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POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN : BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract : The paper is a research study to identify the nature and extent of empowerment of women in political decision making bodies. Seven parameters viz. Election and voting, political parties, parliament, cabinet, judiciary, administration and local self-government have been selected to analyze the past and present situation and suggest future course of action. The constitution of Bangladesh permits to special measures to ensure women's empowerment in all walks of public life. But Bangladesh is still a male dominated country. The present government has attempted to break the tradition and engage women ministers in important ministry such as agriculture, foreign affairs, post and telecommunication, women and children affairs, labor and employment, deputy leader and speaker of the parliament.

Introduction

A study on the political empowerment of women in Bangladesh from a historical and analytical perspective has been carried out mainly for three reasons. Firstly, one of the most important resources of Bangladesh is its population and women comprise about half of the population and substantial part of work force. Secondly, recent literature on the subject is limited. Thirdly, the study is expected to contribute to an understanding of the present condition of political empowerment of women and national policy making process.¹ Bangladesh is one of the first developing country to establish a ministry of women's affairs in 1978, three years after the first world conference on women in Mexico. The government has already prepared a national policy for political empowerment of women and made

some noteworthy progress in implementing the national action plan, prepared in response to the Beijing platform for action. In spite of these achievements, the majority of women in Bangladesh have yet to be empowered to actively participate in political life of the country. The constitution of Bangladesh [Article 27, 28(1), 28(2), 28(3) and 65(3)] guarantees equal rights to all citizens clearly incorporated provision for equal status of women.² In this regard, the universal declaration on democracy stated that the "achievement of democracy and political empowerment of women presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work inequality and their differences."³ But the policies and programmes of the government, NGOs and other institutions do not sufficiently address the need for women's political empowerment in Bangladesh. Undoubtedly, the most vital resources of Bangladesh are its population. Women make up nearly half of the population and work force of Bangladesh. It is essential that they participate in sufficient numbers in politics and government to ensure a truly democratic and representative government. At present, Bangladesh is the only country in the world where both the head of government and leader of the opposition are women. For this reason, women in Bangladesh should enjoy a distinct advantage in advancing their rights of political participation. Nevertheless, that does not portray the real picture of women's empowerment in politics.⁴

Methodology

The paper has been written on the basis of a review of secondary data. Relevant books, journals, government circulars, research reports, newspaper, Internet, annual reports of BBS and ministry of establishment were consulted. In addition, primary data was also collected from informal discussion with many female activists those were struggle for political empowerment of women.

Background of Political Empowerment of Women in Bangladesh

Popular history has not sufficiently documented the political contribution that women have made to Bangladesh society. One may recall here that Bangladeshi women did participate in the anti-British political movement in the 1930s and 1940s. In the after math of independence in 1947, women also participated in the autonomy and democratic movement when Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan.⁵ Although women have played a significant role in the liberation struggle of Bangladesh in 1971, but their historical contribution remain largely invisible. Women for the first time exercised their voting rights in Bangladesh when it was a part of Pakistan. Women voted in the 1954 East Pakistan Provincial Assembly Election where only one women was elected despite that there was a provision for ten reserved seats for women.⁶ Women also exercised their voting rights in the 1970 general election of Pakistan. It may be stated that the government of Bangladesh established the ministry of women affairs to mainstreaming

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women in the development process, promoting gender equality and empowerment of women. But Bangladesh has one of the lowest levels country of women participation in politics. In the first general election in 1973, only two women were nominated by the major parties and both women were defeated in the election. Consequently, women's active participation in politics and government was unusual and minimal until the early 1980s, because women's empowerment in politics was widely discouraged and denied by the major political parties.⁷

Present Situation of Women's Political Empowerment in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has become known as something of a success in advancing gender equality since the 1990s. There have been rapid gains in a number of social and economic domains, yet by most objective standards the current condition and status of women within Bangladeshi society remain low. Now, the seven parameters of political empowerment of women in Bangladesh are given in the below.

