

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: BANGLADESH SCENARIO

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Introduction

Discrimination against women is still widespread despite the fact the full participation and partnership of both women and men is required in productive and reproductive life and essential for the achievement of sustainable development. (UNFPA, 1996). In most regions of the world, women receive less formal education than men, and at the same time women's own knowledge, abilities and coping mechanisms often go unrecognized. Violence against women remains a global phenomenon. There is continuous barrier to women's advancement in government, politics and business.

To overcome the problems of discrimination and oppression, and achieve gender equality in all spheres of life, Third World Feminists Group, notably-DAWN had fixed two long term goals—"freedom" and "empowerment." (APCWD: 1979). These were: a) the achievement of women's equality, dignity, and freedom of choice through women's power to control their lives within and outside the home; and 2) the removal of all forms of inequity and oppression through the creation of a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. To achieve these goals, "Power," was essential for women. However, this power referred to the sense of internal strength, as a right to determine one's choices of life and the right to influence the direction of social change.

In this paper, I will first try to define the concept of empowerment, analyse the various dimensions of empowerment and concentrate mainly on the discussion of "political empowerment" as a major pre-requisite and pathway to achieving gender equality in Bangladesh. In doing so, the paper will also identify the major impediments to women's political participation and empowerment, and finally suggest strategies to promote women's political empowerment.

Defining Empowerment

Empowerment is a process of gaining understanding of, and control over, the political forces around one as a means of improving one's standing in society. (Kinderwater: 1979). Again empowerment can be used for social mobilization, changing women's state of mind and gaining access to the bases of social

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power. (Friedman: 1992). Empowerment begins when women “change their ideas about the causes of their powerlessness, when they recognize the systematic forces that oppress them, and when they act to change the conditions of their lives.” (Morgen and Bookman: 1988). They see empowerment as “ a process aimed at consolidating, maintaining, or changing the nature and distribution of power in a particular cultural context.”

Empowerment, especially for women, has been on the minds of a number of scholars and practitioners, most notably Haleh Afsar (1998), Jo Rowlands (1997), Naila Kabeer (1994) and Srilatha Batliwala (1994). Their emphasis has been on grassroots, participatory methods and their empowerment potential for the “poorest of the poor” (especially women). Actually, writings on empowerment and gender equality as an approach to development have continued to emerge in the alternative development literature, especially from the South. In 1994, for example, Srilatha Batliwala warned that “empowerment” which has virtually replaced terms such as: poverty alleviation, welfare and community participation, was in danger of losing its transformative edge. For Batliwala, empowerment is: “ *the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power.*”(1994:130)

While empowerment requires political action and collective assault on cultural as well as national and community power structures that oppress women, Batliwala insists that women’s empowerment must include transformative political action as well. Naila Kabeer (1994) also emphasizes on the centrality of empowerment for the struggle to achieve gender equality. Criticizing the liberal and Marxist emphasis on power over resources, institutions and decision-making, she argues, however, for a more feminist approach to power, one that emphasizes the transformative potential of *power within*. This power is rooted in self-understanding that can inspire women to recognize and challenge gender inequality in home and the community (1994: 224-229). Like Batliwala, she focuses on :

“collective, grassroots participatory action—the power to work with others ‘to control resources, to determine agendas and to make decisions.’” (1994:229).

Jo Rowlands (1997), (1998) focuses on a broader analytical perspective to the

“ empowerment is more than participation in decision-making; it must also include processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions,” (1997:14)

These definitions of empowerment raises a number of concepts associated with the term. For example, power, domination, control, access, confidence, assertiveness, decision -making and choice. To summarize, the discussion on definitional aspects of empowerment, we may say that empowerment is:

-----“Right to make choices and decisions about one’s own life;”

-----“ Having control over surroundings which effect their lives;”

“Empowerment is a process of transformation which enables a woman to identify her own strengths, skills to challenge and change her life situation, make own choices and decisions and control over surroundings that effect her life.”

