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Cultural Hurdles and Family Restrictions on Female Political Participation among Representatives to the Union Parishads of Bangladesh

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Abstract. The aim of the study was to investigate cultural hurdles and family restrictions on female political participation among representatives to the Union Parishads of Bangladesh. A questionnaire was completed by 680 representatives from 128 Union Parishads, the rural local governance, of Bangladesh (347 females, 333 males). The mean age was 42.6 years ($SD = 6.4$) for females and 43.9 ($SD = 6.2$) for males. A questionnaire was constructed for measuring political participation, experiences of females and observations by males regarding cultural hurdles and family restrictions on female political participation. The amount of both cultural hurdles and family restrictions experienced by female representatives were significantly higher than the amounts their male colleagues had observed. Women with low levels of political participation had experienced high levels of cultural hurdles and low levels of family restrictions. Women with high levels of political participation experienced low levels of cultural hurdles and high levels of family restrictions. For females, age correlated negatively with cultural hurdles but not with family restrictions. Female political participation in the Union Parishads of Bangladesh is hampered by both cultural hurdles and family restrictions. Male colleagues did not observe the full amount of hurdles that females experienced.

Keywords. Female political participation, cultural hurdles, family restrictions, Union Parishads, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

The aim of the present study was to explore the impact of cultural hurdles and family restrictions on political participation of female peoples' representatives to the Union Parishads (UPs) of Bangladesh and how the views on these hurdles and restrictions vary between men and women representatives. From the beginning of the introduction of women reserved seats to the UPs, it has been a debated issue whether women representatives are getting equal opportunities as their male colleagues in the local governance institutes. It has been claimed that women representatives are facing psychological, institutional, legal, cultural, and other barriers which negatively impact their effective participation in the overall governance process (Panday, 2008). Discrimination in effective political participation (Talukdar, Österman, & Björkqvist, 2018), sociocultural hurdles (Rahman, 2014), legal constrains (Khan & Ara, 2006), negative organisational atmosphere and work harassment (Talukdar, Österman, & Björkqvist,

2020), sexual harassment (Talukdar, Österman, & Björkqvist, 2019), and adverse family environment and family constrains (Begum, 2012) have been found to be influential barriers to the effective participation of women in the political arena of the country.

Adverse cultural shaping for women is considered one of the foremost barriers to the participation of women in community activities, civic participation, and political engagement across the globe during all times (Norris & Inglehart, 2001). Living in a society with huge domination of the patriarchy, the women of Bangladesh experience similar cultural barriers in participating to the political institutions (Hossain, 2012; Prodip, 2014; Panday, 2008; Rahman, 2014). A patriarchal society fosters negative family attitudes towards women's participation in political activities (Panday, 2008). It has also been suggested that women who have an outside job beside their household chores face conflict in balancing work and family (Prodip, 2014). This conflict is more severe in Bangladesh due to its patriarchal adverse cultural set-up and negative social attitudes towards the political participation of women (Rahman, 2014).

1.1 Cultural Hurdles

Major challenges were found regarding domination, patriarchy, and hegemony in the study by Rahman (2014) which was conducted on 19 UPs from different sociocultural zones of Bangladesh. The literature review by Prodip (2014) showed the patriarchal attitudes and lack of social acceptance as core cultural hurdles for women's political participation. Cultural hurdles for the political participation of women in the local governance of Bangladesh have been found to be negative community attitudes to political and community activities (Hossain, 2012), lower social acceptance as peoples' representatives, less freedom of movement, lower access to the public sphere (Islam & Islam, 2012), social obligations, lack of security, restrictions in involving regular outdoor activities (Zaman, 2012), unequal power relations, rigid division of labour, negative social values about women in the society (Begum, 2012), lack of social mobility, patriarchal cultural settings, strict gender identity of women, lack of confidence due to social negligence (Panday, 2008), and adverse social norms (Khan & Ara, 2006). In a study by Panday (2010) conducted on 60 UPs of Bangladesh it was found that getting membership to the UPs increased the confidence of women, but the social attitude towards them remained unchanged. This clearly depicts how severe the impact of social and cultural values is on women's participation to the political arena of Bangladesh.