Women in Political Party

Although women constitute about half of the total population of the country. Nevertheless, the actual number of women member in major political parties are not satisfied. However, women occupy the top leadership position in the two largest party in Bangladesh.⁸ The present situation of women member in major political parties are given in the table.

Name of Political party	Name of Committee	Total Member	Women Member	Percentage of Women (%)
Bangladesh Awami League	Presidium	15	5	33.34
	Working Committee	73	8	10.96
Bangladesh Nationalist Party	National Standing Committee	19	2	10.52
	Working Committee	75	11	14.67
Jatiya Party	National Standing Committee	31	2	6.46
	Working Committee	151	4	2.64

Source : Researcher's Observation (From Daily, Weekly Newspaper and Internet).

Women in Parliament

The parliament of Bangladesh is a unicameral legislature consisting of 350 members. They are directly elected from an equal number of territorial constituency on the basis of adult franchise.

General Seats of Women

In Bangladesh the participation of women in the parliamentary elections has increased in the last four decades. Women's participation in the electoral process has increased since 1979, and the scenarios have significantly improved in the last four (1991, 1996, 2001 and 2008) elections. Nevertheless, their participation in electoral and legislative politics are still insignificant as it is less than 20 percent of the overall candidates and percentage of women won in the general seats never exceeded 6 percent in the parliament elections. It is unusual that around 50 percent of total voters are women but their representation in the legislature in only 6 percent.⁹ The list of nominated and elected women member (from 1973 to 2008) in our parliament are given in the table.

Year	Nominated Women Member	Elected Women Member
1973	2	0
1979	13	2
1986	15	5
1988	7	4
1991	39	6
1996	36	7
2001	37	6
2008	60	19

Source : Researcher's Observation (From Daily, Weekly Newspaper and Internet).

Reserved Seats of Women

The provision in the constitution for the reservation of seats for women was a transitory one. The 9th parliament is the last parliament to have this reservation. With the exception of the first parliament which had 15 reserved seats for women and the fourth parliament, which had no such reservation, all previous parliaments (before 8th and 9th) of Bangladesh had included the 30 reserved seats. 8th parliament had 45 reserved seats for women and 8th parliament 50.¹⁰ The list of reserved for women (from 1973 to 2008) are given in the table.

Year	Reserved Seats	Women Member of Political Parties
1973	15	Bangladesh Awami League-15
1979	30	Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-30
1986	30	Jatiya Party-30
1988	-	-
1991	30	BNP-28, Bangladesh Jamaat-E-Islam-2
1996	30	Awami League-27, Jatiya Party-3
2001	45	BNP-39, Bangladesh Jamaat-E-Islam-3, Jatiya Party-2, Islami Yokki Jote-1
2008	50	Awami League-41, BNP-5, Jatiya Party-4

Source : Researcher's Observation (From Daily, Weekly Newspaper and Internet).

Women in Administration

Now-a-day's policy and decision making are related with administration. It is process of assessing the implications for women of any planed action at all levels. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women an integral of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes. The constitution of Bangladesh empowered to reserve a certain percent of their vacancies in the public sector for women, to minimize the disadvantages faced by them.¹¹ The percentage of women participation in the administration of Bangladesh ore given in the table:

Name of Post	Total Number	Men	Women	Percentage of Women (%)
Secretary	55	52	3	5.45
Additional Secretary	120	105	15	12.5
Joint Secretary	275	235	40	14.54
Deputy Secretary	659	557	102	15.47
Assistant Secretary	1045	825	220	21.05

Source : Researcher's Observation (From Daily, Weekly Newspaper and Internet).

Women in Cabinet

The cabinet is the chief executive body of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Cabinet is the collective decision-making body of the entire government under office of the prime Minister. But in the cabinet of Bangladesh women's representation has never risen above 15 percent, although two women prime minister headed the government during the last 22 years.¹² Now the list of women member in different cabinet (from 1972-tilldate) are given in the table.

