

FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT: A CASE STUDY FROM BANGLADESH

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The under-representation of women in almost every policymaking aspect of life is a global issue. Nowhere in the world are women represented in government in proportion to their population. Today, women's participation is deemed necessary in modern democracy because adequate representation is regarded as essential for proper government. One element of representative democracy is that all citizens, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to participate in politics. Also, increased representation of women in elective positions of power is a matter of justice and equity. However, women's representation in many legislatures, the most powerful institutions of democratic nations, is often limited. Critics have seen women's absence from national legislatures as an indication of the absence of full democracy because, lacking women, they cannot easily enact laws that are crucially needed for women and children (Lijphart, 1991; Burrell, 1997; Lovenduski, 1997).

The rate of women's advance into decision-making positions has been very slow. The UN has estimated that, based on the current rate of change, women would have to wait until the year 2490 to reach equal representation with men in the higher echelons of power (Seager, 1997: 70). For instance, from 1945 to 2002 women's legislative representation increased from 3 percent to only 14.7 percent (IPU, 2003). Even now none of the democracies around the globe have been able to reach the numerically equal stage in terms of women's parliamentary representation. Critics argue this is a consequence of a number of factors, including women's responsibilities for family and children, the negative attitudes and discrimination of political parties, conservative religious and cultural doctrines, discriminatory socio-economic conditions, electoral systems, the nature of a regime and financial barriers (Rule, 1994a, 1994b; Liswood, 1999; Harris, 2001).

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As representation is a critical issue throughout the world, many countries, developed or developing, are struggling with the thorny problem of how to increase women's representation in parliament. Despite several barriers, quite a number of individual countries have achieved significant advancement by adopting special measures and techniques such as quotas and reserved seats in political parties and parliaments respectively. It has been strengthened in all the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Germany, Costa Rica, Argentina, Mozambique and South Africa, to name just a few.

The factors responsible for women's overall under-representation are largely common across nations while the degree of under-representation varies from nation to nation. Therefore, special measures and techniques cannot bring similar outcome for all nations. This particularly applies to the Bangladesh parliament. Bangladesh is a South Asian nation, where a patriarchal system reinforces women's dependency on men and men have strong reservations regarding women in leadership and management positions. Despite this, two women leaders have ruled the country for more than a decade now. In addition, a special provision for women's reserved seats in parliament was introduced in 1972. Notwithstanding these apparently favourable elements, women's parliamentary representation reached only 2 percent by the new millennium. This paper intends to establish the causes of for the extremely poor representation of Bangladeshi women in parliament and place these in a global context.

Factors Affecting Women's Parliamentary Representation

Often the factors are interrelated and difficult to separate from one another. For example, Norris and Lovenduski (1995) identified two interacting causal factors, 'supply' and 'demand', which result in women's under-representation. The most common explanation for the supply-side factor is women do not come forward and/or they are not interested in politics. The demand side factor is related mainly to the selectors, or political parties, where such parties discriminate against women's nomination. The authors tried to correlate the two factors, as prospective candidates may be discouraged to put forward their names from the anticipation of failure.

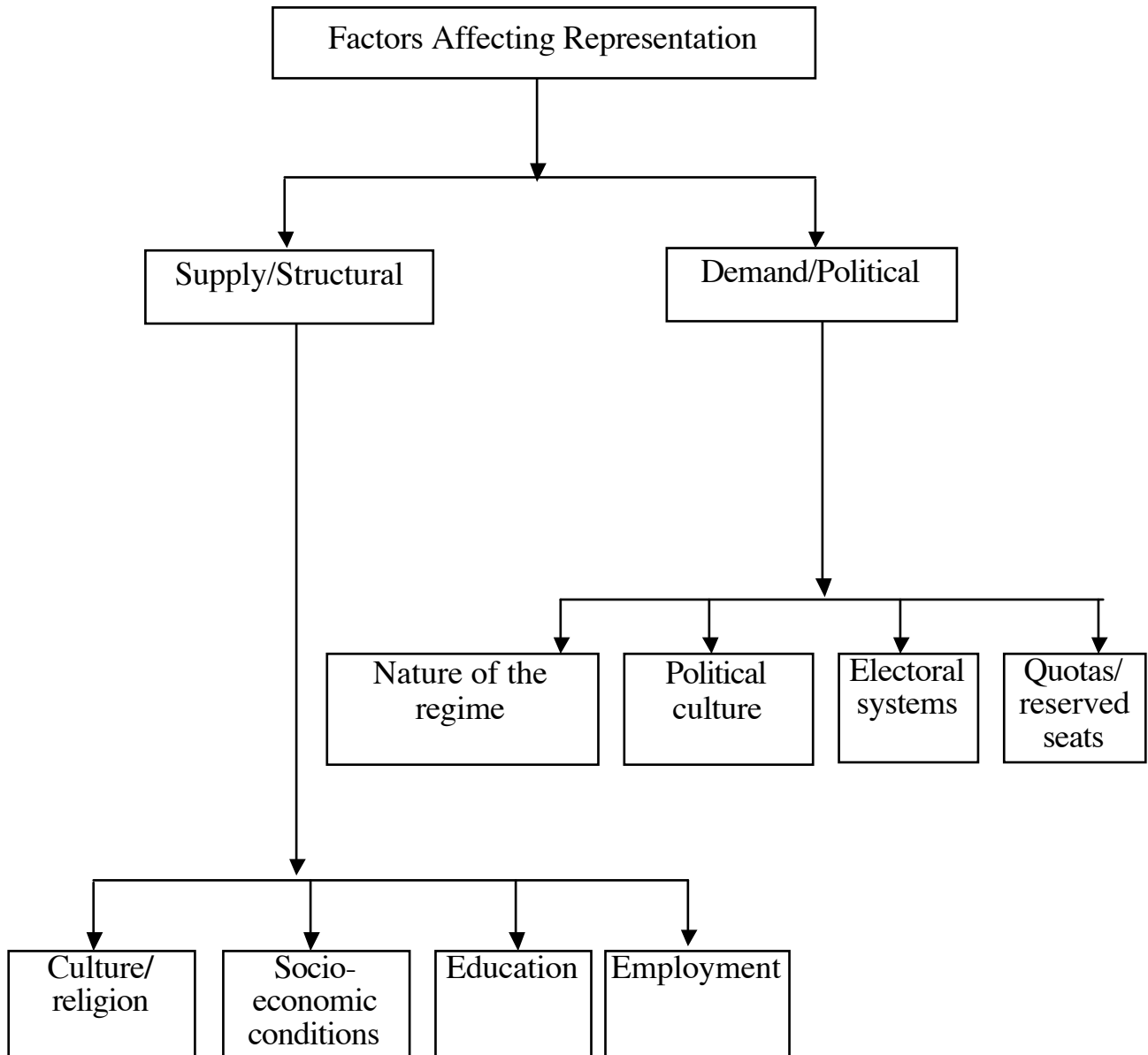
Norris and Inglehart (2000: 3) also found that in traditional cultures women may be reluctant to run for political office and political elites may appear hostile to women by imposing tough selection criteria. Thus, both supply and demand factors may be responsible for women's under-representation. Therefore, rather than simply accusing political parties of discriminating against women candidates, women leaders are also concerned about the supply side problem. Lately, Laura Liswood, the Co-Founder of the Council of Women World Leaders, in her keynote speech at the APEC Women Leaders Network meeting, warned women that "Unlike Cinderella, we can't sit back and wait to be rescued" (1999: 2).

But why do women not come forward? No one doubts that women's reproductive role creates significant constraints that inhibit public activities. While men can play an important part in rearing children (breast-feeding apart), the reproductive role of women creates the expectation that they should be at home to rear children. With recent social and cultural changes there is now a greater acceptance that more opportunities are available to women than bearing and rearing children (Hall, 1992: 28). Nevertheless, women still take more responsibilities in caring for children and families. Haines (1992: 189) argues that mothering is a 'very under-rated occupation.' Not only does this result in low prestige and social status for mothers, but the long-term consequence of women's confinement at home also limits them from acquiring the self-confidence that is necessary for participation in public life.

There may be other factors for women's passivity and lack of initiative, but reproductive and childrearing tasks seem to impose specific negative consequences. Neale (2001: 152) assessed these from the reality of women's major responsibility for childcare, which has a 'detrimental effect' on their career opportunities. Therefore, it is no accident that women who are active in trade union and party politics tend not to have dependent children. The significant coincidence in this is that some of the world's first women parliamentarians were free of restricting family ties, having remained single. Significant examples of such women parliamentarians include Jeannette Rankin in the US Congress, Agnes MacPhail in the Canadian House of Commons and Dorothy Tangney in the Australian Federal Parliament (Haines, 1992: 74).

