure in the light of financial regulations in the management of the funds of the council and advise the council in the matter of expenditure.
- Assist the Upazila Parishad in formulating and approving the annual budget.

* Released through a virtual press conference on 4 November 2021.

1.3 Rationale

Article 28 of the Constitution of Bangladesh recognizes the principle of equality between men and women in state life, and Article 29 ensures equality of employment for men and women. Out of the 17 goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, the Government of Bangladesh has identified 8 goals as more integrated goals. Among the 8 goals, SDG 5 is related to women's rights and gender equality. In addition, the Government of Bangladesh adopted the National Women's Development Policy 2011 where one of the goals is to exercise women's rights and ensure proper justice. The Seventh Five Year Plan (2017-2020) also emphasizes gender equality and women's empowerment. However, various studies have found that women public representatives face various problems while working at the local level, which may also be applicable to women UNO.

At this backdrop, more research is needed on women UNO in Bangladesh. It is to be noted that there is a dearth of specific research on the challenges in the activities of women UNOs in Bangladesh. Research is needed to find out whether women UNOs face any challenge in implementing the activities at the local level. Besides, TIB has been conducting a training program titled 'SDG, Good Governance and Women' for women UNOs since 2016. In continuation of this effort, this study has been conducted to identify the challenges of women UNOs in establishing good governance at the local level.

1.4 Objective and Scope of the Research

The objective of the study is to analyze the challenges faced by female UNOs in performing administrative duties at the local level. This study analyzes the challenges related to providing secretarial assistance to the Upazila Parishad, providing assistance to the Upazila Chairperson, coordinating with other officers and following the government guidelines of the Upazila administration.

1.5 Research Methods

In this study, data has been collected following both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources.

Primary data collection method

Online Survey: According to the Upazila web portal data, as of June 2020, out of 485 upazilas, there were 149 women UNOs. Questionnaire were sent to all the women UNOs for survey. Among them 45 participated in the survey. KOBO tools were used for collecting survey data.

Key Informant Interview: In order to collect the qualitative information, women UNOs, Deputy Commissioners, Additional Deputy Commissioners, officers of other government offices at the upazila level, and senior officials of the administration cadre were interviewed directly. Interviews were conducted through questionnaire.

Secondary sources of information

Secondary sources of information include related laws, regulations, manuals, various research reports, books, articles, online and print newspapers, and various government websites.

Data collection period

Field data of the study were collected from June 2020 to March 2021.

2. Findings of the research

In this study, the activities of the UNO have been analyzed in four parts. Firstly, to provide secretarial assistance to the Upazila Parishad; secondly, to provide assistance to the Upazila Chairperson; thirdly, to coordinate with the Upazila Parishad and other divisional officers; and fourthly to carry out activities related to the execution of government instructions.

2.1 Challenges related to providing secretarial assistance to Upazila Parishad:

The UNO provides secretarial assistance to the Upazila Parishad in making and implementing any decision, approval of bills related to expenditure of Upazila Chairperson and members, approval of expenditure of all projects of the Upazila and verification of all types of expenditure of Upazila Parishad. In addition, the UNO provides secretarial assistance in advising and implementing any kind of program to the Council. An analysis of the UNO's secretarial assistance data shows that she faced challenges in most of the cases to approve the illegal financial benefits. The challenge of approving such illegal financial benefits comes mainly from elected representatives and local politicians. Among the surveyed UNOs 34.3% felt pressure to commit irregularities in the relief distribution process. They are forced to make recommendations for additional relief supplies, as said by 20% respondent. In addition, 31.4% of UNOs reported that they were forced from various section not to verify the accuracy of expenditure and 26.7% of UNOs said that they were forced to approve fake expenditure bills. 25.6% UNO said that they faced challenges for doing irregularities in the procurement process of Upazila Parishad. It is worth mentioning here that 23.54% of UNOs said that they do not get the necessary support from their colleagues to complete the work properly.

2.2 Challenges to provide assistance to Upazila Chairperson:

According to the Upazila Parishad Manual 2013, the UNO provides assistance to the Upazila Chairperson in exercising her/his executive powers, overseeing development programs and administrative activities. 40.5% of the UNOs did not receive proper cooperation from the Chairperson, while 31.4% faced obstacles to facilitate anti-corruption work in the upazila. In addition, 31.4% UNO reported that they were subject to pressure from various section if they took any initiative against illegal acts. In addition, they (31%) faced political influence in conducting different activities of the upazila. This is also alarming that 5.6% UNOs commented on sexual harassment when they provided services to Chairperson through monitoring in development activities.

