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Social Change is a journal for social development published two times a year- January to June and July to December. The Journal welcomes original contributions from all viewpoints on various aspects of development. It is designed to promote understanding of the society at its depth touching upon both theoretical and empirical dimensions of research.

Social Change is a podium for the exchange of ideas among scholars, policy makers and development practitioners, Their intellectual and constructive ideas would smooth the way to social transformation in a desired manner.

Appreciating their consecrated commitment to people and society we earnestly believe that they will make vital contribution through projection of ideas and views embellished with their sagacious policy recommendations. Social Change is a peer reviewed Journal devoted to the advancement of the research and social studies. The Journal entertains articles from the grassroots activists and researchers and appreciates learning from the field situation.

The content and quality of papers should be in accordance with scope and nature of the Journal. All research articles are to reviewed by at least one expert. Also they are subject to an in-house examination in editorial / Advisory board. This is in the pursuit of excellence and strict adherence to professional standards.
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Research Article

Women in Modern Politics and Decision Making in Bangladesh

Sanjoy Kumar Chanda
Assistant Professor
Sociology Discipline, Khulna University
Khulna-9208, Bangladesh

Abstract

The study has been conducted through the documentary analysis of different secondary sources. The vision was to identify the position of women in modern political systems and their decision making arena. The constitution of Bangladesh provides formal equality and entitled to the same fundamental rights of men and women. Article 10 of the constitution ensures participation of women in all spheres of national life. But in modern political system, relatively women are directly and indirectly being dominated or exploited by their male counterpart. Although Prime Minister and opposition leader with other key position holders are women, their representation in parliament is only 18.6 at present. Bangladesh holds 62 number position in world politics whereas Rwanda has more than fifty percent representation in national parliament. The participation of women in both urban and rural local government is still insignificant. Though reserved seats for women have boosted the confidence and aptitude of women, it points out the need of opportunity to play an effective role from those seats have infused them with frustration. The participation of women in decision-making in 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.
Key Words Political Participation; Decision Making; Administration; Government

Introduction

Women's lives in Bangladesh are often affected by various socio-cultural and ethnic forces, a range of religious faiths, obscure legal frameworks, and complex economic and political forces. Despite diversities across countries, women in Bangladesh face similar conditions. Patriarchy characterizes South Asian countries (Caldwell, 1982) where women are dominated by a kin-ordered social structure (Mathema, 1998). Socio-cultural practices based on strong patriarchal traditions have served to curtail mobility of women in this region.

Generally, in Bangladesh, the formal political system is dominated by males, but the degree of domination varies from division to division and region to region. Signs of domination are evident when women are assigned to soft portfolios 'appropriate' for women's concerns, even when they become a part of the formal political process as members of elite political groups. Usually, women in Bangladesh are viewed with distrust if they interact outside their designated areas. They are generally viewed as weak members who should be protected and are expected to remain outside politics, as it is a 'dirty game' (Kabir, 2003).

A significant characteristic of Bangladeshi politics is that the highest position in the government has been occupied by women i.e. Sheikh Hasina and Khakeda Zia. Even though these women occupied the highest position in government, the condition of women at large is very different. The vast majorities of Bangladeshi women are illiterate, in poor health, invisible in the system of national accounts, and suffer from legal, political, economic and social discrimination in all walks of life. Another noticeable fact is that they have the lowest rates of participation in their governance structures as compared to many developed nations (Haq, Mahbub Ul. 2000).

The Fourth World Conference on women, held in Beijing, advocated in favor of ensuring adequate representation of women in all decision-making bodies (Beijing Platform for Action, 1995). It was suggested that in order to voice the concerns of the society in equal terms, it was necessary to ensure a 'logical balance' of men and women in public
life. Participation, accountability, predictability and transparency are the basic characteristics of good governance. In these contexts, good governance generally calls for gender balance in political decision making. Very often, it is argued that the overall decision making process can be enriched if women's insights and values of governance are reflected in these processes. It has been also established that women at the local level are more responsive to community issues (Shamim and Kumar, 2002).

Women constitute slightly more than half of the world population. Their contribution to the social and economic development of societies is also more than half as compared to that of men by virtue of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. Yet their participation in formal political structures and processes, where decisions regarding the use of societal resources generated by both men and women are made, remains insignificant. Men dominate the political arena; men formulate the rules of the political game; and men define the standards for evaluation. The existence of this male-dominated model results in either women rejecting politics altogether or rejecting male-style politics. Presently, women's representation in legislatures around the world is 15 percent. Despite the pronounced commitment of the international community to gender equality and to the bridging the gender gap in the formal political arena, reinforced by the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of Action, there are only twelve countries where women hold 33% or more seats in the parliaments (UNDP Report, 2005).