Women’s Empowerment framework

Women’s development can be viewed in terms of five levels of equality of which empowerment is an essential element at each level: -

- ◆ *Welfare:* addressing only the basic needs of women. Women are merely passive beneficiaries of welfare benefits.
- ◆ *Access:* involving equality of access to resources, such as, education opportunities, land and credit.
- ◆ *Conscientization:* recognizing that their problems stem from inherent structural and institutional discrimination.
- ◆ *Participation:* taking decisions along side with men. By organizing themselves and working together collectively women will be empowered to gain increased representation, which will lead to increased empowerment and ultimately greater control.
- ◆ *Control:* ultimate level of equality and empowerment. Here, the balance of power between men and women is equal, and neither party has dominance over the other. Women are able to make decisions over their lives, and the lives of their family members.

The context and dimension of women’s empowerment

Empowerment is a process ----- we cannot give it to people. Women's empowerment may be viewed as a continuum of several interrelated and mutually reinforcing components:

- ◆ **Awareness Building** about women's situation, discrimination, and rights and opportunities as a step towards greater equality.
- ◆ **Capacity Building** and skills development, especially ability to plan, make decisions, organize and manage and carry out activities, to deal with people and institutions in the world around them.
- ◆ **Participation** and greater control and decision-making power in the home, community and society.
- ◆ **Action** to bring about greater equality between men and women. (Karl, 1995, 14).

In short, empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation to decision making, power and control and to transformative action. (Karl: 1995).

Certain research studies of the manifestations of women's empowerment revealed **six** general categories:

- ◆ Sense of security and vision of a future;
- ◆ Ability to earn a living;
- ◆ Ability to act effectively in the public sphere;
- ◆ Increased decision-making power in the household;
- ◆ Participation in non-family solidarity groups;
- ◆ Mobility and visibility in the community.

These categories are further grouped into **four** dimensions broadly as: -- cognitive, psychological, economic and political.

- **Cognitive Empowerment** refers to knowledge about, and understanding of, the conditions and causes of subordination.
- **Psychological Empowerment** relates to the development of self-esteem and self-confidence so that women are able to motivate themselves into action.
- **Economic Empowerment** is the ability to earn and control economic resources. Independence in controlling economic resources opens more options for addressing one's interests and often serves to improve one's status in social settings.

- **Political Empowerment** has to do with the ability to analyze one's world and to organize and mobilize for social change. It involves access to decision-making process involving the state, and including local government, voting, collective action and other means of having one's voice heard.

Thus it is evident that the dimensions of empowerment are inter-related. Different dimensions of empowerment are often recognizable in the same settings, situations and processes.

Empowerment – Bangladesh case

In Bangladesh, women bear many of the marks of a “disadvantaged minority” in the social, economic and political realms. The traditional society of Bangladesh is permeated with patriarchal values and norms of female subordination, subservience and segregation (Nelson and Chowdhury. 1994, 94) resulting from discrimination at birth leading to deprivation, and access to all opportunities and benefits in family and societal life, thus putting them in the most disadvantageous position.

Bangladesh as a signatory to the Beijing Platform for Action, is committed to achieving equal participation of women in politics and decision-making. The National Plan of Action formulated in line with the Beijing Platform for Action and the National Policy for the Advancement of Women, emphasized that political empowerment of women could be promoted through implementing programmes for achievement of political rights,(Matin: 2001: 223).

Women's involvement in political participation in Bangladesh needs to be addressed in the context of country's social and political conditions.

Social Factors

Among social and cultural factors deep rooted patriarchal traditions, norms and attitudes, poverty, lack of access to resources, low salaries, discrimination in the work place, lack of access to political party lists are noted as root causes for women's under representation in political decision-making. Among the most common and persistent barriers limiting women's ability to participate in politics—poverty is the most pervasive. Women carry primary responsibility for household and family maintenance. In both urban and rural communities in Bangladesh, women of poorer families augment the income and food supplies with agricultural labour or informal employment. These dual obligations of household and paid labour leave women with very little time and scope for politics.