1.2 Family Restrictions

Many studies on the barriers of women to political participation in the local governance of Bangladesh have found family restrictions to be one of the core barriers. The study by Begum (2012) found that a woman's role as a caregiver of the family and at the same time a representative to the UPs creates huge conflict which negatively impacts on their active political participation. Other studies have found that lack of family support (Shamim & Kumari, 2002), lack of family cooperation (Prodip, 2014), the stressful situation when trying to balance work and family (Hossain, 2012), and negative family attitudes towards political involvement (Islam & Islam, 2012) to be common family hurdles in political participation of women in the local governance of Bangladesh. The study by Hossain (2012) explored a new dimension of negative family influence on female political participation which was termed as "proxy participation", meaning that the husband of a woman representative takes part in the monthly meetings of the UPs on behalf of the wife, and directly influences the decisions of the meetings. It is a clear indication of the patriarchal attitudes of the family within the Bangladeshi society towards the political participation of women.

1.3 Age, Cultural Hurdles, and Family Restrictions of Women in Political Participation

The age of an individual plays a vital role in his/her active participation to diverse socio-political activities. It has been found that aged women enjoy more freedom in social mobility than younger ones (Poulton et al., 2002). Social mobility was also positively correlated with mental wellbeing. In patriarchal social settings, it is presumed that older women get more freedom in participating to different social events than younger women (Sultana, 2010). Engaging in activities like political participation, attending social meetings, and volunteering in different social matters have been found to be positively correlated with productive aging (Burr, Jeffrey, Caro, & Moorhead, 2002). A study by Hudson and Gonyea (1990) has showed that political parties gave more value to older party members due to their long experience, time flexibility, and contributions to local fund raising.

2. Objectives of the Study

The aim of the present study was to explore the impact of cultural hurdles, family restrictions, and age on women's political participation among elected people's representatives to the Union Parishads of Bangladesh. Comparisons between male and female representatives were made.

3. Methodology

3.1. Subjects

A questionnaire was completed by 680 representatives from 128 Union Parishads, the rural local governance, of Bangladesh (347 females, 333 males). 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 [$t_{(678)} = 2.6$, $p = .009$].

3.2 Instrument

A questionnaire was constructed for measuring political participation and experiences of females and observations by males of cultural hurdles and family restrictions on female political participation.

Male and female versions of the single items measuring cultural hurdles to female political participation were as follows: (a) People seem to think that it is not suitable for a woman to take part in meetings, (b) Someone has insinuated that a woman should not talk in meetings, (c) There are restrictions on what /I can do because I am a woman/ a woman can do, (d) I/Women feel uncomfortable at meetings, (e) I/Women have access to all the same information that my male colleagues have. Item e was recoded. The response alternatives were on a five-point-scale (0 = strongly disagree, 1 = disagree, 2 = neither agree nor disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for the scale was = .90.

Male/Female versions of the single items measuring family restrictions on female political participation were as follows: (a) My husband/Husbands cooperate(s) with and encourages my/the wife's institutional activities, (b) My/ family members cooperate with my institutional activities/of women, (c) I /Women feel stressed to function as a people's representative beside my/their household responsibilities, (d) I/ A woman can go out anytime for my/her institutional activities after managing the family responsibilities, (e) My husband/Husbands has/have a negative attitude towards my political involvement/ of their wives, (f) My/ family members have a negative attitude towards my/ political involvement /of female family members, (g) I/Women experience disputes with a family member due to my/their political involvement, (h) I/Women can take part in any political or institutional activities at any time without any hindrance from my/their home. Items a, b, d, and h were

recoded. The response alternatives were on a five-point-scale (0 = strongly disagree, 1 = disagree, 2 = neither agree nor disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .65.

Political participation was measured for both women and men with seven items: (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. Response alternatives for the items were on a five-point scale (never = 0, seldom = 1, sometimes = 2, very often = 3, always = 4). Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .96.

3.3 Procedure

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

4. Results

4.1 Correlations between the Scales

It was found that the level of political participation of the representatives in the Union Parishads correlated significantly negatively with experienced (for women) and perceived (for men) cultural hurdles for female political participation (Table 1). Women with low levels of political participation had experienced high levels of cultural hurdles, and men with low levels of political participation had also perceived the cultural hurdles for women to be higher than men with high levels of political participation. The level of one's own political participation was also significantly, but positively, correlated with levels of experienced (for women) and perceived (for men) family restrictions on female political participation (Table 1). Women with high levels of political participation had experienced high levels of family restrictions on female political participation, and men with high levels of political participation had also perceived high levels of family restrictions on female political participation. Family restrictions and cultural hurdles were negatively correlated for both women and men.

