

WOMEN'S EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING IN PUBLIC LIFE, ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE, FOR ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY, AND EMPOWERMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

Background

Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls was the central theme discussed at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in its 65th session (2021). This is a highly relevant issue for Bangladesh to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Global Gender Gap Report 2021 demonstrates the country's good standing in women's political empowerment. For the Political Empowerment sub-index, Bangladesh ranks 7th among 155

countries. However, complete gender parity on political participation is still far away with a parity score of 0.546.¹ Women's higher levels of poverty, limited access to finance, greater share of unpaid care duties, and challenges faced in realizing their sexual and reproductive health and rights, combined with exclusionary institutional rules and procedures, and gender discriminatory social norms limit their full participation, while the Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the barriers for their participation in public life.

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021/in-full/economy-profiles>



1. Progress of Women's Participation in Public life at a Snail's pace

What happens when women lead? It is proven that when women hold decision-making power and authority, they address the often-overlooked policies. In Bangladesh, there has been progress in the number of women elected or appointed to decision-making positions, but full gender parity is far from being reached. Gender equality cannot be achieved unless public life and decision-making includes people in all their diversity. However, the existing pace of progress is too slow to achieve gender equality (SDG 5) for the country by 2030.

1.1 Representation in National Politics: Reserved seat system needing reform.

For three decades, two women have led the country. The national parliament has a female speaker since 2013 and the total number of women legislatures in the 11th Parliament (2018) is 21%, inching up from 19% in the previous legislature. Women directly elected through general seats to the current parliament is higher than any previous election. Nevertheless, women occupy only 7.3% of the general seats and the rest are in reserved seats.²

² <http://www.parliament.gov.bd/index.php/en/mps/role-of-mps/38-mps-category/34-members-of-parliament>

Currently, only one minister, one state minister and one deputy minister are women.³

The Constitution of Bangladesh, since its inception, provides reserved parliamentary seats for women under Section 65. At first, the number was 10 and now it has been increased to 50 out of a total of 350 seats. The percentage of women's reserved seats is therefore roughly 14%. In the 17th amendment to the Constitution approved in July 2018, the reserved seats have been secured for another 25 years with no direct election.

Although parliamentary quota is globally recognized as an effective temporary special measure towards increasing women's participation in politics, the system that Bangladesh has in place has long been contested by academics and women's groups as having limited effect in expanding women's voice and influence in decision making⁴. Bangladesh uses a single transferable vote (STV) system for women's reserved seats based on the number of seats secured by a political party. The general seat MPs acting as the electorate, but there is effectively no competition for the seats as party leaders nominate only as many candidates as there are available seats for each party.⁵ The reserved seat MPs therefore do not have a constituency as they not directly elected by the people, and they are not considered by the voters as a representative of the women's electorate. The female MPs of the reserved seats neither have a budget allocation to develop their own initiatives and have little influence in governmental policy decisions. They have traditionally been treated as second-tier parliamentarians and been used as a 'vote bank' for the treasury benches. The current system of reserved seats without direct election has caused marginalization of women in the policy making institution and have not benefitted women.

Hence, for years, women's groups have been advocating for direct elections to be held in the reserved seats to ensure women's political

³ <https://cabinet.gov.bd/site/page/c3a1d735-abd6-4655-89ff-9e506d7537d7/মাননীয়-মন্ত্রণালয়>

⁴ <http://mahilaparishad.org/women-demonstration/>

⁵ https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/womens_reserved_seat_systems_in_bangladesh_february_2020.pdf

empowerment.⁶ In fact, the election manifesto of the current ruling party for the 9th Parliamentary Election included a commitment to hold direct elections for 100 reserved seats for women.⁷ The National Women Development Policy 2011 also committed to raise the number of women's seat in the Parliament to 33% and to organize direct elections in the extended seats for women (Paragraph 32.7). However, this change has not taken place to date and the 17th amendment to the Constitution that extended the tenure of the 50 reserved seats for women for 25 more years ran contrary to the government's commitment to women's political empowerment.

Political Parties: Masculine nature of politics, lack of party support and limited access to political networks are all identified as major political hindrances for women. Women at both parliamentary and local levels face obstacles due to lack of support from the male-dominated political parties. The Bangladesh Election Commission has taken a first step towards strengthening women's political participation by imposing a 33% reservation for women in all political parties' executive committee positions including the central committee by 2020.⁸ Most of the parties have failed to achieve this target. Such initiatives might ensure representation, not participation.