While women's reproductive role is a universal concern for their political participation, other factors vary from nation to nation. Factors such as culture, religion and the structure of a particular society, the nature of the regime, and women's status in the society all have enormous influence on the political participation of women. Broadly, these can be considered in terms significant *structural* and *political* factors, which are comparable to supply and demand factors respectively. For clarity of discussion, I have divided the factors affecting women's parliamentary representation into two broad categories: 'Supply/Structural' and 'Demand/Political'. Under the Supply/Structural category I include socio-economic conditions, culture, religion, education, and employment. The Demand/Political category comprises the nature of the regime, the political culture, electoral system and special mechanisms such as reserved seats or quotas. The following diagram seems useful to demonstrate the influence of these factors.

Factors influencing women's political representation



Supply/Structural Factors

Cultural and religious factors

The majority of cultures emphasize moral, dependent, and politically less competent images of women. This passive image of women reduces their partisanship and sense of political effectiveness. This tends to suggest a less active political role for them, although Jancar (1974: 230) has stated that female conformity to these characteristics has tended to vary from culture to culture. For example, Western women generally have more freedom and status than women in East Asia. In Muslim Central Asia and in Confucian China women were mostly excluded from public life. Women may win greater political representation in nations where more liberal attitudes toward the role of women in politics prevail. In Scandinavia an egalitarian culture renders the environment more favourable for women's political representation, leading Karvonen and Selle (1995: 11) to label Nordic societies as 'women-friendly'. While most research on gender inequality in political representation has pointed out that political, socio-economic and cultural factors each play a role in accounting for cross-national variation, culture remains the most influential factor (Moore and Shackman, 1996; Paxton, 1997; Matland, 1998b; Kenworthy & Malami, 1999). Earlier, a very successful US Congresswoman, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick (1974: 14-5) attributed significant weight to culture. She stated:

Politics, it is argued, is a good example of arbitrary cultural exclusion. While legal barriers to women's participation in political life have been abolished, cultural norms have preserved the definition of politics as "man's work." ... culture is often said to affect women's political behaviour by depriving them of the self-esteem necessary for political leadership. In a culture which values the male more highly than the female, women may never acquire the confidence and autonomy required to seek power or wield it effectively.

It is also evident from Rosaldo's study (1974: 36) that women's status is lowest in those societies where they are placed under one man's authority in the home. Hall (1992: 89) made this clearer by bringing 'patriarchy' into the scene: "women's empowerment is least developed in the most traditional patriarchal societies." All three aspects (men being more highly valued, functioning as family heads, and with women under their control) are an outcome of patriarchal culture and resemble current attitudes in many Third World countries, including Bangladesh.

Often religious doctrines are used to justify sex role differentiation, a fact that is somewhat obscured by secularisation. Religious beliefs are invoked to justify other systems of ascribed differentiation, such as the caste system and the distribution of power on the basis of racial differentiation. To Hall (1992: 102) however, particular denominational or sectarian belief is not a major

factor as she argues that all religions are powerful sources of women's subordination:

Although women may be motivated to pursue particular work as a vocation through their religion, as men are, women's roles in most religious settings are to obey and be devoted to the traditions of the religion and the family. Religion endorses family expectations, because religion needs to recruit its new members through the families who participate in their congregations.

Nonetheless, to show the direct and indirect impact of religions on women's political power, major religious doctrines need to be addressed. In Christianity the Bible prescribes a differentiation of religious tasks between men and women. St Thomas proclaimed woman to be an 'imperfect man', an 'incidental' being (Beauvoir, 1949: xxxix). The notion of female inferiority appears prominently in religious teachings. Hunter (1976: 15) suggested that the image of woman as inferior, so prevalent in the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions, was further fostered by the moral practice of medieval culture. She noted:

Clergymen still refer to the teachings of Paul and the early church fathers to sanction the enduring exclusion of women from positions of power in their churches. The Bible still lends support to those seeking to justify the idea that women have no roles other than wife and mother.

Islamic doctrines have been interpreted in many different ways. Although the famous Egyptian Sunni thinker Muhammad al-Ghazali criticised males' oppressive attitudes towards women, AbuKhalil (1994: 129) has stated that Ghazali accepted the inherently sexist content of Islamic texts and did not object to the exclusion of women from the top post of government, that is, the position of Caliph. This conviction contradicted the influential role played by Muhammad's favourite wife 'A'ishah. In the early 1950s, a political and religious controversy was created due to the demand for political rights by a group of Egyptian feminists. Some religious authorities vehemently asserted that Islam does not recognise women's political rights and a fatwa (a binding religious opinion) was declared by Al-Azhar:

The fatwa maintained that Islam granted women rights relative to private guardianship, such as the right to parenting and the right to oversee financial and *waqf* (religious charity) affairs. The opinion of Al-Azhar about political rights (public guardianship) was categorical, holding that public guardianship is an exclusively male realm (AbuKhalil, 1994: 129).

This was the extreme case in the Arab world. However, Muslim women generally face tremendous opposition and are often criticised by religious fundamentalists on the ground that there is no provision for women to be state leaders under Islam. Hensman (1996: 57) has stated, the Islamic state of Pakistan made the overall condition of the country especially disadvantageous

to women. Therefore, despite the reserved seats for women in the parliament, Pakistani women can hardly advance because other religious and cultural factors remain. Muslim women in the Middle East, especially in Kuwait, are still fighting for voting rights.

In Hinduism, some have argued that religious doctrines against women are less prominent. According to Mukhopadhyay (1982: 23), Hinduism neither precludes nor deems it unnatural for women to participate in politics and to exercise legitimate power. Hensman (1996: 57) indicates that some Hindu revivalists very cleverly adopted elements of feminist discourse by using symbols of female strength yet in practice affirmed the subordinate status of women. They intended to establish the idea that Hindu women did not need liberation because they already had it within traditional Hinduism. However, Kumari and Kidwai (1998: 16) held Hinduism partially responsible for women's low power status in society. They argue:

Religious teachings are, to some extent, responsible for creating and reinforcing customs that contribute to the low status of women in society. Hinduism, the dominant religion in India, teaches young girls to model themselves on Sita, the wife of the mythological hero Rama, who followed her husband into the wilderness and never failed to do his bidding.

It thus appears that unlike Christianity and Islam, Hinduism has no strong overt religious stricture against women's political power. Why then does India perform so poorly in women's political representation? Mukhopadhyay (1982: 23) argued that rather than the outcome of Hindu beliefs and attitudes, sex differences in political participation might be primarily the result of cultural and political factors. Two decades after Mukhopadhyay's findings, cultural and political factors remain dominant in India.

Surprisingly, it is mostly in the highly religious countries where women have achieved the top leadership positions. Despite cultural and religious handicaps, India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan have had women leaders at the top, which is not typical in terms of the vast majority of politically inactive women in those countries. Katzenstein (quoted in Mukhopadhyay, 1982: 14) has termed Indira Gandhi 'the Mrs. Gandhi anomaly'. From the perspective of the dynamism of culture, it is easy to assume that 'modernisation', 'development', and 'westernisation', by altering traditional beliefs and attitudes, will raise women's overall status and increase their participation and power in the political sphere. These factors became a reality for Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo as their families pushed them to acquire higher education in the Western world. On the other hand, special circumstances led Corazon Aquino, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina to fill the political vacuum created by the assassination of their husbands or father. All of these women politicians succeeded in spite of such dominant religions as Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. As their overall personal development was not typical of the stereotype of women in their countries, they can also be categorised as 'cultural

anomalies'. In fact, in these cases politics is more personal and familial, which is a predominant characteristic of South and Southeast Asian nations. Therefore, for all of the above leaders, class and family remain more important than gender. Richter's (1990-91: 528) assertion is significant:

Thus, the apparent contradiction between the overall status of women in Asian societies and the startling prominence of a few is less attributable to their having surmounted formidable barriers than their proximity to established male power.

The political roles of women in any religion cannot be approached from a generalist perspective because, for example, the status of Muslim women varies from one Muslim country to another. Evidence suggests that Arab women have less political freedom than women in other Muslim countries (AbuKhalil, 1994; Paxton, 1997). Reynolds's (1999) study of 180 nation states is relevant here. He found that religion was an important factor in explaining why nations with a strict Islamic background have often ranked at the bottom of the list in terms of women's parliamentary representation. He also demonstrated the greatest contrasts exists between countries where Christianity is dominant and those where other religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Confucianism are dominant. However, different denominations of Christianity, such as Protestantism and Catholicism, also influence the extent of women's political participation. For example, Reynolds (1999) found a positive correlation with Roman Catholicism and the recruitment of women candidates. This may better explain that with rigid patriarchy, a dominant Catholic nation, such as the Philippines, showed relatively better representation of women (i.e., 17.8 percent) in its parliament when compared with other countries in the Asian region. In addition, despite the Latin American marianismo culture that promotes women's expression of patience, humility, sacrifice and submissiveness to the demands of men, Costa Rica and Argentina, dominated by the Catholic population, produced the highest number of women in their legislatures in the Americas. With 35.1 percent women in its parliament, Costa Rica's 5th global position contradicts the perceived negative influence of culture and religion.