Government	Total Member	Women Member	Percentage of Women (%)
Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972-1975)	50	2	4.0
Ziaur Rahman (1979-1981)	101	6	5.94
H.M. Ershad (1982-1990)	133	4	3.0
Begum Khaleda Zia (1991-1996)	39	3	7.69
Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001)	46	4	8.69
Begum Khaleda Zia (2001-2006)	60	3	5.0
Sheikh Hasina (2009-tilldate)	58	6	10.34

Source : Researcher's Observation (From Daily, Weekly Newspaper and Internet).

Women in Judiciary

Bangladesh Judiciary is a civil court system based on the British model, the highest court of appeal is the appellate court of the Supreme Court. On the other hand the country is divided into division, district, sub-district and union court. The rate of women's participation in the Judiciary of Bangladesh is very low.¹³

Name of court	Men	Women	Percentage of Women (%)
Supreme Court	101	8	7.92
Tribunal Court	11	2	18.18
District Court	505	40	7.91
Magistrate Court	2010	192	9.50

Source : Researcher's Observation (From Daily, Weekly Newspaper and Internet).

Women in Election and Voting

Bangladesh elects on national level a legislature with one house or chamber. The unicameral national parliament has 350 members of which 300 members are directly elected through a national election for a five-year term in single seat constituencies while 50 memberships are reserved for women who are selected by the ruling party or coalition. But the presence of women representatives in both local and national level politics has remained rather low.¹⁴ The need to grant women's suffrage and the rational for women's participation in politics came to be recognized gradually in Bangladesh when feminist organizations and groups launched their campaign for achieving equal rights including voting rights and participation in the electoral process.

First General Election, 1973

The election was held on 7 March 1973. Total number of voters 3,52,05,642. Women voters 1,42,12,782. Reserved women seats 15.

Second General Election, 1979

The election was held on 18 February 1979. Total number of voters 3,87,89,239. Women voter 1, 63,14,369. Reserved women seats 30.

Third General Election, 1986

The election was held on 7 May 1986. Total number of voters 4,78,76,979. Women voter 2,11,17,596. Reserved women seats 30.

Fourth General Election, 1988

The election was held on 3 March 1988. Total number of voters 4,98,63,829. Women voter 2,10,13,411. Reserved Women seats o.

Fifth General Election, 1991

The election was held on 13 January 1991. Total number of voters 5,67,16,395. Women Voter 2,43,77,820. Reserved Women seats 30.

Seventh General Election, 1996

The election was held on 12 June 1996. Total number of voters 6, 20, 81, 973. Women voter 2, 96, 20, 401. Reserved women seats 30.

Eighth General Election, 2001

The election was held on 01 October 2001. Total number of voters 7, 50, 00, 656. Women voter 3, 86, 84, 972. Reserved women seats 45.

Ninth General Election, 2008

The election was held on 29 December 2008. Total number of voters 8, 10, 58, 698. Women voter 4, 12, 36, 149. Reserved women seats 50.¹⁵

The List of All General Election (Total Voter, Women Voter, Reserved Seat) in Bangladesh (From 1973 to 2008) Are Given in the Table.

General Election (Year)	Total Voter	Women Voter	Reserved Women Seat
1973	3,52,05,642	1,42,12,782	15
1979	3,87,89,239	1,63,14,369	30
1986	4,58,76,979	2,11,17,596	30
1988	4,98,63,829	2,17,13,411	0
1991	5,67,16,395	2,43,77,820	30
1996	6,20,81,973	2,96,20,401	30
2001	7,50,00,656	3,86,84,972	45
2008	8,10,58,698	4,12,36,149	50

Source : Election Commission of Bangladesh.

Women in Local-Self Government

Local-Self government is basically an organized social entity with a feeling of oneness. It means an intra sovereign governmental unit within the sovereign state dealing mainly with local affairs, administered by local authorities and sub-ordinate to the state government.¹⁶ In political terms, it is concerned with governance of a specific local area, constituting a political sub-division of a nation, state or other major political unit. At present Bangladesh contains a three tier local self-government i.e. Union Parishad, Upazilla Parishad and zilla Parishad.