In the case of BNP, women constitute 11% of the party's 73-member advisory body, with only eight women. The party at the time expressed hope that the target would be achieved within the stipulated time. Among other parties, Jatiya Party (Manju) has 16 women in its core committee of 101 members (15.8%) and around 11% of the Workers Party of Bangladesh's central committee constitute women⁹. According to party insiders,



19 out of the ruling Awami League's 74-member central committee members are women (26%); seven posts are also empty as of now. Political parties have so far failed to ensure a significant participation of their female members in decision- and policy-making processes compared to their male colleagues. Women politicians in most cases are assigned to less important positions and left out of the main committees.

1.2 Representation in Local Government: Urban and Rural

Women have less representation as local public executives. Bangladesh has only one woman city corporation mayor, and only 102 out of 4701 municipal corporation positions were women in 2021.¹⁰ However, a member of transgender community recently won a post of municipality councilor¹¹. Following elections in the 2014–16 period, 25.2% of councilors were women, up from 23.4% in the 2011–13 period. Also, a third of Upazilla

6 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/parliament/2019/01/12/are-reserved-seats-in-the-parliament-sufficient-for-women-s-empowerment>

7 <https://www.albd.org/articles/news/31125/Election-Manifesto-of-Bangladesh-Awami-League,-9th-Parliamentary-Election,-2008>

8 <https://asiafoundation.org/2012/06/27/are-bangladeshi-women-politicians-tokens-in-the-political-arena/>

9 <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/33pc-positions-women-major-parties-not-there-yet-2057357>

10 <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/women-upazila-parishads-male-colleagues-sideline-many-1437739>

11 <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/news/municipality-polls-transgender-councillor-candidate-wins-satkhiras-kalaroa-2036969>

council seats are reserved for women.¹² Unlike the national parliament, there are direct elections to reserve seats for women in local government bodies. A transgender woman has also been elected as vice-chairman in a town council election in 2019.¹³ The data reveal that rural government bodies show more diversity and gender inequality than urban or national bodies but not yet close to parity.

1.3 Representation in Public Service: Parity still far away

Women still lag behind men in participation in Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS). The majority are found in directorates/attached offices (91.4% in 2010) and only 0.6% work in ministries and divisions. Most of them hold subordinate positions as only 21% women held secretarial positions in 2011. Female examinees notified in gazettes was 55.1% in 32nd BCS, which gradually dropped to 38.3% in 33rd BCS and 35.6% in 34th BCS.¹⁴ Not enough progress is seen in the increase in the number of women appointed to decision-making positions in civil service either. Currently, only 13.15% of Secretary positions and 13.1% Additional Secretary positions in the Ministries and divisions of the government are occupied by women.¹⁵

In the justice sectors, though 30% of the country's academics specializing in law are women, only 10% of those in the legal profession are female. No woman has been appointed Attorney General, Chief Justice, or Secretary of the Ministry of Law and Justice.¹⁶ The appointment of the first woman as Justice of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court in 2011 was a milestone, but she retired in 2017 and no other women has been appointed

since. In the High Court Division, and there currently 5 female judges among the 83 permanent sitting judges. The Chair of the National Human Rights Commission is a woman. Due to the judiciary lacking female leadership, women continue to face multiple impediments while accessing the legal system due to its highly masculine nature.

When it comes to the security sector, female officers began working in the Bangladesh Police in 1974. In 1986, the first female police officer was recruited to the cadre service (Supervisory level) in the Bangladesh Police. However, subsequent recruitment of women in the supervisory level was put on hold from 1989 to 1998.¹⁷ No such restriction exists now but women still consist only 6.86% of the total Bangladesh police force. On the other hand, Bangladesh women police have been serving in UN Peacekeeping Missions since 2010, and a contingent of the Female Formed Police Unit (FPU) of Bangladesh Police joined the United Nations Organization peacebuilding mission in Congo in 2020.

Women's participation in the country's defense and armed forces is also exceedingly low. Women started to serve as commanding officers only in 2019.¹⁸

The constitution of Bangladesh provides for affirmative action and positive discrimination in some cases. Since Independence, Bangladesh civil service has been implementing an equity approach – namely quota reservation - to ensure equitable representation of all citizens in the highest service of the republic. However, over the years, the country's quota policy came under sharp public criticism. In 2013, 44% of the civil officers recruited were based on merit whereas 56% of the candidates were recruited on the basis of quota reservations. More than 30% of these quota beneficiaries were freedom fighters and their children, 10% were

12 http://www.clgf.org.uk/default/assets/File/Country_profiles/Bangladesh.pdf

13 <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/10/16/transgender-councillor-elected-in-bangladesh-first.html>

14 Nishat Afroze Ahmed and Ferdous Jahan (2018). Balancing Work and Family: Women in Bangladesh Civil Service

15 Ministry of public administration

16 https://www.blast.org.bd/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=530