2.3 Challenges in coordination process:

It is difficult to coordinate with the various departments of the government at Upazila level for doing development and emergency activities, according to 31% UNOs. One of the functions of the Upazila Parishad is to take preventive measures against crimes like terrorism, theft, robbery, smuggling, drug use, abuse of women and children etc. as a part of improving the law-and-order situation in the Upazila. The cooperation of law enforcement agencies is very important in performing these tasks. 31% of UNOs complained they do not get cooperation from law enforcement agencies in time if law and order situation in the upazila deteriorates. In addition, it has become a challenge to UNO (11.9%) to tackle the influence powerful person, e.g. minister, local parliamentarian, and secretary. In some cases, they (7.10%) have not received timely cooperation from the district administration.

2.4 Challenges to implement the government directives

2.4. 1 Disaster Management:

The study found that 98% of UNOs faced challenges in dealing with disasters at the field level. According to the survey, 48.9% of UNO faced challenges in coordinating various departments of the government in dealing with disasters. One of the tasks of the Upazila Parishad is to distribute relief among the affected people under disaster response activities. Regarding distribution of relief, political leaders of the Upazila Parishad force the UNO to make irregularities in the distribution of relief materials and to make recommendations for additional relief materials. According to the study, 35.6% of UNO have to deal with the challenge of irregularities in the distribution of relief. 17.6% of UNO participants in the survey said they did not get the support from the disaster affected people. In addition, 7.9% of UNO said they could not rescue the affected people in a timely manner.

2.4.2 Challenges in dealing with Corona pandemic

It was found that 91% of UNOs faced challenges in dealing with the Corona situation. Of them, 74.3% said they did not have the necessary budget to deal with the situation. 28.6% did not get the support of law enforcement agencies to make the lockdown a success. In addition, 22.9% of UNOs faced the challenge to tackle the situation of corruption in the distribution of social security items such as PPE, masks, hand sanitizers. Various government departments of the Upazila Parishad were involved in tackling the Corona situation. 20% of UNOs said they did not get assistance from the relevant departments, while 5.7% reported corruption in the procurement of medical safety equipment.

2.4.3 Challenges to take measure against corruption measures:

89.1% of UNOs has taken steps to establish transparent local government through prevention of corruption at the local level. The study found that 43.5% of UNOs faced obstacles in taking action against corruption. Obstacles are created while taking action against influential local politicians for doing corruption. 48.5% of UNOs said that when they take action against corruption, pressure is exerted from influential people and local politicians. 18.2% UNOs also mentioned that they did not receive co-operation from law enforcement agencies in taking anti-corruption measures. Similarly, 9.1% of UNOs said that they did not get cooperation from the Upazila Chairperson in anti-corruption activities.

2.4.4 Types of anti-corruption measures:

57.8% of UNOs stated that they encouraged people to complain if they are victims of corruption. 35.6% of UNO reported that they conducted advocacy activities to make the upazila administration free from corruption. 28.9% of UNO initiated various anti-corruption campaigns in the upazila. Besides, 22.2% and 4.5% UNOs formulated ethics committee and complained to the ministry about the corrupted people respectively.

2.5 Individuals creating challenges for the UNO:

According to the survey, 59.5% of UNOs was confronted by the Upazila Parishad Chairperson and journalists in doing her regular activities. In addition, 50% of UNOs said they faced challenges from law enforcement agencies while performing their duties. The study also found that 47.6% of UNOs tackled challenges from local politicians while on duty. 40.5% of UNOs faced challenges by other government officials of the Upazila Parishad. UNOs were challenged by District Commissioner

(38.1%) and Additional District Commissioner (4.8%). According to the survey, during the implementation of the work 28.6% of UNOs faced challenges from the common people.

2.6 Tackling challenges by Women UNOs:

All the women who took part in the survey told that they tried by themselves to face the challenges. However, in some cases, 80% of UNOs took the help of the District Commissioner as senior officials and 33.3% of UNO took the help of the concerned ministries. 31.1% of UNOs sought the help of local MPs to address the challenges. In addition, 22.2% of UNOs reported that they asked assistance from law enforcement agencies in tackling challenges.

2.7 Perception of other concerned officials regarding women UNOs:

The officials of transferred departments working in the Upazila Parishad have both positive and negative experiences with regard to the skills and qualifications of women UNO in carrying out all the activities of the Upazila properly. According to them, comparing with men, women UNOs cannot make quick decisions. Their identity as women bars them from going anywhere at any time. Some also pointed out that the challenge of insecurity is more prevalent in women than in men. They also said that women UNOs were less interested in taking tough decisions and less efficient in dealing with emergency situations. If there was any kind of public explosion, women UNOs could not deal with it efficiently.