Bangladeshi women in cultural and religious perspective

In Bangladesh, neither the state nor civil society is structured in a gender-neutral way. The traditional society is saturated with patriarchal values and norms of female subordination, obedience and segregation. Religion was the basis of the country's existence. In 1947, the British rulers in India and India's prominent leaders divided India into two parts, India and Pakistan. During the 1947-1971 period, in the East Pakistan era, which preceded the foundation of Bangladesh, religion became an indispensable part of life and a primary determinant in women's lives. Soon after Partition in 1947, enlightened Hindus left the eastern part of Pakistan and the fanatical religious Muslim League government tried to close down all girls' schools across Pakistan

(Falguni, 1995: 21). At independence in 1971, the new country Bangladesh emphasised its Bengali character and adopted the trappings of a secular state. That new era from 1972 appears as relatively liberal for women. Secularism was proclaimed as one of the fundamental principles of the new constitution of the country. But two subsequent military coups, in 1975 and 1981, changed the situation. The first coup leader started the process of de-secularising the state in 1977 by deleting the principle of secularism and replacing it by absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah. The second coup d'état in 1988 continued the process and declared Islam as the state religion. In return, the recognition of Islam as state religion, and constitutional amendments, encouraged the rise of fundamentalism in the country. Critics have argued that the military leaders followed such a fundamentalists line in order benefit from the petrodollars that flowed from the Middle East (Falguni, 1995; Guhathakurta & Begum, 1995).

In the socialisation process in Bangladesh, girls face discrimination from their birth.² The tradition of placing a higher value on male offspring has a strong correlation with Islamic law, which makes it obligatory for a son to be responsible for the care of a poor mother and thus prescribes sons' shares of property to be double that of the daughters. Thus, religious law indirectly poses a threat to control of the country's population.³ Irrespective of religion, preferential treatment continues in favour of boys by giving them more food and better medical attention while girls are denied equal nutrition and health care in poor families. Islam (2000b) refers to a 1996 UN study, which showed that the mortality rate for girls, between the age of one and four years, was nearly twice that for boys the same age. Girls are treated as liabilities by parents and are taught to be tolerant and obedient, particularly to their husband's household, as if they are born only for marriage. Marriage is almost universal in Bangladesh and this cultural prejudice brings shame to a family having unmarried adult daughters. Therefore, from puberty to marriage the girl is under intense pressure to get married as soon as possible and not become a burden on her parents.⁴

In terms of power relations between genders, a very asymmetrical interdependence exists within the family. Men have the sole authority for decision-making and women are regarded as highly dependent partners. This hierarchy within the family is related to the breadwinning status of men. The customary division of labour, resources, and responsibilities results in different and unequal status for men and women (Kabeer, 1998). Bangladesh has one of the highest battered women rates in the world; at 47 percent it is second only to Papua New Guinea (*State of World Population*, 2000). This pervasive

² A new bride is usually blessed by the elders in order to have a baby boy. As soon as the boy is born, *Azan*, or a call for prayer, is broadcast. But this is not the custom in the case of a girl. See Nath 1981, 15.

³ In rural areas, women usually give birth repeatedly in order to have a son, as sons are believed to be better economic assets providing security in old age. See Hamid, 1996.

⁴ While an unmarried educated woman earning an income brings disrepute to the parents, no such stigma is attached to an unmarried man. See Islam, 1994.

repression of women is an indication of a deeper social ailment and is thought to be an outcome of women's sole dependence on men.⁵

For the majority Muslim population of Bangladesh, Islam plays a vital role in shaping everyday customs within society. The dress code, or *purdah*, for women is most visible among them. Through conforming to *purdah* women bring good reputation and honour to their families. A majority of rural women are convinced that *purdah* is vital for the well-being of their families and discarding this is believed to be a sin against religion (Naved, 1994; Rahman, 1994). Overall, the people's stereotypical attitude and belief about *purdah* is that those conform to it are modest, gentle and passive, rather than aggressive. This religious custom is incorporated into a culture which legitimises the exclusion of women from public spaces. Cultural norms become difficult hurdles when mixed with religion and sometimes it is even harder to separate what comes from culture and what from religion. For example, the ideology of Islam is reinforced by the cultural context and manifested in the institution of women's seclusion through *purdah*. Strongly devoted *purdah* followers usually wear a *borkha*, by which they can cover their whole body. However, a majority of both Muslim and Hindu women in Bangladesh follow *purdah* by covering their heads with a *sari*. Irrespective of religion, the practice of *purdah* infiltrates all areas of the society, from celebrations and gatherings to seating arrangements in public transport.⁶ To avoid the character assassination and innuendo that can damage a political career, women leaders conform to *purdah* in public, at least symbolically. Chowdhury's (1994a: 94) interpretation of the linkage of *purdah*, patriarchy and gender relations is noteworthy: "*Purdah* is a manifestation of the male proprietary approach to gender relations that is inherent in patriarchy".

Table 1. Religious denominations in Bangladesh⁷

Muslim	88.3 %
Hindu	10.5 %
Buddhist	0.6 %
Christian, Animists and believers in tribal faiths	0.3 %

Female chastity and morality get top priority in everyday gender relations in Bangladesh and this is not only limited to *purdah*. The more that women remain in the private sphere, the more this is seen as an indication of women's purity. Some people erroneously indicate the involvement of 1.2 million women garment workers in Bangladesh as a symbol of development and therefore deny the influence of *purdah* (Westfall, 1996). Perhaps *purdah* has been compromised to some extent due to poverty, because a large number

⁵ It is suggested that the situation can only be improved by the advancement of womenfolk in areas of employment or economic self-reliance because the incidence of beating is the highest amongst the illiterate people. See *The Daily Star*, 22 September, 2000; Kabir, 2000.

⁶ For details how *purdah* affects everyday life of women in Bangladesh, See Chowdhury, 1994a: 92-113.

⁷ See Country Profile, Bangladesh 2002, at <http://www.chetona.com/home/Bangladesh.html>.

of poor women have taken jobs due to a need for outside income. This situation, however, does not correlate with improved gender roles in society. Very poor women have no choice but to work, for their poverty has pushed them to seek income outside the home. People accept such behaviour when the necessity for it is apparent and do not make it a matter for shame. This situation is appropriately described as “the pain of hunger pushed away their veil” (Jiggins, 1994: 113).

Fundamentalists, however, are opposed to women’s education, employment and the micro-credit program of NGOs. While NGO workers are helping to educate women, they have been attacked by the Muslim fundamentalists, allegedly for propagating Christianity. A vast number of NGO workers are women. This kind of community educational work needs a door-to-door movement but mullahs often describe those women involved as ‘fallen women’.⁸ There are claims that ulemas and maulanas, who are known to be religious opinion leaders, interpret religious doctrines rigidly against women and relegate women to a subordinate status. Therefore, according to Husain (1995: 39), religion in Bangladesh is “misperceived and misapplied with ulterior motives.” In a patriarchal society the fanatics’ clever appeal seems to attract people when they advocate not dragging a mother and sister out of a home but instead employing the unemployed fathers and husbands (Chowdhury, 1994a; Falguni, 1995). A recent discovery indicates that millions of Bangladeshi women have never had the experience of voting due to *fatwa* that voting involves women’s public interaction. During the last 3-4 years, the government and several NGOs have taken the initiative to teach these women how to vote and for the first time thousands of women cast their votes in the 2001 general election.⁹ The increasing danger of *fatwa* compelled the Bangladesh High Court to proclaim a ruling against village religious leaders in late 2000.

However, it is not only the religious clerics and fanatics who hinder women’s involvement in public life; society itself finds it difficult to accept women on their own. Independent working women, especially those who work late at night, are often accused of being bad characters, and onlookers frequently restrict their mobility. One of these, a self-employed student-cum-worker, Simi, committed suicide on 23 December 2001. Her crime was simply working late hours and leading an independent life, which is not socially sanctioned for women. For months she had been undergoing abuse from local hooligans, led by a group of young men backed by the neighbourhood elders. Systematic and brutal verbal character assassination led her to slap one of these hooligans. This was considered as a direct threat to male authority. Her action forced her parents to receive a delegation of righteous neighbours and law enforcers who threatened her family and demanded that Simi should behave according to the accepted code. Here the accepted code is to obey the

⁸ See Bornstein, 1996, 186; see also the Country Profile, Bangladesh, 1995-96, 8.