17 <https://leph2021philadelphia.com/session-highlight-w6-women-in-leadership-in-the-bangladesh-police-administration-a-review/>

18 <https://www.localguidesconnect.com/t5/General-Discussion/Women-s-Day-2020-amp-Empowerment-of-Women-in-Bangladesh/td-p/2261568>

women, 10% people from districts lagging behind, 5% were ethnic minorities and 1% were people with disabilities.¹⁹ In 2018, university students who felt deprived of opportunities protested the quota reservations. This so-called Quota Reform Movement (2018) demanded reduction of reserved seats from 56 to 10%, among others.²⁰ In response, however, the government abolished the entire quota system instead of reviewing and rationalizing it.

According to CEDAW, State Parties must take affirmative action to correct disparities based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability. As Bangladesh is still far behind in achieving it, the abolition of the quota system may reverse the progress made so far to ensure parity and inclusion.

1.4 Women's Mobilization, Civic Engagements and Associated Challenges

The women's movement has a long history in Bangladesh. Women played an active role in the national struggle for independence, and since independence, women's organizations, although diverse in scope and ideology, mobilized around various issues. Some of the issues that galvanized the different actors in the women's movement were violence against women and religious-personal law reforms. The activism resulted in legislative changes such as the enactment of the Prevention of Violence Against Women and Children Act of 1998 (amended 2000), formulation of the Domestic Violence Act of 2010, The Hindu Marriage Registration Act and the National Women's Development Policy in 2011. However, space for women's organizations to engage on women's rights issues has shrunk in the past decade with the rise of conservative religious



forces. There has been backlash against women's activism for their rights, including violence and intimidation of women human rights defenders and NGOs supporting women's empowerment. Individuals that have spoken out online or in the media on sexual harassment and assault that they experienced were silenced by patriarchal and conservative forces.²¹

The well-established feminist organizations are also facing challenges attracting young women into the women's right movement. However, recently, an inter-generational platform named "Feminists Across Generations" was formed following the violent rape incident of a woman in Noakhali district in October 2020. The platform brings together several highly experienced women's rights activists fighting who have been at the forefront of fighting for women's rights for decades and young feminists to work together for structural change. Numerous youth-based organizations and networks have also emerged in recent years to fight against rape, sexual harassment, and violence against women, often using online tools.²² This gives hope that there is a rejuvenation of the women's movement.

19 Mohammad Moin Uddin M Jashim Ali Chowdhury M Jashim Ali Chowdhury (2016). Quota reservations in Civil Service: Arguments for a Class Based Preference System (p. 5)

20 <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/bangladesh-quota-system-civil-service-reformation-not-abolishment-1643761>

21 Sohela Nazneen (2017). The Women's Movement in Bangladesh: A Short History and Current Debates. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

22 <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/30th-anniversary-supplements/agents-change/news/youth-based-organisations-fighting-against-gender-based-violence-harassment-and-bullying>



2. Violence against Women: A Major Impediment to Women's Participation in Public Life

Violence and harassment against women can act as a barrier for women entering or staying in the public domain and pose risks for women's personal safety and security. According to BRAC, 94% of Bangladeshi women have experienced sexual harassment in public spaces.²³ Assaulting and harassing women, spreading rumors and false information about them is one of the common strategies to discourage women from their public engagement. Politics involves 24-hour duty, heavy travel, and meeting with numerous people, including many unknown men. This runs contrary to the conservative culture and gender norms in Bangladesh. Therefore, female politicians as well as outspoken public female figures such as journalists and activists are being increasingly targeted in social media. Women also face sexual harassment by male leaders or their male colleagues.²⁴

Lack of security is a major concern, and women face harassment both physically and verbally, including in the cyber space. All these discourage women to join politics.²⁵ In 2009, the Supreme Court issued directives to prevent sexual harassment at workplace and in public places. The court has charged the workplaces and the educational institutions with the responsibility of taking effective measures to prevent sexual harassment.²⁶ Lack of implementation of these directives, nevertheless, remain a major challenge. Online violence against women, which is difficult to regulate, has added an extra layer of complexity.

