



## Changing trends of women's participation in politics in Bangladesh: experience from national parliament

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### ABSTRACT

Political participation of women in Bangladesh has increased both at the local and national levels. The meaningful participation of women in national parliament has become an important focus on the democratic development and the range of country's policy issues. In this regard, the participation of women in politics is a very crucial issue through which they can play an important role in decision making as people's representatives. At present, the participation of women in the politics especially in national parliament of Bangladesh is being increased. This paper is based on the review of secondary documents. Using content analysis based on qualitative methods, this study examines the status of women's participation in politics as well as investigates the changing trends, the reasons behind increasing or decreasing trends. Examining the status of women's participation since independence till the last election, study shows the increasing trends of participation of women in the national parliament in the context of Bangladesh.

### Introduction

Participation of women in politics is a basic prerequisite for gender equality in a society or a country. Women are the half portion of total population of a country. The overall development of a country needs to utilize its whole assets and provide equal opportunities for all. It is quite impossible to develop a country without the improvement of its female's participation in all sectors. To build sustainable, strong and effective governance in a country, proper and effective participation of women in public life is essential. In order to establish gender equality in a society or country, women must have a position in the decision-making stage. Generally the number of women in parliament contributes to a stronger focus on women's issues. And for this, the participation of women in politics should be increased, so that they can play an important role especially in their issues by making decision.

Women's political participation refers to an elected woman works for public welfare under particular representation system. Generally women act as a voter rather than a candidate during the election. At present, it is found to be progressing in that Prime Minister, Opposition Leader and the Speaker are all women though this indication is seen mostly at the higher level of political structure (Parvin, 2016). Participation of women in politics in our male dominated society makes women participation in politics difficult for women to enter the political process. Elected women members are still suffering

from a lack of acceptance as a political leader. Institutional reforms effective and positive roles of actors (political parties, NGOs, women's organizations, donors) are necessary to enhance the participation of women in the political process. The imposition of quotas could help to change the popular political culture which is more conducive to women's political participation (Panday, 2013). Political involvement of women in Bangladesh allows them to fight against male dominated societal culture in order to attain decision making power at both national and local levels. There are 50 reserved seats for women in national parliament of the parliamentary seats (Gocio & Kulkarni, 2016).

Although there are two prominent female leaders, the participation of women in politics is very limited in our male dominated society. The criminalization of politics, use of black money, and widespread sexual harassment hinder women's involvement in politics. There is a possibility of violence against women in the case of unmarried and young women politicians. Women must fight to create an favorable political environment where they can be elected to the parliament and can raise voice about the interests of all women. They have to fight against male dominating culture and patriarchy system to prevent violence and corrupt practices so that they can participate equally in the decision-making process of Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2009). In the national parliament of Bangladesh, the total number of women has significantly increased since 2008 to 2018. Bangladesh progressed for woman to participate in national parliament for the last three

consecutive elections (Bahari, Tantra, & Widodo, 2019).

This study mainly aims at examining the changing trends of women's participation in politics that play a stronger role for ensuring gender equality as well as effective and increased participation of women in national parliament of Bangladesh.

## **Methodology**

Data from secondary sources has been collected and theoretical concepts have been used to analyse the data. Most of the data and information of this research have been collected from the governmental sources mainly from Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), National Archive and Bangladesh Election Commission. Besides, is also be drawn from non-governmental agencies documents and print media.

Using descriptive and qualitative method, this study based on content analysis and examines the status and changing trends of women's participation in national parliament in Bangladesh based on collected information.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***The status of women's participation***

By participating in the parliamentary elections, women get the opportunity to be involved in the decision making process and influencing the power structure. In the context of Bangladesh, a unicameral parliament known as Jatiya Sangsad composed of 300 general seats. Both men and women are equally eligible to contest for the 300 general seats. There is also a provision to reserve seats in parliament for women to ensure such participation. In the first parliament no women were elected in general seats (Table 1). Woman elected from general seats for the first time in the history of second parliamentary election held on 1979. The scenario was the same in the 3rd to the 8th Parliament. The number of women representatives was almost same. In the 9th parliamentary election 19 women members were elected in general seats. Though the number of women is more than that of the previous parliaments, it is very small in comparison to the number of male members of parliament (MPs). In accordance with the constitutional amendment passed by the parliament on 30th June 2011, the number of seats reserved for

women in parliament has increased 45 to 50, bringing the total number of seats to 350. The number of women is 69 that is 19.83 percent in the 10th parliament (Kabir & Haque, 2014). Women participation in the national parliament in Bangladesh is consisted of 20.9% of the available seats in 2020. This was an increase from 2010, in which women held 18.6 percent of the available seats in the national parliament in Bangladesh (Statista research department, 2021). The number of reserved seats in the parliament for women also reflects the range of participation of women. However, there were no provision for reserved seats in the parliament of 1988 and 2001. Meanwhile, the number of reserved seats for women was raised from 30 to 45 with the 14th amendment—prior to the ninth parliamentary election held in 2008—and then increased to 50 through the 15th amendment in 2011. During 10th election in 2014, 19 women were directly elected. However, four new women became parliament members through a by-election later on (Irani, 2019). The highest number of women has been elected in the last eleventh parliamentary election. The number of women candidates in this election was 69. Among them, 22 women have won the election.