⁹ *Fatwa* declared by one Peer (religious cleric) debarred women from voting in three localities for 45 years. This scenario can also be found in many places of the country. See *The Daily Ittefaq*, 21 September, 2001.

male. Even the concerned policeman ordered Simi and her family to obey male rule. This destroyed her spirit, and she decided that death was her only escape from the 'patriarchal collusion' (Siddiqi, 2002:5). She described her assault as 'worse than being raped'.¹⁰

A strong patriarchal culture not only gives the sole authority over women to men, but, until recently, the sole authority over children as well – mothers had no legal standing as a guardian. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took a radical step in the year 2000 by changing this. Thanks to her initiative, it is now mandatory to put the mother's name along with the father's on the birth registration and on children's school certificates. A number of other documents, like voter identification and passports, will now also have to carry the name of the mother. Conservative Islamic groups were infuriated by these changes and claimed that this would bring social disorder by undermining the institution of marriage. They argued that this provision would encourage young people to live together without getting married (Islam, 2000b).

Officially, the constitution of the country recognises a woman's equal rights but legal discrimination against women exists through the religious laws relating to marriage, divorce, child custody and property inheritance. For example, according to Muslim family law, a daughter is entitled to only half a son's share of the father's property. However, with a few exceptions women surrender their inheritance as a matter of custom, thereby showing love for their brothers; depriving brothers of this source of income might antagonise them. A Hindu woman does not have any inheritance right to family property so at the time of the wedding her father has to provide everything for the household of the new bride, including money and ornaments, which is truly a 'dowry'. A father who cannot afford a dowry fails to find a suitable match for his daughter. Christians have equal property rights but their small proportion in the country's population does not create any significant impact.

Bangladeshi women's secondary status is known internationally. Although Bangladesh is a signatory and has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), it reserved the Articles concerning women's equal rights in the family, which is controversial and militates against achieving gender equality. The country thus limited its objective of equality in the public domain. Though many NGOs in Bangladesh have been quite successful in demonstrating the efficacy of empowerment approaches, official statements on women have not embraced them. Religious law is the main sources of inequality and discrimination between the sexes, and inferiority in personal rights has inscribed women's secondary status.¹¹ Gender discrimination and inequities are deeply embedded in the socio-economic structures and to some extent they are legalised. While

¹⁰ Her suicide was the outcome of cultural constructions of honour and shame and she got rid of the pain of that cultural shame for her parents and family, which she described in a small note before her death. See Chowdhury, 2002 and *The Daily Star*, 8 January 2002.

¹¹ See the Report of the Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategies for the 1990s, Vol.1 (1991), 357; Jahan, 1995; Kamal, 1995. Also see IDEA for the State of Democracy, 2001.

articles 27 and 28 of the Bangladesh Constitution state that all citizens are equal before the law and the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, laws relating to citizenship are discriminatory against women. For instance, the 1951 Citizenship Act restricted Bangladeshi women from extending their nationality to foreign husbands but the same law did not apply to men (Islam, 2001). The latest Human Development Report placed Bangladesh in 132nd position (among 162 nations) in terms of its Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM).¹² The GEM reflects the percentage of women who hold seats in parliament, the percentage who are managers and professionals and, lastly, their per capita income.

Currently, both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition are women, but no other areas, including parliamentary representation, show any significant sign of women's advancement. This unusual advancement of two women occurred only because they have not achieved their positions in their own right; rather they are accidental leaders. They do not fit the existing cultural pattern of the country. Moreover, Islamic religious doctrines play a crucial role in nourishing the conservative nature of the culture. The advocacy of gender issues in Bangladesh has been seen as a 'win/lose' scenario, rather than societal advancement. Women's gains have been evaluated as men's losses (Jahan, 1995: 128).

The socio-economic condition of the nation

There is reason to suspect that political gender inequality will be affected by a nation's level of economic development. Richard Matland (1998b: 114) has noted:

As countries become more developed, women are increasingly integrated into all spheres of public life; this should include representation in the national legislature ... Several processes that accompany development should increase women's political resources and decrease barriers to political activity. Development leads to weakening of traditional values, decreased fertility rates, increased urbanization, greater educational and labour force participation for women, and attitudinal changes in perceptions of the appropriate roles for women.

However, overcoming all of the above barriers does not necessarily mean that women may advance rapidly in the political realm; for instance, a highly developed country like the US has one of the smallest proportions of female legislators (14 percent). On the other hand, Costa Rica, a less developed country has a high representation of women in its parliament (35.1 percent), which is exceptional for a developing country (Matland & Taylor, 1997).

¹²See the UN Human Development Report, 2001.

Regarding exceptions like these, Dahl notes that the fact

That competitive politics is undoubtedly associated in some way with socio-economic development is not, it seems, a very satisfactory – nor perhaps even a very interesting – conclusion. What is more tantalizing is the fact that the association is weak, that the conclusion ignores a number of critical deviant cases, and that the relationship of one to the other is unexplained (Dahl, 1971: 70).

From a Bangladeshi perspective, one of these unexplained factors could be ‘culture’. The more dominant factor ‘culture’ is distinct from the developmental factor. Matland (1998b: 114) asserted, “the development factor looks at the absolute level of development, while the cultural factor looks at the women’s position relative to men’s.” In their study of 146 nations, Kenworthy and Malami (1999) found that levels of economic development did not appear to have a direct effect, and culture was more important than the level of development.

However, development still remains a crucial facilitator. When women reach the same level of social status as men in terms of literacy, university degrees and work force participation, they will be regarded as equal to men in the political sphere. Again, the wealthier the country, the more leisure time women have as technological supports are available for their household chores. Formal childcare facilities are part of the culture of developed countries.

Economic development has proved to be quite important for gender inequality of other types. Development can indicate some freedom from the daily task of living for the individuals of a country, which would be expected to positively increase the number of women available for political office (Paxton, 1997: 448).

Lack of leisure time is one of the explanations why lower-class women were not politically active. But not all women face this barrier of limited leisure time, some can afford it at the cost of money, and equality is not an issue for them. There are also societies where individual and family wealth and class position permit women to hire other women for childcare and household activities. Therefore, in those countries which have a deeply divided class structure, the rich, and higher-class women, are often involved in politics because they can afford to hire maids for their children.

This is a familiar scenario in most Third World countries, including Bangladesh, where women politicians hire maids to look after children. They can also afford childcare through extended family networks, which is not a popular choice in developed countries. Regarding the political participation of Third World women, Waylen’s (1996: 12) notes that

Almost universally middle-class women, because of factors such as economic resources and employment, levels of education and confidence, find it easier to participate than poorer women in the upper echelons of conventional politics.

It thus appears that the individual situation of some prominent women may

bear no relation to the prevailing socio-economic condition of the country.

Socio-economic position of Bangladeshi women

Wealth and status are necessary in order for Bangladeshi politicians to win electoral nomination. The general failure of women in the 2001 general election was explained in terms of their inability to confront the monetary demands required for success.¹³ However, this is not only true for women; it is true for all prospective candidates. The number of businessmen and industrialists in the parliament is increasing rapidly. They join the respective parties just before the election and money, rather than party political experience, is the prerequisite for their selection. Unprecedented examples of money games occurred during the 2001 general election. Many dedicated party workers were denied nomination as nomination papers were sold to wealthy men. The BBC analysed this as an unhealthy political culture and named the parliament as a millionaire's club.¹⁴ We have seen earlier that Bangladesh's women have extremely limited property rights; therefore, they have the least priority in winning electoral nomination. Along with restricted property rights, women have limited access to education and employment, which also undermines their ability to win nomination. The extremely few visible women in the current political mainstream in Bangladesh are from the higher economic class. Wealth is thus a facilitator for women's representation in parliament.

Education and Bangladeshi women

Women's progress in attaining political power surely depends, at least in part, on the degree of progress they have made outside politics (Randall 1987; Chafetz, 1991). One important area is education. Many women lack access to education, which is necessary for an equal political position with men, and this may influence their political outlook. An empirical study in South Korea conducted by Wade and Seo (1996: 44) suggested that with education women become more politically aware, and more assertive and active in political discussions and participation. Kishwar (1996a: 17) delivered proof for the Indian *Panchayats* (the lowest tier of local government) that most uneducated women members feel helpless and incapable in interpreting and handling bureaucratic rules, accounts and procedures. Therefore, the government appoints male assistants who simply take control of the *Panchayats*.

If we look at women's situation in the educational system of Bangladesh, the poor performance of women can be found throughout the society. The movement for educating Bengali Muslim girls was started at the beginning of the 19th century by a few young modernist Muslim men when they found Muslim women were disadvantaged compared to Hindu and

¹³ BBC World News, 2 October 2001a.

¹⁴ See Ahmed, 1998; BBC World News, 30 September 2001b.