While major changes have occurred in the status of women in some parts of the world in recent decades, norms that restrict women to the home are still powerful in defining the activities that are deemed appropriate for women—and they exclude political life, which by its very nature takes place in a public forum. In the contemporary world, some regimes have enforced this principle most severely (the Taliban in Afghanistan for example), but it is also a powerful factor in many other countries such as Japan where there is still a strong expectation that when they marry, women will leave full time employment outside the home (Brinton, 1993). Women's historic exclusion from political structures and processes is the result of multiple structural, functional and personal factors that vary in different social contexts across countries. However, beyond these specificities of national and local
contexts, there is a generic issue in women's political participation that relates to the wider context of national and international politics, liberal democracy and development. It is, therefore, imperative to critically review these constructs and decode the gendered nature of Democracy as well as Development, which poses limitations on women's effective political participation. The elements of enabling environment for women's participation in politics and development cannot be discussed and identified without putting the current development and political paradigms under scrutiny. (Bari, 1995)

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).

Methods and Materials

The study is based on secondary data collected by the articles of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Inter-parliamentary Union, Ministry of Establishment in Bangladesh and other relevant books, journals, magazine and the different search engines. Here national and international authentic references have been used to validate the writing. The articles which are used most of them carry on the recent statistical data of Bangladesh and other foreign countries. They range from statistics regarding women's political participation at all levels of governance to both qualitative and quantitative information that include individual case studies, debates and critiques of women's political participation.
Discussion

1. Participation and Representation of Women in Politics
Historically, women's voting right was established long ago but women's participation in the political and national movement has been negligible. At present both the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition in Parliament are women. However, their high positions in politics do not reflect the whole scenario of women's position in politics. Both the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition come from political families. The Prime Minister's father was founder and first Prime Minister of Bangladesh, while the husband of the leader of the opposition led a military coup and was subsequently elected as President. Women are still subordinated to men in many cases but they are coming out. Gradually women's participation is increasing.

Table 1: Elected Female Members to the Bangladesh Parliament (1973-2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Election</th>
<th>Total Elected Women</th>
<th>Reserved Seats</th>
<th>% of Women in the Parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.8 (out of 315 seats)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.69 (out of 330 seats)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11.21 (out of 330 seats)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.33 (out of 300 seats)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11.81 (out of 330 seats)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13.03 (out of 330 seats)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.00 (out of 300 seats)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008*</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>18.6 (out of 345 seats)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Election Commission of Bangladesh.
*Estimated based on the result of National Parliamentary Election held in 2008 in Bangladesh.

Jatiya Sangshad or the National Parliament of Bangladesh consists of 300 general seats filled by direct election from single member territorial constituencies. There are also reserved forty five seats exclusively for women members, who are elected according to law by the members aforementioned. Data in Table-1 depicts that in 2008, the Bangladesh Parliament had the highest representation of women (18.06) including the reserved seats. However, both in the 1988 and
2001 Parliaments, the provision for 30 reserved seats for women were not maintained, which resulted in fewer women represented in the Parliament. The nomination of fewer women candidates by the major political parties and absence of quota reservation have been responsible for the very low percentage of elected women to parliament in 2001. The provision for 45 reserved seats for women far 10 years was created with the passing of 14th constitution Amendment Bill, 2004. Later, the women seats were distributed proportionately s per elected representation of different political parties in the parliament. Women leaders demand that there should be at least 100 seats in the national parliament where women representatives would be elected by the direct voting of the electorate.

2. Participation and Representation of Women in Ministry

Table 2: Position of Women as Minister and Mayor during Different Regimes in Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Regimes (in Years)</th>
<th>Women in Cabinet and State Ministers</th>
<th>Women in Mayors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Ministers</td>
<td>Male Ministers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972-1975</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979-1982</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-1990</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-1996</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-2001</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2006</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008- onward</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Table-2 depicts that 13.63 percent women represent in the Ministry of Bangladesh at present whereas 4.0 percent represented in the political regime of 1972-1975 and it declined to 3 percent in
1982-1990. Although the participation of women in cabinet is increasing, the male domination is still significant. Basically power is being distributed among women but the key role is being played by the male authority. As power practices are inherent in the gender disparities which are very much based on class, race, ethnicity, religion etc, there are always the possibilities of exploitation not only between men and women but also among men (Sarker, A.E. 2008).