### ***Changing trends of women's participation in national parliament***

The reflection of political participation of women in parliament is through women's representation in both general and reserved seats. Women's participation in politics is necessary for both the democratic development of the country and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. The country has experienced a positive change because of the efforts made in this regard. Syeda Razia Faiz was the first woman ever to be directly elected in Bangladesh, as a candidate from Bangladesh Muslim League, in the second parliamentary election which held in 1979. The number of reserved seats for women increased from 15 to 30 in that year. Recently Women's participation in politics is on the rise. At present, there are 300 general seats and 50 seats are reserved for women. Bangladesh is quite progressive in terms of political participation of women. Analyzing the number and percentage of women in the consecutive parliamentary elections, the changing trends can be explored. The following table shows the number and percentage of women in different parliamentary elections.

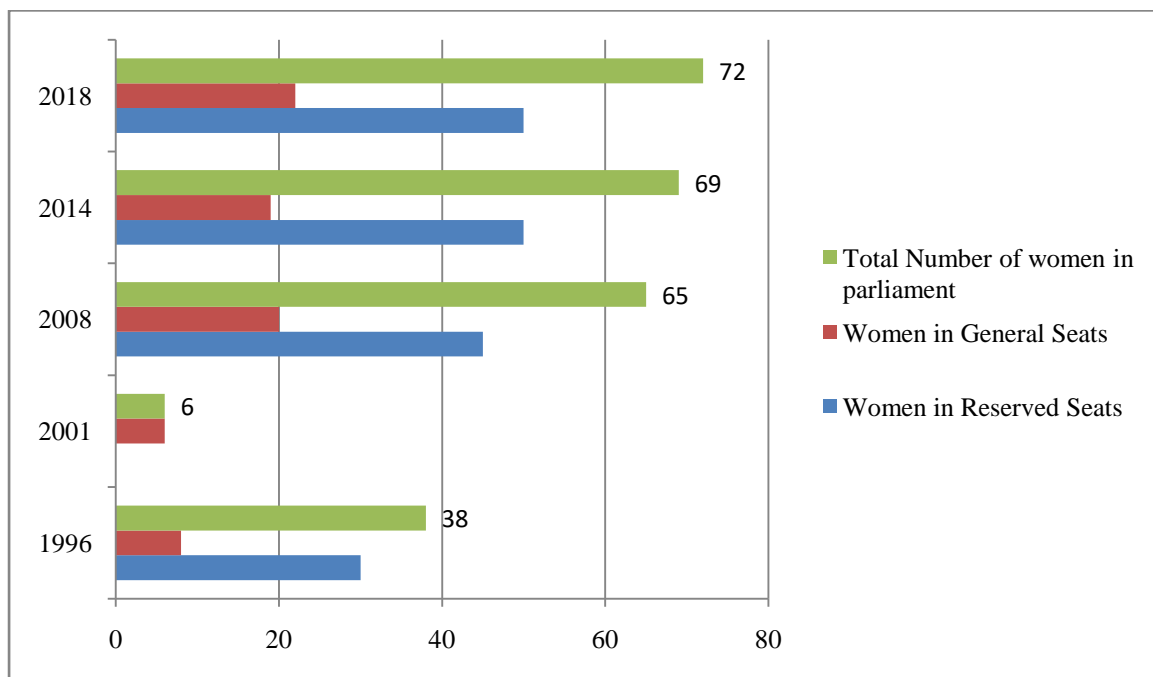
**Table 1:** Women’s in different parliamentary elections

General Election	Number of Elected seats	Number of women in Reserved seats	Total Number of Women elected	Total seats in the parliament	Percentage of women in general seats	Percentage of women in Total seats
1 <sup>st</sup> (1973)	0	15	15	315	0	4.8
2 <sup>nd</sup> (1979)	1	30	31	330	.33	9.4
3 <sup>rd</sup> (1986)	5	30	35	330	1.70	10.6
4 <sup>th</sup> (1988)	4	0	4	300	1.33	1.33
5 <sup>th</sup> (1991)	4	30	34	330	1.33	10.30
6 <sup>th</sup> (1996)	3	30	33	330	1	10
7 <sup>th</sup> (1996)	8	30	38	330	2.6	11.51
8 <sup>th</sup> (2001)	6	0	6	300	2	2
9 <sup>th</sup> (2008)	19	45	64	345	6.7	18.6
10 <sup>th</sup> (2014)	19	50	69	350	7.67	19.71
11 <sup>th</sup> (2018)	22	50	72	350	7.33	20.6

Source – Compiled from various data of Election Commission of Bangladesh

The table 1 shows the number and percentage of women in both general and reserved seats from first to eleventh parliamentary elections. The 300 general seats are to be filled by direct election. In the 1<sup>st</sup> parliament total number of women was 15 which were 4.8% of the total seats and there were no elected seats for women. In the second parliament, one woman was elected directly. Fifteen reserved seats were increased to 30 and the total percentage

of women was increased from 4.8% to 9.4%. This trend of participation was almost same till 7<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections. There were no provisions for reserved seats in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections. In the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election held in 2008, both elected and reserved seats were increased. The total number of women was increased to 64 which was 18.6% of the total seats.