Table 1. Correlations between the Scales in the Study. Women below the Diagonal ($N = 347$), Men above ($N = 333$)

	1.	2.	3.
1. Political Participation		-.65 ***	.10 *
2. Cultural Hurdles to Female Political Participation	-.76 ***		-.10 *
3. Family Restrictions on Female Political Participation	.27 ***	-.12 *	

*** $p < .001$; * $p \leq .05$

4.2 Differences Due to Sex and Level of Political Participation

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with sex and political participation (high/low group) as independent variables and cultural hurdles to female political participation and family restrictions on female political participation as dependent variables, and age as a covariate. The multivariate analysis was significant (Table 2, Fig. 1).

Table 2. Results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with Sex and Political Participation (High/Low Group) as Independent Variables and Cultural Hurdles to Female Political Participation and Family Restrictions on Females as Dependent Variables, and Age as a Covariate ($N = 347$ Females, 333 Males)

	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> <	η^2	Group with higher mean
Multivariate Effect of Age	3.22	814, 2	.041	.008	
Effect of Sex					
Multivariate Analysis	380.31	814, 2	.001	.483	
Univariate Analyses					
Cultural Hurdles to Female Political Participation	35.53	815, 1	.001	.042	Females
Family Restrictions on Female Political Participation	730.79	“	.001	.473	Females
Effect of Political Participation (High/Low)					
Multivariate Analysis	433.23	814, 2	.001	.516	
Univariate Analyses					
Cultural Hurdles to Female Political Participation	861.77	815, 1	.001	.514	Low PP
Family Restrictions on Female Political Participation	3.80	“	.052	.005	(High PP)
Interaction Effect					
Multivariate Analyses	91.48	814, 2	.001	.184	
Univariate Analyses					
Cultural Hurdles to Female Political Participation	180.25	1, 815	.001	.181	See the text
Family Restrictions on Female Political Participation	2.27	“	<i>ns</i>	.003	

Note. PP = Political Participation

The univariate analyses showed that reports by females about the amount of cultural hurdles they encounter to their political participation was significantly higher than the amount of hurdles males had observed that their female colleagues had been victimised from. The same was the case for family restrictions for female political participation. Representatives who themselves had low scores on political participation rated cultural hurdles to females to be significantly higher than representatives with high scores on political participation did. A tendency was found for representatives with low political participation to rate family restrictions on females to be lower than representatives with high participation did. An interaction effect occurred; women with high political participation made the lowest ratings for cultural hurdles to female political participation (Fig. 1).