Western women. In 1911, Rokeya Sakhawat Husain, a dedicated feminist, founded the first Muslim girls' school. However, although nowadays the government has taken a few steps in favour of free education for girls at primary and secondary school levels, attending mosques for religious teachings is often all the education that a rural girl child receives (Hamid, 1996). One recent survey shows that while the attendance of girls in primary school is equal to that of boys, it is one third in secondary school, and one quarter in higher secondary levels. Above the age of 15, the number of girls who can sign their own name is 40 percent below the number of boys. The literacy rate of women is 24.2 percent, against 45 percent for men.¹⁵

The biographies of Bangladesh's MPs show that among the 37 women MPs in the 1996-2001 parliament, only 37.8 percent had a university degree. It is noteworthy that the highest percentages of these women MPs were housewives (46 percent). Therefore, women MPs who were housewives with little education were allocated to standing committees for science and technology, finance, foreign affairs, fisheries. In contrast, more than 90 percent of male MPs had a university degree.

Employment

If women are found disproportionate numbers in disadvantaged positions in the social structure, they will not have the resources necessary to gain political power (Paxton, 1997: 444). Professionals are considered in advantageous positions in the sense that they are likely to be well educated, practised in public speaking, and familiar with the political system and the law. The greater the share of women in professional occupations, the larger we should expect women's share to be in the parliament. Women's political opportunities and power are also likely to depend in part upon their labour-force activity. Women who work outside the home tend to participate more actively in politics. Jobs can provide funds to help launch political campaigns and can yield political contacts. Higher rates of female participation in the labour-force may thus lead to a larger number of motivated and well-connected female candidates willing to stand for office. This is likely to result in increased numbers of elected female representatives and in greater strength as well.

However, this may not be the same across nations. Matland (1998b) found a contrasting scenario between industrialised and Least Developed Countries (LDC):

... in industrialized countries women who previously worked in the home and have now moved into paid work outside the home are the primary cause of the increase in women's labor force participation Moving into the paid labor force, often into low paying or public sector unionized jobs, has a consciousness raising

¹⁵ Many parents think it is useless to educate daughters, and marriages get priority over education. See Rahman, 2001; Riaz, 2001.

effect on women's political participation and their propensity to articulate political demands. While women's labor force participation rates are quite high in many LDCs, this is largely due to women's presence in subsistence-level primary sector work. This work is quite unlikely to have the same empowering and consciousness raising effect. Labor force participation does not mean the same thing in these two worlds, and therefore it is not surprising that the effects are different (Matland, 1998b: 118).

From Matland's proposition, the socio-economy status of any nation appears to be a dominant factor in determining political participation. Similarly, Rosenthal (1998: 52) states that in the case of the US states' committee chairs, men are twice as likely to have acquired an advanced professional degree in law, medicine or business, whereas, women are three times more likely to be schooled in the more integrative modes of community and volunteer leadership. Similar research findings produced by Norris (1997) showed that elected political officials in the UK are frequently drawn from professional occupations. Lawyers and business professionals tend to be heavily overrepresented in parliament.

Employment and Bangladeshi women

Bangladeshi women's poor educational achievement explains their poor performance and representation in the job market. However, most qualified women are interested in developing a professional career, but they are underrepresented in government jobs, making up less than one-tenth of government employees. Only one of the 51 government ministries is headed by a female civil servant. There are only two women among the nation's over 300 senior bureaucrats (Islam, 2000a).¹⁶

Among the 37 women MPs in the 1996-2001 parliament, the following categories of background have been found.

Table 2. Background of women MPs in Bangladesh parliament¹⁷

Category	Number	Percentage
Housewives	17	45.9
Teacher	12	32.4
Business	4	10.8
Other professional occupation	3	8.1
Professional politician	1	2.7

¹⁶ Although women's representation in government positions is close to 10 percent, in semi-government enterprises, banks and corporations this representation is around 5 percent. This is because the Public Service Commission (PSC) does the recruitment for civil service cadre jobs, while individual employers recruit women for other bodies. See *The Daily Janakantha*, 16 October 2001.

¹⁷ For the biographies of women MPs see the Bangladesh Parliament 1996-2001.

The global trend of more women with teaching backgrounds entering parliament became true for Bangladesh. On the other hand, only three women MPs have been found with a law degree, and of these only one was practising law as a profession. Political apprenticeship was rarely found among women MPs; only 2.7 percent took politics as their profession.

There is a provision for a 10 percent employment quota for women, which is applicable for all government ministries and corporations, but this job quota for women is rarely filled due to the negative attitudes of employers, which undermine women's capability and potential. Khan (1993) argued that the rationale behind quotas for women was perhaps the fact that in a patriarchal structure, the need for a woman to get a job was always considered a low priority compared to her male counterpart. Therefore, even with the requisite qualifications, a woman often fails to get her due share in a highly competitive and male biased job market.

Demand/Political Factors

Every society has its own structure and method of control. The nature of the regime is a determinant of an individual citizen's power. In an authoritarian state, citizens can exert and exercise the least amount of power. In communist regimes, parliaments are generally mere rubber stamps. Lack of democratic practice is also recognised as a hurdle for women's political advancement, as democratic countries have more liberal attitudes towards 'people power'.

Matland and Taylor (1997) argued that despite a patrimonial society with a dominant role for men, the significant achievement of Costa Rican women in politics and parliament is due to the country's long established democracy, PR electoral system, organised feminist movements and women's active involvement in political parties. Not only that, over time, Costa Rican women have held a significant number of high governmental positions. While socio-economic conditions and culture remain considerable obstacles for women, other factors appeared to be conducive for them in Costa Rica. Moore and Shackman (1996) found a positive correlation that democratic nations have more women in their legislatures than non-democratic nations.

However, although democratic processes decrease artificial and arbitrary barriers, Paxton (1997) found a negative correlation between democracy and women's legislative participation in her study of 108 nations. A long-standing Indian democracy has proven to be very inhospitable for women, resulting in a decline in the participation of women, not only in legislatures, but also in many other political and public arenas. The particular problem for women in India is more serious due to increasing violence, sexual harassment and victimisation in many of the political parties. Parties do not function according to democratic norms and women parliamentarians are kept sidelined in their respective parties. Lack of financial transparency and the dominance of 'thugs' and 'crooks' in political parties made the parties less credible to people (Kishwar,

1996b: 28). Earlier, in a survey in India, Kaushik, (1993: 81) found that 63 percent of middle class women did not approve of participation in politics by family members, as politics is considered to be 'dirty', 'corrupt' and 'immoral'. Overall, the Indian political culture made women's participation far more hazardous than it was prior to 1947. The supply of women candidates is thus affected or negatively influenced by the nature of the regime.

Nature of the regime of Bangladesh

Bangladesh resembles India in many respects. Bangladesh has experienced military rule on a number of occasions. The subsequent elected governments have failed to withdraw completely from dependency on military administration. This kind of democracy cannot be a determinant or sufficient support for women's political participation. In the 30-year history of Bangladesh, the democratic constitution has been postponed by two military coups and the people have experienced prolonged military rule. The founder of the country was killed in the first coup (along with a majority of his family members). Ultimately, two military rulers formed their own political party and legalised their rule by calling a general election. One of these parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is now in power, although its founder was killed in a coup. The country remained under absolute military rule from 1975 until 1990. After a massive amount of popular pressure and a number of demonstrations, military rule was abolished in 1990 and the country became a parliamentary democracy in 1991. Nevertheless, authoritarianism remains dominant in the political parties and the parliament. Boycotting parliament by big parties is another deviation from democratic practice.

The 1991 Report of the Task Forces identified specific barriers to women's participation in politics. It emphasised the need for the eradication of the unholy alliance of big money and arms in political power.¹⁸ The situation is much worse now. The failure of institutional politics in favour of gangster politics has made things much tougher for women. While women are entering into other aspects of public life, they generally are not interested in politics to the same extent because of its violent nature. In addition, women are vulnerable to police brutality and violence. Assaulting women is one of the popular tricks to discourage them from political involvement. The police removed a woman's sari while she was demonstrating against the ruling party in May 1999.¹⁹ Cultural prejudice meant that the woman was blamed for attending the demonstration. It seems women are rarely ready to bear this kind of shame in a patriarchal culture and remain absent from formal institutional politics. A similar thing happened on 9 January 2002 in an opposition party street demonstration. Police tried to take off women's

¹⁸ See the 'Report of the Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategies for the 1990s', p. 351.

¹⁹ The photograph of two police personnel taking off a woman activist's sari was published in all daily newspapers in Bangladesh, along with *The Daily Prothom Alo*, 22 May 1999.

clothing and bashed the veteran woman politician Begum Matia Chowdhury. Referring to this kind of police torture, one of the high court judges termed the police in Bangladesh as 'Frankenstein' (Mamun, 2002).