**Figure 1:** Increasing trends of women’s participation over the last few elections

In the 10<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election there were 69 (19.71%) women out of 350 total seats in the last general election (11<sup>th</sup>) 22 women were directly elected among in 300 constituencies.

From the figure 1 it is observed that over the last few elections, the number of women representations in national parliament has incrementally increased. In the last election held in 2018 there are 72 women

who are 20.6% of the total number of seats in the national parliament. This number was 38 which was 11.51% of the total number in 1996. In every election period it has shown the rise of women elected in national parliament. So the total number of women in national parliament has significantly increased.

### **Reasons behind the increasing trends**

#### ***Educational development***

Education is an integral part of political participation because it helps in acquiring the skills required for politics. One of the main drivers of increasing women's participation in politics in Bangladesh is the expansion of education. Both educated women and men are able to understand the importance of women's political empowerment. Many women MPs are highly educated, and they have acknowledged the importance of education which played a vital role in their involvement in politics.

#### ***Organizational supports***

Various supportive actors such as feminist organizations, civil society organizations, NGOs in Bangladesh have been trying to increase the resources of the mobilization against gender inequality in the country. These actors attempt to connect between women and the government of Bangladesh towards gender issues. A few examples of the hundreds of organizations that are dedicated to the advancement of women in Bangladesh such as 'Jatiya Mahila Sanshad', 'Women for Women', 'Democracy Watch', 'Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha', and 'Khan Foundation' are strong advocates of women's rights, gender equality, and women's empowerment. Such organizational attempt helps to increase women's participation.

#### ***Legal factors***

As a developing country, Bangladesh is quite progressive in terms of woman's political participation. Since getting independence in 1971, Bangladesh has recognized and legalized their constitution to guarantee woman presence in any political activities. On the article 28(1) stated that "the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth", it provides the legal basis which recognizes the involvement of woman in the aspect of politics. Again, in article 28(2) stated that

"women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and public life." These two articles show that Bangladesh actually aware towards woman participation in any political activities. Such legal factors help to increase women's participation in politics.

#### ***Favorable political culture***

In the last three parliamentary elections, we have observed a favorable culture for women participation in national parliament. The present government emphasizes on women's empowerment and tries to create women friendly political culture. In this regard, an increasing number of women in national parliament are seen. The two largest political parties in the country are Awami League and BNP and the chairperson are women. Besides, the Speaker of the Parliament, Leader of the Opposition and Deputy Leader are also women. Such representations motivate women to get involved in politics which ultimately help to increase the number of women in politics.

#### ***Reservations of quotas***

The reservation of quotas for women has created the opportunities for women to represent them in parliamentary affairs that ensure participation of women in national politics.

#### ***Changes of attitudes***

Conservative attitudes regarding women and gender roles, and gender-bias socialization processes have not remarkably vanished from our society, but such attitude is changing day by day. A common attitude towards women that women are not able to carry out the responsibilities of a position, as capably as men, has made the society neglect women. This notion has changed as women have proven countless times that they are able to handle responsibilities successfully. Changes of such negative attitude drive to increase the percentage of women in political activities.

#### ***Awareness***

Women are now more aware of their rights and responsibilities than before. Such awareness drives to involve in politics and plays role in increasing participation.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, examining the existing status of women's participation in national parliament it can be said that though the number of women in parliament is not much satisfactory, there is an increasing trend in participation than before. The study shows various factors that drive the women to be involved in politics though various discriminatory practices against women still persist in the context of Bangladesh. Various progressive efforts are run by the government of Bangladesh to increase the involvement of women in any political activities including national parliament. Although the result is not much satisfactory, every election has seen the rise of women elected in national parliament. To ensure the continuation of the growing participation of women, the following recommendations may be taken into consideration:

Specific programs should be undertaken by the government and non-government organizations in order to create an awareness among the women that political participation would give them access to the political decision making process.

Mass media should be used to mobilize public opinion in such a way that the realization about the benefits of women's full participation in the national development efforts is created among people.

Supportive actor such as women's organizations, political parties, NGOs, CSOs, donor agencies should play effective and stronger role to enhance and ensure effective and increased participation of women both in national and local politics in our country.

Our patriarchal and male dominated societal structure should be changed to a favorable societal structure to become women friendly for their participation on political activities.

Reservation system for women should be continued. Besides, reserved seats should be kept as long as a favorable political environment for women is not created.

Research should be conducted on participation of women, male female ratio, present status, changes etc.

In the context of Bangladesh, the increasing number of women in decision making positions in national parliament does not in itself translate into greater empowerment for women. Proper steps need to be taken to increase the quantity of women representatives along with improving the quality of participation.

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