Political Factors

With regard to political factors any discussion must include both the formal and informal political process. The formal political system must cover the electoral, legislative and party process, whereas the informal political process includes a review of women's organizations whose aim is to raise women's status, create awareness of women's issues, and build platforms from which women's demands can be made. In seeking to find a public voice with which to demand change, these ostensibly non political organizations do in fact venture into realm of politics. -(Nelson and Chowdhury:1994:p 95).

The constitutional guarantee of equality between women and men, the measures undertaken to reform the laws that relate to women, the ratification of international conventions for elimination of discrimination and violence against women, and the provisions in the successive plan documents to cater for resource needs to enhance the opportunities for women are all indicative of the commitment of the Bangladeshi government to eradicate gender discrimination.

Constitutional guarantees

The Constitution of the People's Republic Bangladesh drafted in 1972 guarantees certain rights and privileges to women as fundamental rights. The constitutional guarantees ensure that women of Bangladesh possess full political rights with men.

CEDAW

Bangladesh has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women noted with appreciation the emphasis given by the present government in Bangladesh on increasing literacy among women and girls aiming at achieving education for all by the year 2000. In its report adopted at the 17th Session of CEDAW held in the United Nations Headquarters in July 1997, Bangladesh presented the combined Third and Fourth Periodic Report where the Committee noted with satisfaction the existence of constitutional guarantee to equality between women and men as well as laws ensuring protection of women in Bangladesh.

The government has withdrawn reservations about some provisions of CEDAW, relating to personal rights such as family benefits and guardianship of children. The withdrawn reservations of Bangladesh pertain to Article 13 (a) and Article 16 (1) (b) of the Convention. Article 13 (a) gives women the right to family benefits. Article 16 (1) (b) says

“State’s parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that men and women have the same rights and responsibilities with regard to guardianship, worship, trusteeship and adoption of children.

The National Policy for the Advancement of Women, which was declared by the former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, on March 8, 1997. The main goals of the policy are as follows.

- ◆ **Establish equality between men and women in all spheres;**
- ◆ Eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls;
- ◆ **Establish women human rights;**
- ◆ Develop women as human resource;
- ◆ Recognize women’s contribution in social and economic spheres;
- ◆ Eliminate poverty among women;
- ◆ Establish equality between men and women in administration, politics, education, games, sports and all other socio-economic spheres;
- ◆ Eliminate all forms of oppression against women and girls;
- ◆ **Ensure empowerment of women in the fields of politics, administration and the economy;**

- ◆ Develop appropriate technology for women;
- ◆ Ensure adequate health and shelter to women;

- ◆ Provide housing and shelter to women;
- ◆ Create positive images of women in the media;
- ◆ Take special measures for women in especially disadvantaged situations.

To examine the participation of women in politics the paper concentrates on the following issues:

- **Women’s Right to Vote;**
- **The Legislature -- National and Local;**
- **The Party Arena;**
- **Women in Leadership Positions;**
- **Women in Administration;**

Women’s Right to Vote

In Bangladesh, women constitute about 50% of the eligible voters. Although women are illiterate, underdeveloped, and lack the basic knowledge of politics, their participation in the

national and local elections have been very impressive. (Siddiqui and Hossain: 2002; 114). It is encouraging that women are coming to the polling booths in increasing numbers to cast their votes. (Islam: 2002: 201). In the presidential referendum of 1997, the turn out of women voters was as high as 88.05%. In the national elections of 1979, 1986, 1988, the turnout of women voters is worth mentioning. Their turnout in the elections of 1991, 1996 were also impressive, and in some case almost as equal to men's turnout. However, during the last national elections of the country held in 2001, the turnout of women voters especially in the urban areas was not up to the mark.