Political Culture

One can develop organising capacity, decision-making techniques, lobbying and other political manners while working for a political party. Parties offer power both through access to public office and in the party organisation itself; they also make useful ties between public officials and voters. They exercise extensive influence in nominating candidates for parliamentary elections. Party affiliation is extremely important for women to overcome typical societal discrimination. Jones and Navia (1999) stated that the experience of a Chilean grassroots women's group and their unfamiliarity with the array of political institutions restored by parliamentary democracy made them vulnerable and disorganised. Not being part of a political party, they had no back-up and their language was often outside accepted political concepts. In reality, those few women associated with party politics in developing countries tend to mobilise mainly in women's sections where decision-making mechanisms are rarely exercised. Overall, due to poor party structures and odd timing of meetings, women in Third World countries rarely show interest in participating in the mainstream political parties (Randall, 1987: 109; Waylen, 1996: 12).

Political parties are not only sources of power and influence but are regarded as gatekeepers because they have the power to nominate candidates (Norris, 1997: 218). The central party organisations have considerable influence over the nomination of candidates, and if they are committed to include more women, they have that option. Hague et al., (1998:82) described how women are treated by political parties:

... of course, women still face the high hurdle of discrimination from sexist male politicians. These gatekeepers claim that women are 'unsuited' to politics – and then use the scarcity of women in high office to prove their point!

Women's share of legislative seats may also be affected by the partisan composition of the legislature. Leftist parties can be expected to express greater commitment to reducing gender inequality, and so ought to be more likely to nominate women as candidates. Norris and Lovenduski (1995) stated distinct criteria for the left and right wing parties in Britain. Parties on the right wing have gradually developed a meritocratic selection procedure from a patronage process. In contrast, the left wing parties follow a meritocratic process where numerous candidates compete and finally the person wins who has political abilities and experience. In safe seats, local beneficiaries get priority. Women's meritocratic ability and political experience may not appear as sufficient to the right wing parties to get selection. Another explanation came from Matland and Studlar (1996: 729), who argued that left parties usually feel a responsibility to bring the powerless group into the power circle.

Also, they have strong women's groups in their party structure that prompt them to bring more women into the mainstream of the political arena. Thus, the larger the proportion of parliamentary seats held by leftist parties, the larger we should expect women's share of those seats to be.

Political culture of Bangladesh

An extremely small number of women participate in political parties. Every big party has separate women's sections and student fronts. Student fronts also have separate women's wings. But women rarely get chances to exercise any decision-making power. This separate party structure simply reflects the existing cultural segregation of men and women in the society. In addition, traditions of formal political structure in the Third World prevent women from participation. For instance, Waylen (1996: 12) notes that the timing of meetings and the combative style of politics discourage women from active political participation. Female students usually appear as amateurs in politics and do not follow a political career in their later life. Although Sheikh Hasina, the former Prime Minister and present Opposition Leader, took part in political demonstrations in her student life, she did not continue as a dissident. She inherited power because of a lack of other male heirs in her family. So far, only one woman in the country's history, Begum Matia Chowdhury, the veteran student leader of the 1960s, has continued from her student life into a political career. An analysis of the 1996-2001 parliament shows that 90 percent of the women MPs chosen for the reserved seats had been involved with the women's sections of political parties where no mechanism for the exercise of power existed. As there is no pressure from strong women and feminist groups within the party, party men are reluctant to promote women.

No particular partisan nature is visible in the big political parties in Bangladesh, which are broadly centrist. The Bangladesh Awami League (AL) is categorised as left-of-centre, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jatio Party (JP) are right-of-centre and the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB) is a right wing fundamentalist party. Political institutions are strongly influenced by cultural and religious barriers. They emphasise women's protection and purity. Chowdhury (1994b: 51-52) claimed that the constitution of the AL did not include women's role in the mainstream issues of human resources development, education and other areas. It put women under a separate heading, 'Women and National Development', which reflects the marginal status of women. The BNP promotes equal status for women, but this refers to achieving greater respect and value for women as mothers and wives. The religious fundamentalist party JIB promotes Shariah law and propagates a sharp public-private dichotomy by directing women's seclusion and subordinate status.

As the political parties do not keep any record of their members, it is very hard to find out the number of women members (Chowdhury, 1994a: 97; Falguni, 1995: 24; Ahmed, 1998: 46). However, as Table 3 indicates, female membership in the central executive committees set up by the

dominant political parties is an indication of the limited numbers of women in these parties.

Table 3. **Women in the central executive committees of political parties**

Name of parties	Total members	Female members
Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	231	11
Bangladesh Awami League (AL)	65	6
Jatiyo Party (JP)	151	4
Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB)	141	8

Source: Bangladesh National Report, 1995: 8.

The current Prime Minister and Opposition Leader have held the chief positions of their parties, BNP and AL, since 1984 and 1981 respectively. But far from being an example of gender advancement, this is a sign of weak political institutions and a lack of democracy. Despite having had opportunities to promote women's interests, these two women have done very little to bring more women into parliament. The 2001 general election is a typical example of this. Although she promised on numerous occasions to bring more women into politics, the AL leader Sheikh Hasina nominated only 10 women (including herself) for the 300-seat parliament. The BNP leader Khaleda Zia did even less, nominating only three women (including herself). One of the other two was her sister and the third was a deceased MP's wife. The 2001 general election is an example where women showed enormous interest in getting nominations but few were successful. After the election, BNP women arranged an open discussion where women criticised the party's policy of nominating few women and the unclear position of women's reserved seats. The party General Secretary replied that they only nominated those candidates who could win. He added the word 'protection' by reminding them that women are given all sorts of protection. Unless women become equal to men in all respects they would not get elected.²⁰

In Bangladesh women are not usually public figures. For instance, during natural disasters and other crises, local male leaders visit affected areas and victims. But in a similar situation, women rarely go beyond their own locality. Unless they have a reputation of serving people in wider localities it is unlikely for them to be elected. The existing culture provides little scope for ordinary women to advance at the same rate as men and whenever women claim any of their rights they are asked to show similar competency with men. Chowdhury (2000) found another reason for nominating fewer women. As, socio-economically, women's status is low, political leaders find it difficult to share state power with their female counterparts.

²⁰ See 'A debate of BNP women with the General Secretary of BNP, regarding fewer women's nomination in the parliamentary election', *The Daily Janakantha*, 23 January 2002a.

Electoral systems

There is strong evidence demonstrating the effect of the structure of the electoral system on increasing the number of women in legislatures. Party list/multi-member district systems are more conducive than are candidate-centred/single-member district systems. Research by Rule (1987, 1994a, 1994b), Norris (1987, 1997), Lovenduski and Norris (1993), Darcy et al., (1994) and Matland (1998a) identifies the nature of the electoral system as one of the most important factors in accounting for variations in the share of female legislators across nations. Several single-nation case studies (Rule, 1994b; Zimmerman, 1994; Matland and Taylor, 1997) and one cross-country analysis (Paxton, 1997) found that it makes a difference in both the wealthiest democratic nations and the less developed countries. Among the most affluent longstanding democracies, the United States has one of the smallest proportions of female legislators. The reason has been well explained by Rule (1994b: 22): none of the positive steps for women, such as quotas in political parties, reserved seats in the Congress and 'woman-friendly' electoral systems, are available in the US. It is worth noting that the US follows the First-Past-the-Post (FPP) plurality electoral system, which Rule considers to be 'woman-unfriendly', whereas she argues that the Proportional Representation (PR) system is 'woman-friendly'. A study by Kenworthy and Malami (1999) of the twenty most affluent longstanding democracies suggested that on average a party list/multi-member district system increases women's share of parliamentary seats by nearly 12 percent (when compared to a candidate-centred/single-member district system).

Norris and Lovenduski (1995) argued that electoral systems with a high number of seats in multi-member constituencies facilitate the entry of women. But it would be misleading to see this factor in isolation from its broader context. A party list system is perhaps a facilitator, but certainly not a sufficient condition for high levels of female representation. In Scandinavia, the electoral system is conducive to women's representation but since it has remained stable, by itself this factor cannot account for change over time. In Israel, Italy and Greece the electoral system should be favourable to women, yet without party initiatives or wider political pressures from a women's movement, few women are selected or elected. It is, therefore, necessary to understand the interaction of the political system in a comprehensive model, rather than relying upon simple and deterministic explanations.

Impact of the electoral system on Bangladeshi women

While PR systems have been found to be 'woman-friendly', Bangladesh employs the least favourable system for women, FPP. However, Matland (1998b) found that for developing countries, PR is not as effective as it is in developed countries because to meet one standard a developing country may fail in another. For example, while electoral rules are mouldable, cultural norms, women's status in the society and the country's development level are

resistant to change. Goetz (1992: 12) described the existing patriarchal culture of Bangladesh as ‘among the least negotiable in the world’. Therefore, even with the PR system, political parties may discriminate against putting women’s names on the list. It is also the case that the two major parties always took the opportunity to use the 30 seats reserved for women to form a single party government, which might not have been possible under a PR system.