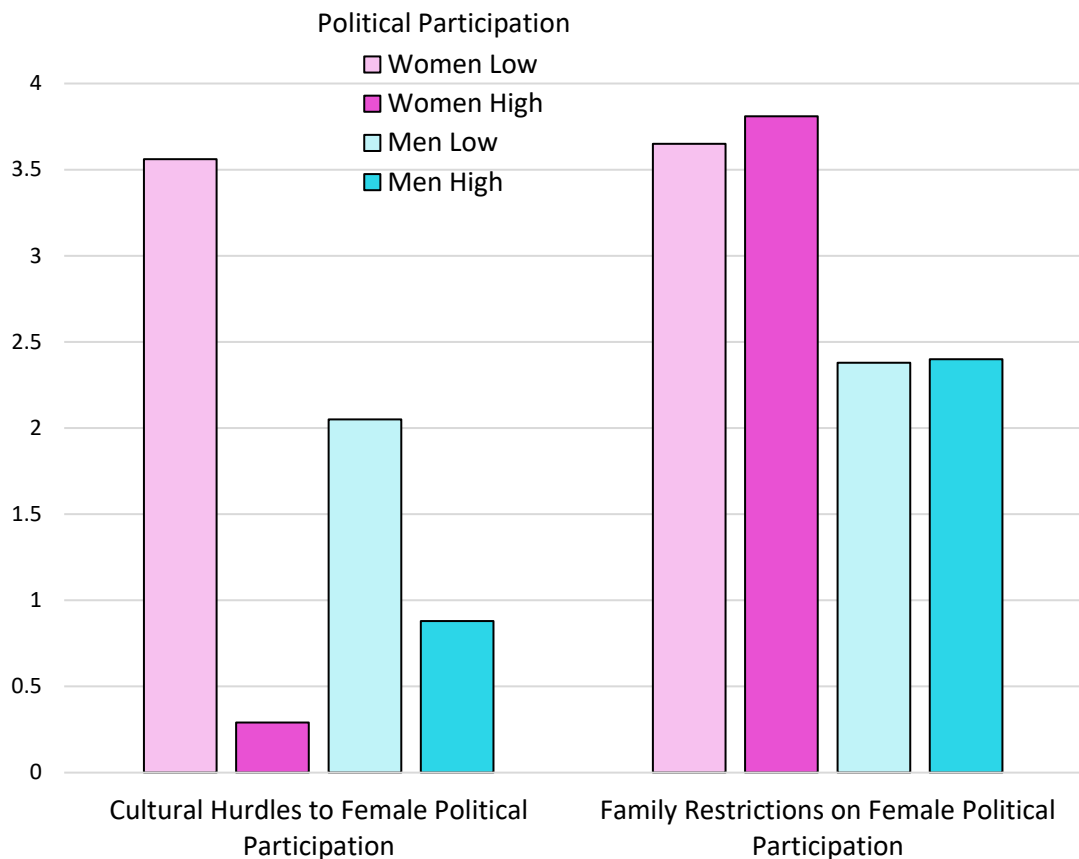


Figure. 1. Mean values for women (experiences) and men (observations) with high vs. low political participation on cultural hurdles and family restrictions on female political participation in the Union Parishads.

4.3 Age, Cultural Hurdles, and Family Restrictions

For females, age correlated significantly positively with political participation [$r = .30$, $p < .001$], and significantly negatively with experienced cultural hurdles to female political participation [$r = -.35$, $p < .001$]. There was no correlation between age and family restrictions on female political participation. For males, a significant negative correlation was found between age and political participation [$r = -.18$, $p < .001$]. Age did not correlate with observed cultural hurdles to female political participation or observed family restrictions on female political participation.

Two multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were conducted: one for women, and one for men, with age group as independent variable and cultural hurdles and family restrictions on female political participation as dependent variables (Table 3, Figs. 2 and 3). The multivariate analyses were significant in both cases. For both women and men, the univariate analyses showed a significant effect of age group for cultural hurdles to female political participation, but not for family restrictions. In the case of women, Scheffé's test revealed that the oldest age group (56 to 61 years of age) scored significantly lowest of all on experienced cultural hurdles to female political participation. Respondents 51–55 years of age scored significantly lower than those who were 36–45 years old. Those who were 46–50 years old broke the pattern by showing a tendency to score lower than the age group 51–55 years old. Respondents 41–45 years of age scored higher than all those who were older than themselves.

The 36–40-year olds also scored higher than those who were older than themselves, with the exception of those who were 41–45.

Table 3. Results of Two Multivariate Analyses of Variance (MANOVA), One for Women ($N = 347$) and One for Men ($N = 333$) with Age Group as Independent Variable and Cultural Hurdles and Family Restrictions on Female Political Participation as Dependent Variables (cf. Figs. 2 and 3)

Women	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> ≤	η_p^2
Effect of Age Group				
Multivariate Analysis	13,05	10, 812	.001	.138
Univariate Analyses				
Experienced Cultural Hurdles to Female Political Participation	28.97	5, 406	.001	.263
Experienced Family Restrictions on Female Political Participation	0.86	“	<i>ns</i>	.010
Men				
Effect of Age Group				
Multivariate Analysis	2.34	10, 804	.010	.028
Univariate Analyses				
Observed Cultural Hurdles to Female Political Participation	4.18	5, 402	.001	.049
Observed Family Restrictions on Female Political Participation	0.53	“	<i>ns</i>	.007