However, increase turn out of women in polling centres does not mean their absolute freedom to choose the candidates they would vote for. In a majority of cases, this decision is always influenced by male members, that is , their husbands, fathers, brothers, or some influential male members not only within the family, but also from the locality to cast their votes in favour of candidates who are not even known to the women.

A question arising from this is: What are the stated purposes and functions of the right to vote? Certainly, one of the purposes in democracies is the right of the citizens to choose their representatives for elective office by means of his/her vote.

Again, the right to vote does not necessarily indicate that women get full legitimate, social and political recognition. Usually, in Bangladesh, **the use of female voters is a means for male politicians to get elected.**

The Legislature (National)

National Parliament (JATIYA SANGHAD) (a) General Seats

Jatiya Sangshad or the National Parliament of Bangladesh consists of 300 general seats filled by direct election from single member territorial constituencies. In the last Parliamentary election held in 2002, women candidates won from 13 electoral constituencies and captured 2.0% of the 300 directly elected or "general" seats. In 1996, women won 1.36%, in 1991, 2.7%; in 1988, 1.3%; in 1986 1.7%; and in 1979 0.8% of the general seats. Thus it is clear that from 1979 to 1996 less than 2% of the candidates standing for parliamentary elections were women. (Table 1).

TABLE--1

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN CANDIDATES IN GENERAL SEATS OF NATIONAL PARLIAMENT; THROUGH DIRECT ELECTION (1973-2001):

Year of Election	% of Women Candidates
1973	0.3
1979	0.9
1986	1.3
1988	0.7
1991	1.5
1996	1.36
2002	2.0

Source:

- 1) Nazma Chowdhury : "Bangladesh: Gender Issues and Politics in a Patriarchy" B. Nelson and Nazma Chowdhury (eds). Women in Politics Worldwide, Yale University Press, 1994.
- 2) D. Chowdhury and Hasanuzzaman: Women's Participation in Bangladesh Politics: Scope Nature and Limitation. CIDA, October, 1993.
- 3) Election results, 2002

During the democratic movement in 1990, women's role in electoral politics achieved some qualitative changes. One important aspect was that the movement was led by Three Alliances, of which two were women leaders,----- Begum Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Sheikh Hasina of Awami League(AL). In addition, a number of women politicians in both BNP and AL emerged on their own rights, through competition, efficiency and effectiveness.

Reserved Seats in National Parliament in Bangladesh:

Article 65, Clause 3 of the Constitution (1972) states "There shall be reserved fifteen seats exclusively for women members, who shall be elected according to law by the members aforesaid.." However, in less than ten years time this number was increased by 100%, that is, 30. The term for the constitutionally guaranteed reserved seats for women expired in December 1987, and in 1988, the Parliament had no reserved seats for women. In 1990, the 10th Amendment to the Constitution re-inserted Clause (3) to Article 65 providing for 30 reserved women seats for a further period of 10 years from the first sitting of the next Parliament (that is, from April 05, 1991). As a result, 30 women were elected on March 30, 1991, to the 5th Parliament. This provision expired in April, 2001.

Legislature (Local)

The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, as modified up to December 31, 1986, highlights the establishment of the local government institutions in Bangladesh for empowerment and participation of the people in the development processes at the local level.

With regard to local government institutions, Article 9 of the Constitution states:

"The state shall encourage local government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representations shall be given as far as possible to peasants, workers and women."

Women in Urban local bodies (City Corporations and Pourashava)

The Constitution further advances and incorporates the principle of special representation of women in local self-governing bodies. In the urban areas, in each Pourashava there is a provision of a quota for at least 3 women members who would be elected by the Commissioners of the Pourashava. (Union Parishad, 1993). Women possess the right to vote as well as the right to stand for election to an office or membership at these local bodies. Till 1993, no women had been elected as Pourashava (Municipal) Chairperson.