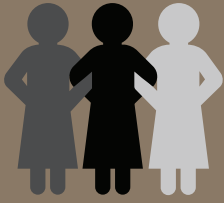


23 <https://www.dw.com/en/why-bangladeshi-politics-is-mans-domain/a-46696907>

24 Farah Deeba Chowdhury (2009). Problems of Women's Participation in Bangladesh Politics (p. 560)

25 Fardaus Ara and Jeremy Northcote (2020). Women's Participation in Bangladesh Politics, the Gender Wall and Quotas (p.7)

26 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/court/2018/05/08/supreme-court-guidelines-sexual-harassment-largely-ignored#:~:text=In%202009%2C%20the%20Supreme%20Court,measures%20to%20prevent%20sexual%20harassment.>



3. Additional Barriers to Women's Participation in Public Life

3.1 Social Norms and Gender Roles:

Conservative attitudes and behaviors regarding women and gender stereotypes about women's aptitude, skills and competencies to be leaders and managers act as serious hindrances to women being accepted to lead public positions including civil service and politics. Discriminatory social norms that determine gender roles suitable for women also exacerbate unequal opportunities for women's participation in public life. For example, women in Bangladesh are expected to be the primary caretaker in the family and spend 6.3 hours out of a total work time of 15.3 hours on unpaid care and domestic work each day. This is significantly higher than men and limit that time that women can spend engaged in paid work of community and public activities.²⁷

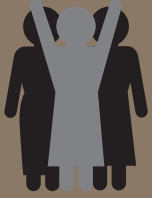
²⁷ https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/policy_brief_wueucw_sasia_online_version.pdf



3.2 Lack of Financial Resources:

Running a political campaign requires funds. Women's limited access to and control over financial resources is another key factor that limits the political representation of women in Bangladesh. A very low proportion of women have property and assets of their own due to discrimination in laws and practice. Even if a woman earns, it is still hard for her to spend her income independently for herself.





4. Pathways to a Better Tomorrow

Achieving gender equality is a collective responsibility and both men and women need to work together to create a society where women can participate equally in decision-making. Systematic review of institutions, policies, procedures, written and unwritten rules, norms and cultures to reveal and remedy “unseen” barriers to women’s participation is required.

a) Transform gender-discriminatory beliefs and attitudes through comprehensive gender equality education and gender-neutral parenting:

Gender stereotypes and perceptions about gender roles are formed at a young age. Children, both boys and girls, need to be brought up in an environment that fosters an understanding they are equal and there are no limitations to the roles that they can play in society. Girls should equally be encouraged to express their opinions and given the opportunity to lead initiatives. Standardized comprehensive sexuality education should be adopted across all mediums including Bangla, English and Madrasa, and in both rural and urban schools so that girls and boys learn to respect each other. The mentors at all levels need to be brought under a comprehensive training programme in order to develop knowledge and sensitivity. Furthermore, school-based or community-based programmes are needed to coach parents in gender-neutral parenting.



b) Reduce and Redistribute Unpaid Care Work:

Family-friendly working environment is another way to support women. To address the family care and domestic responsibilities that heavily fall on women and hold women back from pursuing their career and management positions in public services, government offices can introduce flexible working arrangements and accelerate establishment of childcare facilities in their offices. Childcare provision should also be made for female parliament and local council representatives. Incentives can also be placed for male government officials to provide a positive role-model by taking paternity leave and family leave, thereby demonstrating that care work is a shared responsibility of men and women.

c) Strengthen normative, legal and regulatory frameworks:

Undertake comprehensive reforms to eliminate laws, policies and regulations that discriminate against women; formulate a uniform family code in line with CEDAW Committee recommendations which can ensure equal social, legal status and opportunities for women, regardless of religion.

d) Prevent and Eliminate Violence Against Women in Public life:

- i. Reform legal frameworks to criminalize violence against women in political and public life, both online and offline, and to end impunity.
- ii. In 2009, the High Court division of Bangladesh issued a set of guidelines to prevent workplace sexual harassment. The court provided that every educational institution and workplace must have a sexual harassment committee. Therefore, formation of sexual harassment committee in all levels of workplace where women can lodge complaint or seek help is necessary. The committee can create a strong accountability for the perpetrators and prevent the possible sexual violence against women. Gender sensitivity training should be made mandatory for all civil servants, legislative staff and officials.



- iii. Proper monitoring and evaluation of the laws to understand its effectiveness and challenges in terms of its enforcement.
- iv. Implement awareness-raising measures and sensitize community and religious leaders.
- v. Ensure that women human rights defenders and members of women's organizations and feminist movements are protected from violence for engaging in public life;

e) Strengthen women's voice and leave no one behind in public life:

- i. Introduce direct elections for the parliamentary reserved seats to ensure meaningful representation of all marginalized sections based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and other personal characteristics.
- ii. Introducing a reformed system of quota for women and other marginalized sections in civil service.
- iii. Expanding digital access and ensuring safety in digital space is essential for the advancement of women.
- iv. Fund and support public information campaigns with positive messages and images of women's role in public life to help change stereotypes.

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