However, some Deputy Commissioners said that there is no difference between the skills and qualifications of women and men in performing duties. However, in the case of women, they think that their family responsibilities are more than men. Apart from this, the concerned officials have shared some positive experiences with the women UNOs. They work with maintaining transparency and accountability and there is less 'red tapism' in the workplace. In addition, women UNO always extended cooperation in performing the work.

3. Overall observation

1. Inadequate security arrangement: There is no dedicated security system for women UNOs for inspecting development works as well as in ensuring the smooth law and order situation. So, if the police administration does not provide force for any reasons, then they have nothing to do. Due to the superstitious and conservative social thinking women are at a much higher risk than men.

2. Traditional gender-role perception: There are negative perceptions about women UNOs among the colleagues, other officials of the Upazila Parishad, and public representatives as well. They think that women are not very good at dealing with disasters and working in emergencies. They also think that women cannot make tough decisions. This implies that patriarchal attitudes still exist in the process of socialization of men in this country. In fact, inadequate healthy, safe, and gender-friendly working environment make women more vulnerable that hinder women to perform their duties properly.

3. Lack of cooperation of law-enforcement forces: It has been said earlier that the Upazila administration did not get the cooperation all time from the police force. Many times, UNOs can not go for important operations, however, which are crucial for establishing good governance at the local level. In addition, due to the social and political environment as well as law and order situation in the country, it is very important for women to get adequate and timely cooperation from the law

enforcement agencies in these operations, such as anti-corruption operations, anti-terrorism operations, anti-drug operations, lockdown implementation, etc.

4. Political challenges in conducting activities: Women UNOs face pressure from politicians when conducting operations. Pressure is exerted on local and national level politicians to control the distribution of relief and in the planning and execution process of various projects. In addition, they are physically abused. UNOs faced obstacles in taking initiatives against corruption and often felt pressure into committing illegal activities.

5. Lack of cooperation from the officials of Upazila Parishad and other departments: As the head of the Upazila administration, UNOs do not get the cooperation from the Upazila Parishad to establish good governance at the local level. There is a lack of coordination among the various administrative departments at the upazila level. In the emergency situation, such as dealing with natural disasters, coordination between different government offices becomes an additional complication. Besides, UNOs do not get proper cooperation from the Upazila Parishad in planning and implementing various developmental works, as the public representatives in some cases give priority to their own personal interests without considering the welfare of the common people.

6. Challenges of women UNOs to take action against corruption: According to the 'Vision 2021', the Government of Bangladesh is committed to take measures for combating corruption. In this context, the Government of Bangladesh has formulated a National Integrity Strategy (NIS) that mentioned local government as a state institution. Accordingly, to establish a transparent and accountable local government has been identified as the goal of NIS. However, UNOs face obstacles in taking action against corruption. However, when pressure is applied from powerful politicians and influential people, who are mostly men, it becomes difficult to deal with being a woman.

7. Challenges from journalists: The media is the fourth pillar of the state. So if the UNO is challenged instead of getting cooperation from journalists, it becomes an obstacle to establishing good governance. In addition, women UNOs are especially at risk when they face challenges from journalists. Because when the character of UNO is tarnished, women face more criticism from men than family and society.

8. Unwillingness of women UNO to participate in the survey: 45 out of 149 women UNOs participated in the survey, which indicates that women are still reluctant to talk about their challenges.

4. Recommendations

From the above analysis, it can be inferred that women UNO are facing various challenges in establishing good governance at the local level. Therefore, a set of recommendations are proposed, which if implemented, women UNOs will be able to ensure good governance at the local level.

1. Training on gender sensitivity should be organized by Local Government Division level for the public representatives and government officials at the Upazila to eliminate the negative attitude towards women UNO. Gender sensitivity could be an indicator of the ACR of government officials.

2. Orientation programs should be arranged by Local Government Division for UNO and Chairmen from the Local Government Division to address the challenges of providing secretarial support by UNO. The main objective of will be to realize that they are not an opponent but an ally.
3. The GoB should have introduced a system to honor women UNOs through certificate/ crest/ medal for taking effective measures against corruption.
4. If a woman UNO is attacked and conspired by a powerful group for implementing activities to prevent corruption, relevant authority should be provided legal assistance and security.
5. The media should assist UNOs in carrying out her activities by disseminating accurate news to establish good governance at the local level.
6. Government order/ circular is required to stop putting pressure on local development work by politicians at the national and local level.
7. The capacity of women UNO in managing the disaster could be increased through arranging training.
8. Law and enforcement agencies need to take proactive measures for providing security and support to women UNOs.