However, in each of the elections of 1977, 1984, and 1993, a women candidate was elected as a member of a Pourashava, and it was not the same woman.

In the 1994 City Corporation elections, no woman contested for the 4 Mayoral positions.¹⁷ women contested for 1992 Ward Commissioner seats, but none was elected. (UNDP, 1994).

TABLE-2

NUMBER OF RESERVED SEATS FOR WHICH WOMEN WERE NOMINATED BY THE MAJORITY PARTY (1973-1996)

Election Year	Reserved Seats for Women	Overall Percentage of Women Seats	Political Parties
1973	15	4.8	Awami League
1979	30	9.7	BNP
1986	30	10.6	Jatiya Party
1988	----	----	-----
1991	30	10.6	BNP 28 + Jamaat 2
1996	30	11.2	Awami League 27 + Jatiya Party 3
2002	-----	-----	-----

In the last City Corporations election held during the months of April to June 2002, no women candidates contested for the post of Mayor in any of the cities of Dhaka, Khulna, Chittagong and Rajshahi. However, as per the provision, a total of 63 women commissioners were elected in the country's four city corporations. Among them, 30 were elected from Dhaka, 13 from Chittagong, and 10 each from Khulna and Rajshahi. The preparations are now going on for elections to newly upgraded Sylhet and Barisal City Corporations. (The position of the elected Ward Commissioners of the four City Corporations is presented in **Table 4.**)

Women in Rural Local Governance:

According to Article-9 of the Constitution,

"The State shall encourage Local Government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation shall be given as far as possible to peasants, workers and women"

To implement this constitutional provision and on the basis of the recommendations of the Study on the Institutional Review of the WID Capability of GOB, 1996, and the Local Government Commissions Report, 1997,

TABLE - 3

PERCENTAGE OF SUCCESSFUL CANDIDATES IN NATIONAL PARLIAMENT

Year of Election	No. of Successful Women in General Seats	Percentage of Successful Women candidates	Reserved seats for Women	Percentage of women candidates to total seats
1973	0	0	15	4.8
1979 (a)	0	0	30	9.0
1979 (b)	0+2	0.7	30	9.7
1986 (a)	5	1.7	30	10.6
1986 (b)	3+2	1.7	30	10.6
1988	4	1.3	-	-
1991 (a)	8	2.7	30	11.5
1991 (b)	4+1	1.7	30	10.6
1996	7	2.0	30	11.21
2002	6	2.0	---	---

Source: Dr. Nazma Chowdhury: Women in Development: A Guide Book for Planners, Draft Report 1994. Election Results, 2002.

**TABLE 4:
(Reserved Seats For Women)**

City Corporations	No. of Ward Commissioners who were Elected (Men)	Number of Women Ward Commissioners Elected
Dhaka	90	30
Chittagong	41	13
Rajshahi	30	10
Khulna	31	10

it is important to mention that for the first time in the history of the country direct election for women representatives was provided in the local government tier, the Union Parishad.

Bangladesh has made great strides in promoting women in decision-making bodies through direct election to one-third reserved seats in all local bodies. The Union Council Elections of 1997 set a landmark in the history of political empowerment of women in Bangladesh. This initiative was a major breakthrough in the process of ensuring political participation of women. But there exists a gap between rhetoric and reality. According to clause 38 (1) of the local government (Union Parishad) Ordinance 1986 (Amended), elected UP members will act as chairperson in at least 3 of 12 standing committees of the Parishad. But in many UPs, Standing Committees the women members have been given **no** responsibilities despite their inclusion in the committees. In most cases the women members are assigned the job of looking after education and health care. They are not included in the committees that deal with development projects. Thus, many women members are still sidelined by their male counterparts who control the Parishads.