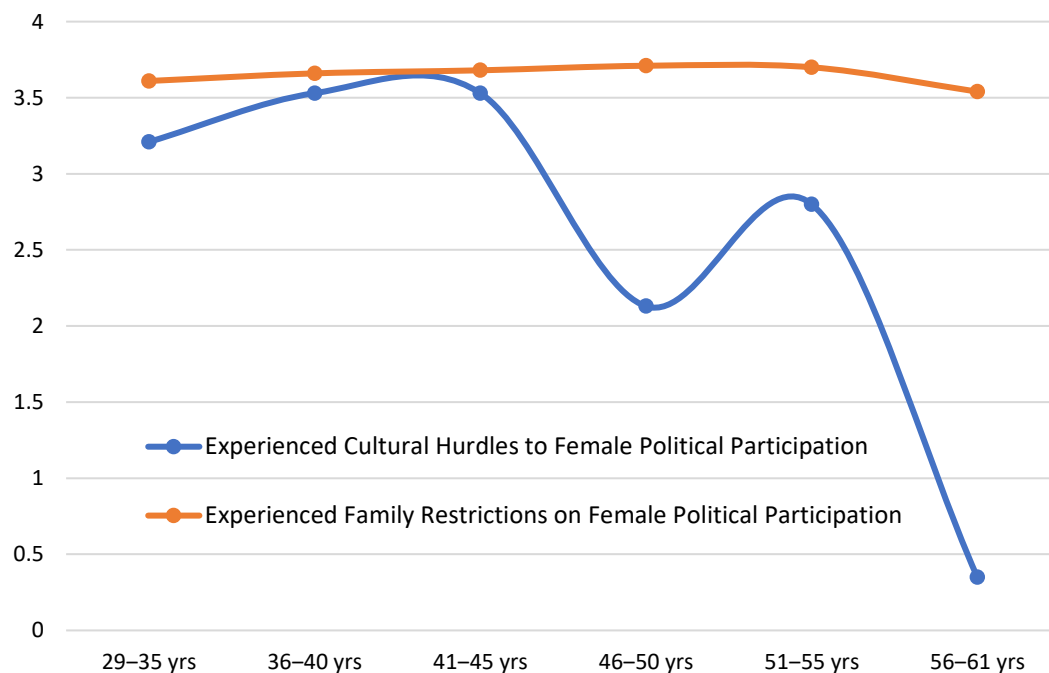


Figure. 2. Mean values for women in six age groups for experienced cultural hurdles and family restrictions on female political participation ($N = 412$).

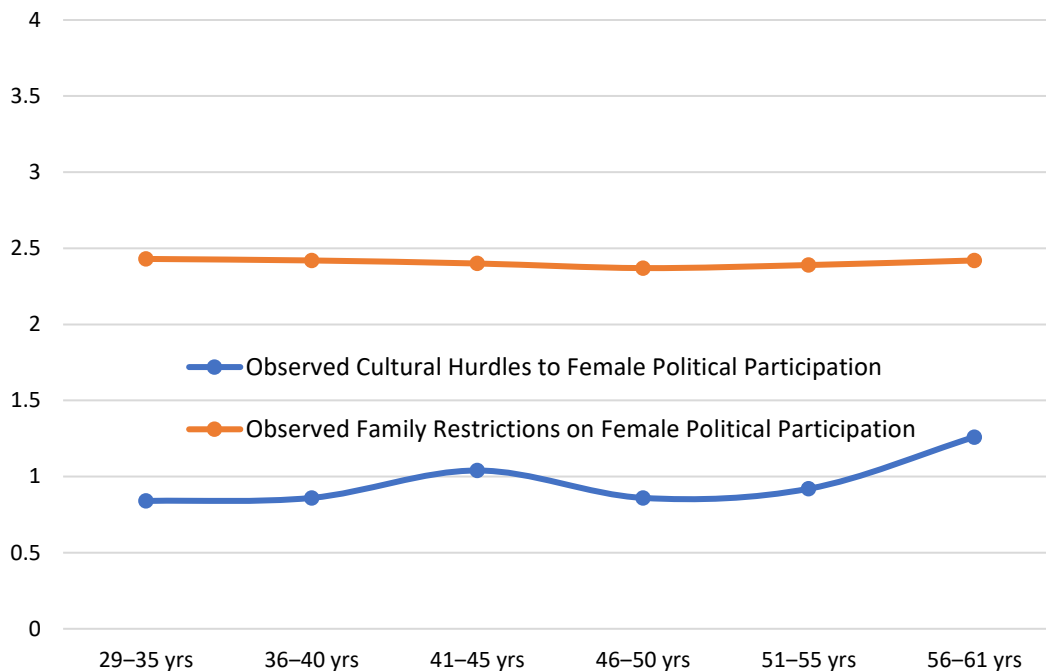


Figure 3. Mean values for men in six age groups for observed cultural hurdles and family restrictions on female political participation ($N = 408$).