Union Parishad

Union Parishad is the lowest tier of administrative unit in Bangladesh. The main functions of union Parishad include public welfare, maintenance of law and order, revenue collection, development and adjudication. The union Parishad consists of a chairman, nine members and three women members. The voters of the union directly elect all. The constitution of independent Bangladesh was adopted in 1972, where in article 59 provided for elected local government institutions at all levels. In 1976, the government

promulgated the local government ordinance for a three tier local government system. In this ordinance the structure of the local government system underwent change and the provision was made to select two women members in the union parishad. In 1983, the changes were brought in the structure. The ordinance increased the member of nominated women members to three and each of them represented one ward. In 1997 is a milestone in the history of political empowerment of women in Bangladesh. The government enacted law for direct elections to reserve seats for women in local level institutions. In this act the government ensure reserved three seats for women in the union parishad where women members were directly elected from each of the three wards.¹⁷ Apart from the reserved seats women can also contest for any of the general seats.

Upazilla Parishad

The upazilla system is the second tier of the local government of Bangladesh. This system is the successor of the previous sub-division which was introduced by the government day by day. The local government ordinance 1982, provided details on the structure and functions of the upazilla. A upazilla parishad consists of a chairman, two vice-chairman. The voters voted for a chairman and two vice-chairman in each of their upazillas. One of the offices of the vice-chairman reserved for a women and one for a men. Both men and women could contest for the office of chairman.¹⁸ The chairman and vice-chairman are going to be elected today. One-third of the total women members from reserved seats of union parishad under a upazilla will be the upazilla Parishad members. The women members of the reserved seat of the union Parishad will elect them. At present there are 485 upazilla in Bangladesh. The last upazilla election was held on 22 January 2009.

Zilla Parishad

Zilla Parishad is the third tier of the local government system in Bangladesh. The every district has a zilla Parishad headed by a chairman. In 1976, president Ziaur Rahman promulgated a local government ordinance providing for Zilla Parishad in each district. The ordinance stated that the Parishad shall be composed of elected representatives for five year term. According to Zilla Parishad Act, 1982, the Zilla Parishad shall consist of the following members

- ii. Representative members
- iii. Nominated members
- iv. Women members
- v. Official members

The nominated and women members shall be nominated by the government from amongst the men and women living in the district and their total number

shall not exceed the total number of the representative members of the Zilla Parishad.¹⁹ According to Zilla Parishad Act, 2000, the zilla parishad comprises

- i. One Chairman
- ii. Fifteen general members
- iii. Five reserved members (women)

All of them will be elected by the elected public representatives of the municipality, the upazilla parishad and union parishad. But up to till now, under the law no such election has been held. At present zilla parishad activities are conducted by the Zilla Parishad Development Co-ordination Committee headed by the chairman (select by the government) under the administrative order.

Problems of Empowerment of Women in Bangladesh Politics

A number of obstacles have kept the representation of women in government and politics is low. In fact, the time restraints associated with women's traditional roles as wife and mother as well as the frequent lack of family support for women seeking elected office still remains as one of the primary reasons for women's inability to make any advancement into politics. There are multiple explanations for the low numbers of women in public office in Bangladesh. Situational barriers, economic problems and dependency, political and social violence, lack of education and political knowledge one major explanation is that Bangladeshi women have been conditioned not to take much interest in government and politics. Besides, women generally face numerous obstacles in the process of their political empowerment in Bangladesh. Some of these are given below.

1. Albeit the constitution guaranteed the equal rights for women but the reality is that they are not seen as equal, their roles are closely tied to their reproductive and household activities only.
2. Patriarchy as a system, an ideology and practice impacts in different ways on the lives of women. The patriarchal society enforces rules and laws in such way that affect the self-confidence of women, limit their access on resources and information.
3. Education is the strongest factor influence women's control of their own fate. In Bangladesh women are further more handicapped because of lower educational achievements and the prevalence of social norms that severely restrict their political empowerment
4. The male biased environment within political institution can deter women's political empowerment in Bangladesh. As a result women can't give attention to their issues.
5. Present political situation is another problem of women's political empowerment in Bangladesh. Men dominate the political arena. Men

formulate the rules of the political game and define the standards for evaluation.