TABLE - 5

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ELECTION OF UNION PARISHAD

Elections of Union Parishad	Number of Union	Women Candidates	Number of Women Chairpersons	Women Candidates as Members	Women Members Elected
1973	4,352	N/A	1		
1977	4,352	19	2	19	7
1984	4,400	N/A	6	863	Inf. NA
1988	4,401	79	1		Inf.NA
1992	4,450	115	19	1135	
1997	4,472	110	20	43969/4; 56*	110*/128; 82
2003	4472	232	22	43764/6; 17*	85*/1268; 4

Source:

- i) Election Commission Office, 1992
- ii) UNDP- Report on Human Development on Bangladesh; Empowerment on Women, 1994.

Women contested and elected to the general seats.

Political Parties	Structure of Political Parities	Total % of Members	Female Members
BNP	National Standing Committee	15	1
BNP	National Executive Committee	231	-
Awami League	Presidium & Secretariat	13	3
Awami League	Working Committee	65	6
Jatiya Party	National Standing Committee	30	1
Jatiya Party	National Executive Committee	151	4
Jamaat-i-Islam	Majlish-e-Shura	141	-
Jamaat-i-Islam	Majlish-e-Amela	24	-

TABLE : 6
WOMEN IN
POLITICAL PARTIES

Source: Choudhury and Hasanuzzaman, (1993: 54).

- In comparison with the total number of members, it is found that women are not only lagging behind in politics, their number is very insignificant in the important committees of different political parties.
- In Jamaat-i-Islami party committee there are no women members.
- It also reveals that the proportion of female to male in the higher echelons of the mainstream political parties is minimum.

Women in Cabinet (Leadership positions)

TABLE – 7

NUMBER OF WOMEN MINISTERS IN BANGLADESH DURING DIFFERENT POLITICAL REGIMES:

Government	Total number of Ministers	Total number of Men Ministers	Total number of Women Ministers	Percentage of Women Ministers
Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972-1975)	50	47	2	4
Ziaur Rahman (1979-1982)	101	95	6	6
Hossain M. Ershad (1982-1990)	133	127	4	3
Begum Khaleda Zia (1991-1996)	39	36	3	5
Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001)	46	42	4	8.69
Begum Khaleda Zia (2001-)	60	58	2	3.5

Source: Dr. Nazma Chowdhury: **Women in Development: A Guide Book for Planners.** Draft Report, 1994. Election Commission, 2002

Women in the Party arena

The Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have the highest proportion of women in decision-making structures. Twenty three percent of the members of the Awami League's Presidium are female, while 9.2 percent are on the executive committee. The BNP has 14.7 percent women on its executive committee. Both the Awami League and BNP have included women's issues on their agendas and aim for gender equality. The third largest party, the Jatiyo Party also supports equal rights for men and women. On the other hand, the Jammat-e-Islam and the Communist Party of Bangladesh, have no women in their top leadership. Although Bangladesh has many political parties, only 16

parties had women as candidates for the 2001 Parliamentary election. Generally all parties are male dominated.

In Bangladesh, since 1991, the Prime Minister has continuously been a woman. Except the Prime Minister, women have very insignificant participation in the Cabinet. In the first place, number of women with full ministerial status has never been more than two in a cabinet of 40-60. Secondly, women Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Ministers of State are usually allocated portfolios that are not regarded crucial or important. (Islam: 2003).

Women in Bangladesh have had limited and restricted access to this highest decision-making body. Their entry into higher position has depended on the wishes of male political bosses and elites. In Bangladesh there have been cabinets without a single women member. Sometimes even the Minister for Women's Affairs was a man. This post was created during 1978-79 by the Government of late President Ziaur Rahman. A male politician presided over the

Ministry for some years during the Ershad period and even under the Prime Ministership of Khaleda Zia, until recently, when a women state minister was put in charge of that Ministry. Since independence there have been only four women politicians who have held cabinet posts till now. Most of the time they represented tokenism rather than any recognition of their talent. This has been demonstrated by the fact that women ministers were employed only in the feminine or soft issue areas such as women's affairs, culture and social welfare.