3. Participation and Representation of Women in Administration

Women's participation in political decision-making and administration remain very rare. At present, a small number of Bangladeshi women can be found in positions of political leadership in both central and local government structures, and even in the chain of command of administration. Women have negligible impact in the planning, management and implementation of policies due to desire of opportunity to get involved at the policy and decision making level.

Since 1982, women have been regularly appearing at the Bangladesh Civil Service Examinations and getting recruited on all the 28 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 (Ministry of Establishment, 2010).

**Table 3: Women Appointed to Decision Making Level Positions of the Civil Service (Federal and Local) in 2010**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Post</th>
<th>Number and Percentage of Women Civil Service (Federal)</th>
<th>Number and Percentage of Women Civil Service (Local)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>No. of Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Secretary</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Secretary</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Secretary</td>
<td>1416</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Assistant Secretary</td>
<td>1496</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Secretary</td>
<td>942</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Estimated from the list of Ministry of Establishment (updated 26th May, 2010).
Table-3 shows that only 5 women hold the position of Secretary, 9 additional Secretary, 25 Joint Secretary, 157 Deputy Secretary, 246 senior assistant Secretary and 234 Assistant Secretaries in 2010. Again, civil service in local or regional level, no women represent in Divisional and Additional Divisional Commissioner. Only three and four women have been appointed to serve as the head of the district administration that is Deputy Commissioner and Additional Deputy Commissioner respectively. 33 women have been given the post of UNO (Upazila Nirbahi Officer) - the head of the Upazila Administration.

4. Women's Participation in Urban Local Government

Before the Gazette notification (the Paurashava Ordinance 1977, Ordinance No. XXVI of 1977 which was amended on 1998, July and Gazette Additional copy 22/3/1999) for municipalities and city corporations respectively, female ward commissioners were appointed by selection. For the first time Dhaka City Corporation elected 19 female ward commissioners (elected by male commissioners) for reserve seats in 1994. With a view to promote women's participation in urban local government, the Paurashava Ordinance and City Corporation Ordinance have been introduced which are mandatory for every Paurashava and City Corporation. These ordinances stipulate that whatever the number of ward commissioner, depending on the area of the Paurashava and City Corporation; there should be reserved seats, exclusively for women equivalent to one third of the number of commissioners fixed by the government. The women ward commissioner will be elected directly. The span of responsibilities for ward commissions has been well defined in the government gazette. But there is no definite responsibility narrated in such a Gazette for women ward commissioners. The government Gazette notification has described the nature of meetings, panel chairpersons etc. So the status of women wards commissioners (reserved seats) has been undermined. Still there is some confusion and misunderstanding between commissioner and women ward commissioners. Every political party has a women wing to encourage women to join politics either at national or local level. Women's participation in politics has no doubt increased tremendously. All NGO's, women's organizations and civil society organizations are very active in this regard. Recently there has been a phenomenal change. During the last 1998 local
government election (Union Parishad) more than 12,000 women members were elected directly for reserved seats. In the near future, after completion of municipal election, another 887 women ward commissioner will be directly elected. Contesting for reserved seats, women's participation in elections will have a positive impact on women's political consciousness. Beside this, the media are playing a vital role educating women. The total number of women voters' enrolment has increased compared to the previous enrolment.

Table 4: Number of voters by sex and the ratio of vote casting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of voting/enrolment</th>
<th>Total number of voters</th>
<th>Number of voters by sex</th>
<th>The ratio of M/F voters</th>
<th>Percentage of vote casting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>62181743</td>
<td>33040757</td>
<td>29140986</td>
<td>53.14 : 46.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>56887588</td>
<td>28614475</td>
<td>2827313</td>
<td>50.30 : 49.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: FEMA, election report (1996)

From the above table we can see that the ratio of female voters has increased from 46.86 to 49.7 per cent by the year of 1991-1996. Local government has initiated different programmes to encourage women's participation in governance. Women ward commissioners mainly deal with women's issues, particularly for poor women, such as micro credit programmes, handicrafts and professional training programmes attracting women to join such programmes. There are some positive impacts of these programmes initiated by local government. Women are becoming very concerned about their rights and unnecessary cases. Local governments are compelled to facilitate their rights. Very recently the government has introduced transport facilities for women, child care facilities, violence against man. All these are the result of the women's movement.