6. The lack of party support such as limited financial support for women candidates and limited access to political networks.
7. The lack of contact and co-operation with other public organization such as trade unions and women's organizations and groups.
8. The absence of well-developed education and training systems for women's leadership and orienting young women toward political life.
9. The nature of the electoral system, which may or may not be favorable to women candidates.
10. The lack of confidence to run for elections.
11. Poverty and unemployment hinders the women's participation in politics.
12. Illiteracy and limited access to education obstacles women's empowerment in politics.
13. Women's low self-esteem and self-confidence supported by curtain cultural patterns which not facilitate women's access to political careers.
14. The recruitment and nomination process of parties in the national elections also obstacles women's empowerment in politics.
15. The problem of reconciling family life and public life has been a serious disincentive to Bangladeshi women contemplating over whether to participate in the political process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that women's empowerment has been accorded priority by different governments in the consecutive five year plans to Bangladesh, but women continue to be disadvantaged, deprived, neglected and face discrimination even after 42 years to independence. The society in male dominated while women are poverty stricken and continue to be victims of domestic violence and abandonment. In spite of constitutional guarantees, women have not enjoyed the some equal might's as men as accorded to them. Women still remain considerably under represented at both the local and national level of politics. There is now general consensus among women's organizations and groups and those concerned over the need to increase the number of seats reserved for women as well as to held direct elections for those seats. The major political parties such as the BNP and Awami League made this promise in their election manifesto. Despite the fact that top leaders of the two major political parties (BNP and AL) are women, but politics in Bangladesh continue to remain a male monopoly. At the onset of the new millennium, the percentage of female representation at both the local and national level has remained low compared to global standards. Although women have made some advancement in many fields that were previously dominated by men, a career in politics is not one of them. The reasons and obstacles why few Bangladeshi women are involved

in politics can be attributed to the social biases, enormous campaign costs, financial dependency, social and political violence, religious problems, lack of education and political knowledge and situational barriers and attitudes based on gender roles and stereotypes that persist that in order to give Bangladeshi women a place in the decision making process, there is a need increase the number of women holding political office at both the local and national level. However, any substantial increase in women's representation in public life depends on the mainstream changes within the major political parties, the strong support and campaigning by women's groups, notional and international NGOs, the removal of structural impediments, traditional mindsets, biases and attitudes based on gender roles and access to financial resources. It is likely that in the national parliament of Bangladesh as well as in the local level politics, women's representation will remain insignificant in the near future despite their enthusiasm to provide political leadership.

Recommendation

In order to improve the situation of women, government of Bangladesh and different national and international NGOs taking different steps. In 1972 Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has recognized and guaranteed equal rights to women to participate in all aspects of public life. Moreover, to safeguard the various constitutional rights, the government has enacted various women specific and women related legislation. As a result, gender gap is closing day by day, though much is left to achieve. In recent years, participation of women in politics has been increased significantly to the country's democratic exercise and some of them are very much successful in performing their responsibilities. Some means take in to consideration to solve the problems of empowerment of women in politics are given in the below.

1. To create greater awareness among women about their low status in political empowerment and the need to improve it, motivational programmes along with programmes for expanding opportunities and employment should be launched.
2. Specific programmes should be undertaken by the government and NGOs in order to create an awareness among the women in the grassroots levels that political empowerment would give them an access to the political decision making process.
3. Priority must be given to monitoring the status; conditions and might's of women. There must be sustained comparing for women mobilization, monitoring, public information and advocacy in their realm.
4. Women should be given various opportunities for leadership training to increase their political empowerment,

5. There is urgent need to undertake research on women's empowerment in politics, their voting behavior, consciousness and empowerment in the political parties.
6. Women have acquired a legitimate space in political institutions that can raise their marginalized position, though they are still a minority. The 33% quota for women is indeed an important impetus to empowerment of women in the political process.
7. Mass media should be used to educate and mobilize public opinion in such a way that the realization about the benefits of women's full participation in the politics.

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