The youngest age group, 29–35 years old, scored significantly higher than respondents 46–50 and 56–61 years old. In the case of men, Scheffé’s test did not reveal any significant age differences regarding observations of cultural hurdles to female political participation.

5. Discussion

Previous studies have shown that the male dominated social set up of Bangladesh clearly impacts the political participation of women in the country negatively (Begum, 2012; Hossain, 2012; Khan & Ara, 2006; Panday, 2008; Prodip, 2014; Rahman, 2014; Zaman, 2012). The aim of the present study was to explore the effect of cultural and family hurdles on the active political participation of women peoples’ representatives of the UPs of the country.

The correlation between cultural hurdles and level of political participation was negative. Women with high levels of political participation had experienced low cultural hurdles to female participation while women with low levels of participation had experienced high cultural hurdles ($r = -.76, p < .001$). This finding could be due to the fact that women who encounter less cultural hurdles have a better possibility of becoming politically active, while women who live in circumstances where they experience severe cultural hurdles never get the chance to become politically active. The results also showed that older women experienced less cultural hurdles. A previous study on the same sample (Talukdar et al., 2018) showed that the influence on political decisions was higher in the older age groups of women, while for men, there was almost no change related to age. It could be that women who have not encountered severe levels of cultural hurdles have become more politically active as they grow older.

In contrast to the aforementioned finding, family restrictions to female political participation correlated positively ($r = .27, p < .001$) with the level of political participation. Women with high levels of political participation had experienced high levels of family restrictions, while women with low levels of political participation had experienced low levels of family restrictions. This finding could be explained by the fact that relatives of women with

low political participation have not given their political participation much thought and have therefore also not tried to impose so many restrictions. Women with high levels of participation, on the other hand, are likely to have family members who have often observed their work and are therefore more likely to impose more restrictions. No significant effect of age group was found for women in the case of family restrictions. Older women encountered as much family restrictions to their political participation as younger women.

To summarise, women with low political participation had encountered high levels of cultural hurdles but low levels of family restrictions, while women with high participation experienced low levels cultural hurdles and high levels of family restrictions.

Men reported that they had observed less cultural hurdles and family restrictions for women in political participation than the women had actually experienced. It has previously been found in several studies that women face more cultural constraints than men do (Begum, 2012; Hossain, 2012; Islam & Islam, 2012; Panday, 2008; Prodip, 2014; Rahman, 2014; Zaman, 2012). The finding of the present study is in line with these findings. Moreover, this study explored a new dimension that has not been studied before, namely that the levels of cultural hurdles and family restrictions women encounter are not observed and almost denied by their male colleagues from the same local governance institutes.

Older women were found to report higher levels of political participation and lower levels of experienced cultural hurdles, but there was no correlation between age and family restrictions on female political participation. In the case of women, the oldest age group scored significantly lowest of all on experienced cultural hurdles to female political participation. The youngest age group, 29–35 years old, scored significantly higher than respondents 46–50 and 56–61 years old. The oldest group might experience more freedom in their family life due to not having the responsibility of child care and few other household chores. In contrast, the mean values for men on their observations of family restrictions of women's political participation remained stable through all age groups. Observed cultural restrictions on female political participation by men increased by age, and it reached a peak for the oldest age group (56-61 years). The underlying causes for these finding are worth further study.

5.1 Conclusions

It was shown that despite of having reserved seats for women in the local governance of Bangladesh and many provisions for equal participation to the activities of the governance process, the participation of female representatives has yet to reach the desired level. Sociocultural restrictions in the form of cultural hurdles and family restrictions are significant obstacles. The study indicates that female peoples' representatives experience considerable hurdles both in the home and outside the home in their daily life. If women who are properly assigned by the state and elected by the people to conduct important activities of the governance process experience hardship both from the society and the family good governance certainly remains in danger. It also indicates an alarming sociocultural position of women in the society of Bangladesh. Moreover, the observations by their male colleagues also indicate that women are not well received by the opposite sex in their elected positions, and that their male colleagues do not cooperate with them. It expresses negligence on the part of Bangladeshi males towards women in their elected roles in the local governance of the country.

Ethical Considerations

Data were collected with informed consent and under strict anonymity. The study adheres to the principles concerning human research ethics of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013), guidelines for the responsible conduct of research of the

Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012), as well as the general data protection regulation of the European Union (European Commission, 2016).

Competing Interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare

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