5. Women's participation in Rural Local Government

Article 9 of Bangladesh Constitution states that "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" (Bangladesh Constitution, article 9). Local government of Bangladesh
is known as Union Parisad and women's participation at the local government is still insignificant. In 1994, for the first time, 19 women ward commissioners were elected to the reserved seats of the Dhaka City Corporation. In 1997, Bangladesh government took a positive step to ensure women's participation in the elected bodies at the local level. The government introduced a law of direct election of women for three reserved ward member seats to each Union Parishad. A part from the exclusive reserved seats, women can also compete for any general seats. 43,969 female candidates contested in the 1997 Union Parishad direct elections for 12,723 ward member seats reserved for women.

**Table 5: Elected Women Chairperson to the Union Parishad of Bangladesh (1973-2003).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Union Parishad</th>
<th>Female Candidates</th>
<th>Elected female Candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>4352</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>4352</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>4440</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>4440</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>4443</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>4443</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>4443</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Hossain (cited in Ahmed, 2005) found that reserved seats for women have boosted women's confidence and their capability but he points out that lack of opportunity to play an effective role from those seats has infused them with frustration. In the men dominated Union Parishad (UP), women ward members hold subordinate position and cannot express their views. Salma Ali (cited in Ahmed, 2005) alleges "many women elected through quotas were subjected to sexual harassment by their men counterparts and were looked down upon as second category members". Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (LGRD) constrained women UP members as they are not authorized to give birth certificate and cannot be a member of law and order maintain committee of the UP. Ain -O- Salish Kendro
(ASK) sued against government and High Court gave verdict against government, but government till has not circulated a new rule for them.

6. Women in World Parliament

Table 6: Women's Political Participation in the World Parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Election Held</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>Sept, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>Sept, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>April, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>Jan, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>April, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>Nov, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>Feb, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49*</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>May, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>Dec, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>Nov, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>April, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>122*</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>April, 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*2. Estimated based on the Election Result of UK and Sri Lanka.

Data in Table-6 shows that 45 seats were occupied by the women of Rwanda among 80 seats of national parliament holding the rank 1 for women's political participation over the world. Bangladesh holds the rank 62, the USA 71, India 99 and Sri Lanka 122 among 140 countries for women's political representation over the world. It is noted that every country is being dominated by the male supremacy being represented more male seats in parliament than female except Rwanda. Men's political, economic and cultural privileges arise from their 'masculine advantage' as variously reflected in genetic predisposition to aggression, physical strength and sexual drives. The problem with biological determinism is the arbitrary nature of the fixing of men's essential masculinity which can range across a whole spectrum from men's innate physically to men's innate rationality. Feminist scholarship and practice has long critiqued the political convenience of explaining gender inequality and hierarchy in terms of men's natural superiority. But patriarchy is unstable, and women's movement as one restoring social justice. "It is the day of experiments...We are questioning where before we have accepted, and are seeking out new ways in which mankind will go...will go because it must"(Hartley, Catherine Gascoigne, 1914).
Conclusion

Women's historic exclusion from political structures and processes is the result of multiple structural, functional and personal factors that vary in different social contexts across countries. The rate of women's advancement into decision-making positions is very slow. Neo Marxists understand contested class relations to be immanent to the social, and so the concept of hegemonic masculinity takes as given the project of cultural and numerical dominance of heterosexual men across not only key decision making arenas but across society gradually (Whitehead, 2002:91). However, the notion of less participation of women in both politics and decision making in parliament, cabinet and administration is being changed by occupying key positions of government and more representation in Bangladesh from the earlier decades. Now women's representation has been increased by increasing 45 reserved seats than earlier and in the administration sector women have been recruited, though negligible number, to play the key role.

Not surprisingly, feminism often consolidates into a political movement as a result of women's participation in other radical, reformist, or revolutionary activities. The long history of struggles of women's suffrage to women's participation in electoral politics at national and local levels--is an ongoing process. The state's initiatives of granting quotas or reservation for women have proved to be a mixed bag. Still women in Bangladesh have been facing numerous social, religious and political obstacles while participating in national and local level governance.

Mobile: 01721047466
E-mail: skchanda_soc@yahoo.com

Reference


4. Brinton. 1993. For a carefully done analysis of the career patterns of Japanese women. Even in the US there is mounting evidence that women are returning to the 'home' especially when children need to be raised.


8. Ibid, p-149.


25. Ibid, p-103

In this PDF version, we included chapter 1 only. The rest of the chapters (2-14) were not included here to reduce its file size. The hard copy of this version can be provided on request. Interested readers can contact YPSA Head Office.
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