Such powerlessness of women politicians demonstrated a correlation between the weaker status of women in the political party, electoral constituency or parliament and even more weaker representation in the council of ministers. As a result women had really an extremely limited role to play at the higher level of political, governmental, or executive leadership. However, under the last regime, although the number of women holding positions of Ministries had not increased, they were placed in charge of some important areas, such as food and agriculture and environment, which were always assigned to men.

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh is a woman. The leader of the Opposition in the Parliament is also a woman and it is significant that both have ascended to the position of leadership through the process of direct election. It is often alleged and argued by men in the society that both prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition being women, the women's cause should be well addressed and fulfilled. But the reality is that, both of them have to operate within a

political system that is predominantly male biased. The power of the Prime Minister emanates from the political parties that subscribe to the traditional “masculine” political culture and values and do not in general encourage active participation of women in politics. (Islam:2003). Women Prime Minister or leader of the Opposition have to adhere to and be affiliated with the prevailing political norms, and they cannot transform the existing deep - rooted political culture individually.

TABLE: 8
WOMEN MINISTERS IN THE PRESENT CABINET

Year	Size of Cabinet	Women in Cabinet	Status
1991	39	1. Prime Minister-1 2. Minister of State	1. MP 2. MP against reserved seat- Ministry of Women’s Affairs.
1996	38	1. Prime Minister-1 2. Minister-2	1. MP 2. MP-1-Minister of Agriculture; Reserved seat-1, Forest & Environment 3. Reserved seat -- Women’s Affairs
2001	60	1. Prime Minister-1 2. Minister-1 3. Minister of State -2	1. MP 2. MP - Women’s Affairs 3. Non-MP (Technical quota) --- Culture Affairs & Primary Education.

Source:
Cabinet

Division.

Women in Administration - present situation

The participation of women in political decision-making and administration remains very slim. Currently very few Bangladeshi women can be found in positions of political leadership in both central and local government structures, and even in the administrative hierarchy. As a result of this lack of opportunities to intervene at the policy and decision making level, women have a minimal impact in the planning, management and implementation of policies.

Since 1982, women have been regularly appearing at the Bangladesh Civil Service Examinations and getting recruited in all the 29 Cadre Services. However, the position of women vis-a-vis men in terms of number is still insignificant. The number of women holding Class I positions in ministries / divisions, departments / directorates and autonomous bodies

/ corporations is only 5,066 compared to 73,619 men. **This means that only 6.44% women are occupying Class I positions compared to 93.56% men.**

The situation of women in 29 cadre services is by no means satisfactory. Except for two cadres, i.e. BCS General Education and Health representation of women is very poor, because until the 1980s, women tended to join government service either in the education or health sectors. It was not until the last decade that women began to join the other cadres in the Bangladesh Civil Service. Women's representation at the higher levels of the civil service, i.e. Secretary, Additional Secretary, Joint Secretary and Deputy Secretary are almost negligible. (Table - 9).

TABLE :9

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AT DIFFERENT LEVELS IN THE ADMINISTRATION

Position	Male	Female
Secretary	53	0
Additional Secretary	59	1
Joint Secretary	257	3
Deputy Secretary	658	8
Assistant Secretary	594	23

Source : --Ministry Of Establishment, (1998), 2002

After two decades of the introduction of the special quota system for women in the government services, the overall situation of women remains below expectation. At the regional level (district) only four women have been appointed or promoted or posted to serve as the head of the district administration, that is Deputy Commissioner. However, below the district there is the thana, where very few women have been given the post of TNO (Thana Executive Officer) - the head of the Thana Administration.

CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

After the general election held in October 2001, the new government assumed power, but there was no women representatives in the reserved seats. Once again, the women's groups became vibrant with their demands. A unique feature of their approach is that for the first time ever all the different women's organizations had reached a consensus on **three** issues:

- 1) Provision of Reserved Seats for Women ;
- 2) Mode of Direct Election and
- 3) Extension of the period of reserved seats for more than ten years.