Reserved seats/quotas

Use of quotas and reserved seats for minority groups are quite common and women are predominant among these groups. However, women are a ‘political’ minority rather than a ‘numerical’ minority (Lijphart, 1999: 280). When women gain access through quotas it does not necessarily mean that they can act independently to influence policy, although sometimes they can symbolise potentially expanded political roles for women. These women should be able to participate in the decision-making process of parties and thereby develop necessary the skills that enable them to become expert members of the legislature. Quotas impose restrictions and are usually justified on the grounds that protection leads to a rapid increase of women’s representation in politics. To reduce the gender gap and to increase the numerical representation of women in parliaments, many countries have adopted these mechanisms. Such quotas are usually perceived as a transitional mechanism to lay the foundation for a broader acceptance of women’s representation. Some countries use them in parliaments and others in political parties. Scandinavian countries are exemplary in bringing more women in parliament by using quotas in political parties. In contrast, South Korea, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal are significant in introducing reserved seats in parliaments.

The two most commonly used systems of quotas are those achieved through constitutional stipulation or national legislation and those achieved through political parties. Countries such as Uganda, Argentina, Nepal, Eritrea, Tanzania, Belgium, Italy and Namibia follow the written quota policy according to their constitutions. For example, a parliamentary seat from each of the 39 districts is reserved for a woman in Uganda. Argentina’s Ley de Cupos (Law of Quotas) is a singular example of a national law requiring all political parties to adopt a minimum quota (30 percent) on party lists for women in the election of national deputies. Significant positive outcomes have been evident from Argentina’s 30 percent quota law. Female representation in the Chamber of Deputies increased from 5.5 percent in 1991 to 12.8 percent in 1993 and 26.4 percent in 1998 (Del and Feijoo, 1998: 42).

The countries that did best with quota provisions used them in their political parties rather than parliament. For example, the countries that used quotas in their political parties secured the top global positions in women’s parliamentary representation: they include Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands and Norway. Pressure from women’s groups within parties led most political parties in Scandinavia to introduce gender quotas. These quotas were

embedded in the selection and the nomination processes from the very start.²¹ The success of the increasing numbers of women in legislatures in several Scandinavian countries is a consequence of the political parties adopting formal quota systems which ensured at least 40 percent female representation on party lists (Darcy et al., 1994; Rule 1994a, 1994b; Burness, 1997). During the 1970s and 1980s, the social democratic and left wing parties in Norway introduced quotas but most centre and right wing parties considered quotas 'un-liberal' (Dahlerup, 1998: 100). The Socialist Left Party was the first to adopt a quota policy. The Labour Party introduced at least a 40 percent quota for both sexes for all electoral nominations in 1983. It did not face any difficulty in recruiting qualified women candidates because their ultimate target was to get more women elected, not just to prepare a party list. By implementing the quota system, it took three elections for women to reach about 50 percent of the parliamentary faction and 50 percent of the ministers when the Labour Party was in power (Dahlerup, 1998: 104). Norwegian electoral studies show that, due to this quota policy, women's share of members increased rapidly in the Labour Party. Norway has had the highest percentage of female party members in Scandinavia since the early 1980s. Overall, in Scandinavian countries, quotas have simply become an established instrument for equality in politics; it seems natural to extend them to other areas as well (Karvonen, 1995; Matland, 1998a; Mørkhagen, 2002).

The Netherlands Labour Party introduced a policy of requiring at least 25 percent female candidates on all lists in 1977. This led to some debate initially but later it became an effective policy (Outshoorn, 1991). There are also instances where political parties have adopted their own informal quotas for women as parliamentary candidates. This is the most common mechanism and has been used with varying degrees of success by the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa and the Labour parties in Australia and the United Kingdom (Dahlerup, 1998).

On the other hand, the mandatory quota law can be proved ineffective since the political parties are gatekeepers. In Nepal 5 percent of the candidates in each political party must be women. But most women are placed in constituencies where they have little chance of being elected. Women's poor performance in the parliament of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Taiwan is an outcome of ineffective reserved seat provision in parliament. This can be demonstrated clearly in the case of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh parliament and women's reserved seats

Bangladesh is one country that has introduced reserved seats in the parliament for women. Under its 1972 constitution, an additional 5 percent i.e., 15 reserved seats were introduced to the 300-member parliament with provision for renewal every 10 years. This was raised to 10 percent (30 seats) in 1978

²¹ See the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU 2003) web site <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> (accessed 29 February, 2003)

and the term extended by two successive constitutional amendments. However, due to a lack of consensus about renewal, women twice missed the opportunity of having reserved seats in the 1988 and 2001 general elections. The reinstatement of the provision for the 1991 and 1996 parliaments was an outcome of a consensus reached at the end of the 1988 tenure of parliament. With reserved seats, female representation from 1973-1996 averaged around 11 percent and without reserved seats it reached around only 2 percent. From 1973 to 2001, a period of 28 years, seven general elections have been held. The following table illustrates the details of women's parliamentary representation in Bangladesh.

Table 4. **Women's representation in the Bangladesh parliament (1973-2001)** ²²

Year of Election	Women candidates among all candidates (percent)	Women elected among all elected MPs (percent)	Reserved seats for women (percent)	Total women in the parliament (percent)
1973	0.3	0	5*	4.8
1979	0.9	0.7	10**	9.7
1986	1.3	1.7	10	10.6
1988	0.7	1.3	-	1.3
1991	1.5	1.7	10	10.6
1996	1.4	2.3	10	11.2
2001	1.9	2	-	2

*In 1973, the reserved seat was 5 percent, ** From 1979 onwards it was 10 percent.

The table indicates a poor achievement. In the 32 years of the country's history, the reserved seats provision did not bring any significant improvement in women's parliamentary representation, which in 2001 ended up at only 2 percent. In fact, the reserved seat provision was a continuation of the British legacy, based on a consideration of women's backward and disadvantaged positions in then British India. In those days, fathers and husbands were reluctant to expose women to education and any public activities, considering that these posed unknown dangers for them. Except for a very few, it was thought women were dependent on men and needed special protection. The provision was continued in the new nation of Bangladesh in order that women could take part in the most important organ of the government in a parliamentary system (Karlekar, 1991; Choudhury, 1995). Perhaps women needed some preferential treatment initially, but Chowdhury (2000) argues that using the word protection was another game of 'politics'. What is this politics?

²² Compiled from Nazmunnessa Mahtab, 'Women in Politics: Bangladesh Perspective', a paper presented in the international seminar on Women in Politics, Dhaka, Bangladesh, October 9-10, 2000: 5-6 and 2001 general election results.

Let us look at the working formula of reserved seats. The 300 directly elected MPs indirectly elect the 30 seats earmarked for women. These women have no familiarity with voters and no grassroots connections. They do not represent any constituency. Therefore, the majority party usually gets the opportunity to elect these women. This turns out to be a vote bank for the winning party later on. They are not appointed and neither are they elected by voters. Two distinct intentions have been identified in the establishment of reserved seats in the Bangladesh parliament:

1. There were some prominent women politicians who were directly elected from the general constituencies during the provincial election of 1954. But despite this fact, the government party, the AL, did not nominate a single woman candidate in the country's first general election in 1973. The party that publicised democratic ideals considered reserved seats as the only way of ensuring women's political representation. In 1975, the constitution and parliament was suspended due to a military coup. Without any demand from women's groups, this military government established offices responsible for Women In Development (WID) in support of the declaration of 1975 as the International Year of Women and 1976-85 as the UN Decade of Women. In 1976, the government introduced a 10 percent quota for women in non-gazetted public service positions and in 1978 increased the proportion of women's reserved seats in parliament from 5 to 10 percent. Interestingly enough, it is argued that the decision came as a surprise because the military regime wanted to increase the volume of donor assistance and picked up one of the donors' favourite themes WID (Jahan, 1995: 42). Women themselves were not particularly conscious of the need for parliamentary representation. They neither demanded it nor rejected it.
2. As the 30 reserved seats gives undue advantage to the majority parties, none of the political parties were prepared to go beyond their own interests in the lucrative 'vote bank' system and so kept the provision alive with no specific target. This provision helped the BNP in 1991 and the AL in 1996 to form single party governments. There was a constant fear on the part of political parties that without the reserved seats Bangladesh would have experienced coalition governments in the 1990s (Ahmed, 1998; Chowdhury, 2000; IDEA, 2001).