A woman Parliamentarian, if she is to become an active politician, she should be recognized by a political party, and she should be supported by the voters. In doing so, it is necessary to educate a competent woman so that she can choose and run for politics as her long term career pursuit. Training programs for women political leadership should be at the national level. Educational institutions for women's political leadership should be established. Each political party should also provide educational programs for its women's members.

- **Women's active participation in political parties**

There are a lot of women members in political parties. But the number of women members itself has no meaning, because most of them are merely registered members only in name with little involvement. Women should be active members who virtually participate in politics on an equal terms with men members.

- **Strengthen Women's Organizations**

Women's groups should serve as a driving force to forming a political power for women based on solidarity. They should exercise influence on policy-making processes, and should help women develop their ability on their own. To achieve this goal, they should: Educate women voters and candidates in developing the capability and skills of women not only to run and win in elections, but to engage in advocacy work for gender-based issues at the global, regional and national levels.

However, with regard to the number of seats there was still some variation. For example, The National Coalition for Beijing + Five (NCBP) has put the demand for 75 seats;

Mahila Parishad ---100 seats;

Other groups would prefer 150 seats.

It is important to mention here that the present government had pledged in their election manifesto to increase the total number of seats to 500, together with the increase in the number of seats for women in the reserved seats.

In January, 2004, the present government had made the announcement for the 14th Constitutional Amendment in which the issue of reserved seats for women was mentioned. With this announcement, once again the women's groups became vibrant with their demands for direct election of women in the reserved seats and increase in the number of seats. A series of dialogue, discussion sessions, rallies, demonstrations were all held by all sectors-----, women's groups, NGOs, academicians, members of the civil society, researchers, etc, to stop this amendment. But all efforts were in vain when on May 16, 2004, the Jatiyo Sangshad (National Parliament) passed the 14th Constitutional Amendment Bill. **The highlights of the Bill with regard to reserved seats for women are:**

- 1.Total number of seats in the JS to be raised to 345 seats from the existing 300 seats as reserved seats for women have been introduced.
- 2.Reserved seats for women is to be filled on the basis of representation of parties in the JS.
3. Reservation provision for women seats has been made for next ten years from next Parliament but to be introduced in the JS immediately.

Addressing future challenges

The overall consensus within the women's movement in Bangladesh is for direct election of women, by women. (Huq, 2000, p139). But the provision of direct election is not sufficient to ensure women's participation in politics. It needs to be supplemented with other

strategies such as education for developing women's political leadership, women's active participation in political parties, strengthening women's organizations, studies, setting a goal, humanization of politics, and a need for a women Caucus in the Parliament.

Conclusion

It is worthy to recall that one important area of concern for women in politics is that *Political Participation of women is the basis of leadership and power.*

The Beijing Platform for Action also affirmed that women have the equal right to participate in Governance and, through that participation, contribute to the redefining of political

priorities, placing new questions on the political agenda and providing new perspectives on mainstream political issues. The platform defined two strategic objectives under this critical area: --

To ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making.

To increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

It is extremely important to consider the seriousness of the issue by all concerned parties to reactivate their policies, programs and strengthen their movement for greater mobilization, motivation, lobbying and advocacy with the appropriate and relevant sectors so that the women's interests of the country are represented and fulfilled. Members of the civil society, women's movements and citizens at large need to raise their demand for enhanced and

effective participation of women in Parliament through direct election of women in the reserved seats **in every possible way in every forum.**

The leaders of the civil society and women's movement will have to continue lobbying, strengthening, advocating role and dialoguing with legislators and policy makers. They need to take concentrated efforts to intensify their actions to keep the issue on the agenda

" We shall have to struggle not to become discouraged, but to remember that each step—however small--- taken by politicians, policymakers, planners, civil society, NGOs and women's movements will move us forward along the path."

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