Thus the provision, which ostensibly was for the sake of women's protection, benefited the political parties. Instead of placing more women as candidates for direct election, political parties argued that women would be represented through the reserved seats. Even in the new millennium, only 37 women (or 1.9 percent) contested the 2001 general election, as compared with 1,933 male candidates. This kind of performance is not surprising. As there was no goal fixed by the political parties to increase the number of women, no party was

keen on this issue. Instead of making the reserved seat provision effective for increasing the number of women in the parliament, it has been used as a token all these years. Both the government and the parties have shown little interest in hastening the matter of increasing the number of women. Another significant element is that the ruling party recruited women who had no party connection or political experience. These women were often undermined because of their indirectly elected status and thus have even been compared with ornaments of the parliament. They were not elected by voters but by the elected MPs. Also, they had no particular constituency responsibilities. After serving five years, these women rarely opted for a parliamentary career of their own. Only five women contested the October 2001 general election. They were MPs from reserved seats and all were unsuccessful. In 28 years, only one woman, Begum Khurshid Jahan Haque, was directly elected. She was previously an MP in the reserved seats and is now serving as a minister. The nomination and electoral process of reserved seats for women in the Bangladesh parliament seems to be ineffective, but the political parties overlook the repeated demand from women's organisations for quotas.

Chowdhury (1994a: 98) has asserted that not only did the reserved seat provision fail to increase the number of women in the parliament, it also undermined women's representative status. In a male dominated society the non-electability of women is recognition of political weakness, and for that reason they usually do not exercise an independent voice. She has demonstrated how successive governments took the opportunity for block votes by controlling these women representatives. Jahan (1995) argued that the members who came to parliament under the women's quota rarely took the initiative to ask tough questions or held their government accountable for their actions on women's advancement. This failure is understandable because the women parliamentarians were elected neither by a female constituency nor by a general constituency but were primarily composed of party loyalists, selected by members of the majority party in parliament. For the sake of eradicating women's 'backwardness' the reserved seats provision has been used to maintain the status quo. However, the effectiveness of women parliamentarians in Bangladesh, according to Choudhury (1995: 11), showed that although no significant qualitative changes have occurred, their role and activities have become somewhat visible.

The 'politics' regarding women's reserved seats is on-going. The larger parties often ignore their election promises, and the women's agenda is prominent among these ignored promises. During Sheikh Hasina's tenure in government from 1996 to August 2001, the reserved seat provision expired (in April 2001). On 9 March 1997, Sheikh Hasina had promised that instead of the 30 reserved seats, one woman would be directly elected from each of the 64 districts in the next election. By the year 2000, several women's organisations and the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) had held 46 district level and five divisional seminars and workshops on electoral law reform concerning women's seats in parliament and agreed with the proposal of the government (Khan, 2000). However, on 17 June 2000, the law minister

introduced a Constitution Amendment Bill proposing the continuation of the old '30 reserved seat provision' for another 10 years. The minister's claim that the bill included the recommendations of the women's organisations was not correct. Women activists were surprised and agitated. Within days, the renowned Women's Caucus (*Mahila Parishad*) held a seminar and this time demanded 150 seats for women through direct election. However, the AL could not pass the bill without the support of the BNP as it needed a two-thirds vote of MPs and the BNP was boycotting the parliament.

The BNP not only boycotted the parliament but also accused the government of not consulting them. However, the women's organisations have a poor opinion of the BNP as it never reached a consensus on this issue. One of its longest serving and powerful Mps, and the Speaker of the current parliament, Mr. Jamiruddin Sircar, previously commented that the majority of women did not care about the demand for women's increased reserved seats and the principle of direct election. This is a headache for the well-off women (Chowdhury, 2000). The then Leader of the Opposition, Khaleda Zia, who was boycotting parliament, was urged by women's organisations to come to the parliament for the sake of the reserved seats bill, but she was determined not to co-operate in the House. However, she promised that once she formed the government this bill would get top priority with an increased number of women. She formed a government on 10 October 2001, but the women's reserved seat bill is yet to emerge because her party is wavering on the issue, and on its election promise.

The political situation also made the bill's future uncertain. As the BNP won more than two thirds of the seats in parliament and formed a coalition government with the fundamentalist party, it does not need any support from the 'vote bank' of women. Since the formation of the new government, women's organisations have been as active as ever and arranged about 10 conferences, seminars and workshops on women's parliamentary representation to press the government to fulfil its election promises. However, the law minister has already expressed his suspicion that the bill may pass but it may not be effective for this parliament. On the other hand, one anonymous source indicated that the high command of the party (i.e. the party chief and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia) has not given the green light yet.²³ Unlike Sheikh Hasina's government, this government does not need any support from the opposition party and has passed a number of bills. The law minister only expressed his intention to get the support of the opposition party in the case of the women's parliamentary representation bill. But once the opposition party indicated that it would not oppose the bill, the law minister raised another issue: the lengthy examination process. Although his party made an election promise on this issue, the party is still confused about the nature of the bill and prefers to spend time on it. It has now been confirmed that even if the bill passed in the next five years, its implementation is not

²³ See *The Daily Janakantha*, 11 January 2002b, *The Daily Ittefaq*, 12, 13 and 14 January 2002a, *The Daily Prothom Alo*, 12 January 2002a.

possible in this term of parliament. Women's organisations are frustrated with this unexpected setback.²⁴

Conclusion

Which factor weighs more for Bangladeshi women? No one particular factor, neither of supply or demand, is responsible for their under-representation in parliament. Under the broad category of supply/structural factors, individual elements have a combined effect. Bangladeshi women live in a strong patriarchal culture that determines their position relative to men. Their financial dependency on men affects all other aspects of their lives, therefore, choosing a non-traditional career, like politics, is usually a low priority for most women. The few who are interested in politics cannot compete in the monetary game with limited and/or no financial ability. Reynolds's findings of the negative influence of Islam on women's representation became a reality for Bangladesh. Due to religious and cultural conservatism they lag far behind in the two key areas of education and employment that have been identified as crucial for political participation. The female literacy rate is only 24.2 percent; for cultural reasons they are not encouraged to seek education. Subsistence needs appear to be more crucial than political power for Bangladeshi women. Thus, factors such as the socio-economic condition and culture are all interconnected. They not only contribute to women's under-representation in parliament but also limit their effectiveness.

Demand factors are also responsible for the political under-representation of women. The nature of the regime itself is a difficult barrier for women. Democracy appears to be a prerequisite for women's effective representation, as it helps to remove artificial barriers and smoothes women's social mobility. A relatively young democratic regime like Bangladesh is still dependent on its authoritarian past. For example, the military are called on often to maintain law and order. The corrupt and violent nature of politics, the lack of democratic practice in electing party leaders, the total control by parliamentary party chiefs over members' opinions in the House, the disregard of election promises, the ignoring of the demands of women's organisations, and the brutal nature of the police reflect the limited nature of democratic practice in Bangladesh. Women's social mobility and participation in demonstrations are restricted by undeveloped democratic practices. The political arena has become a fearsome place for women due to the negative attitudes of political elites, the violent nature of politics and police brutality. Party elites, including the two most prominent women (the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition), remain hostile towards women's nomination in Bangladesh. Along with other factors, the FPP electoral system hinders women's parliamentary representation.

²⁴ *The Daily Ittefaq*, 29 & 30 January 2002b, *The Daily Prothom Alo*, 29 & 30 January 2002b; *The Daily Janakantha*, 30 January 2002c.

Quotas and reserved seats are another key issue. These are one of the most effective mechanisms to increase the number of women in parliament. Yet none of these factors have been beneficial for Bangladeshi women. At least the reserved seat provision could have been one of the state interventions for women's advancement in parliament. However, the fault lies with the policy that applies it in the parliament rather than in political parties. Thus the policy has proven weak and ineffective. Without any fixed target with reserved seats, women's parliamentary representation reached only 2 percent in seven general elections. In fact, the reserved seat provision of Bangladesh is substantially different from other countries. To impress outside sources such as donors and the international community, the military government of Bangladesh introduced reserved seats without setting any goal. As they did not ask for this, women's groups and networks showed little interest in it.

As long as the barriers to participation are interconnected, the techniques for overcoming them must also be inter-related. It is noticeable, however, that despite a conservative society and the extent of both visible and invisible barriers, women in Bangladesh are becoming more interested in participating in politics. While few women are active in politics, this active group targets the parliament in a true sense. Political parties cannot, therefore, blame women for not wanting to participate. Rather, party elites appear to be the main opponents of women's political representation in Bangladesh. Not only do they discriminate against the nomination of individual women, but they also ignore the repeated demand of women's organisations to introduce quotas. They also break election promises and use women's reserved seat as a 'vote bank'. Thus demand or political factors seem to be the most crucial issues that need to be addressed in order to increase women's parliamentary representation in Bangladesh.

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