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What is This?

# Representation without Participation: Quotas for Women in Bangladesh

### Pranab Kumar Panday

Abstract. This article explores the state of women's participation in the political process in Bangladesh. Available data substantiates that women's organizations, donors, and nongovernmental organizations have influenced the government of Bangladesh to introduce quotas for women. Although quotas have increased the total number of women in political arenas, their representation in the decision-making process has not yet been ensured. They still face several social, cultural, and religious challenges which hinder their participation and they are still neglected by their male counterparts. Once they ask for their rights, they are very often victimized, assaulted, and harassed.

*Keywords*: • Representation • Participation • Quotas • Women in politics • Bangladesh

## Introduction

In recent years, it has been widely recognized that achievement of human development goals depends to a large extent on the quality of government that exists in a state. In this context, there have been vivid debates on the linkage between "good government" and "gender equality" over the past decade (Morna, 2002). Husain and Siddiqi (2002) asserted that the sustainability of the economic and social empowerment of women depends on the extent of their integration in the political decision-making process. The political participation of women is an indicator through which the extent of the enjoyment of political rights by women is measured. In Bangladesh,[1] it has been realized that without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development, and peace cannot be achieved. This article examines different dimensions of the question of quotas for women in the political process in Bangladesh and considers whether quotas for women really do ensure their representation in political decision-making.

## The Importance of Women's Participation in Politics

While highlighting the issue of women's participation in politics, it is reasonable to ask whether lack of women's involvement makes any difference to the outcome of decision-making. Here, the commonsense answer is "yes." From ancient times until today many theorists have laid importance on the issue of women's participation in politics. A century and a half ago, John Stuart Mill pointed out that the participation of both the majority and minority will have to be ensured for a government to be competent and efficient. He included women in his definition of the enormously disfranchised "minority" of that time. In *On Liberty*, Mill discussed ways to represent and articulate competing interests, and emphasized the importance of tolerating different views from different quarters (Mill, 1993; cited in Reynolds, 1999: 547–8). In *Considerations on Representative Government* (originally published in 1861), he advocated bringing intellectual and social diversity into government by extending the franchise to women. In *The Subjection of Women* (Reynolds, 1999: 547–8) Mill stated that the idea of denying suffrage to half of the population and thus losing their talents in society was "non-utilitarian idiocy."

Rule and Zimmerman (1997; cited in Reynolds, 1999: 547–8) argue that a parliament would fail to recognize or comprehend issues of great importance to women in society if there were few women members, an observation which raises broader questions of answerability, openness, and isolation. The European Network of Experts (1997: 8) has observed that

> A balanced representation of women and men at all levels of decision-making guarantees better government. Because of their history as a group, women have their own and unique perspective. They have different values and ideas and behave differently. Increased participation of women in decision-making will create a new culture and shed new light on how power should be exercised. Women attach great importance to the quality of contact between people [and] are less individualistic than men.

Lister (1997: 154) has pointed out that policy institutions and policy processes must be representative of women, as women hold specific interests that are different from men's.

Chowdhury (1994: 21) offers five reasons why increasing women's representation and participation is necessary:

> (i) It is a question of democracy and equality as well as a question of civil rights making the demand for proportional representation of women in politics unavoidable. (ii) Women's insignificant presence in politics raises questions about the legitimacy of the democratic process and of decision-making authorities. (iii) Women are well informed and experienced about their basic problems and needs. But they will be deprived of equal shares if they are not properly represented in politics. (iv) Women's increased participation in politics and decision-making bodies will facilitate more changes and open up more spaces for them. (v) Finally, for the efficient and maximum utilization of human resources, women should be increasingly allowed in politics.

The extent of women's representation in government has considerable political consequences. In addition, the relatively lower level of representation of women has critical impacts on democracy and state legitimacy. The validity and trustworthiness

of democracy will be in question if women, constituting half of the population, remain absent from the different institutions of a society (Haque, 2003: 584). In short, ensuring women's political participation is essential to bring legitimacy to government and to establish democracy in its true sense.

## The History of Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh

In order to comprehend gender issues in Bangladeshi politics, it is crucial to look at the extent of the participation of women and men in decision-making in different institutions and to identify the gender gap and inequalities in each institution. Assumptions regarding the division between private and public worlds strongly limit the participation of women in decision-making institutions (Nussbaum et al., 2003: 5). When women attempt to negotiate in the public domain, they are often criticized and patronized by men. Yet it is also true that even in the private domain, women seldom have the upper hand in the roles they play. In most cases, it is believed that an altruistic male head is needed to take responsibility for the welfare and safety of all members of the family. Women's bargaining power at the household level is restricted by their lack of access to and control over resources outside the home, low self-esteem, low skills and education, restricted physical mobility, and, eventually, by their having less power in society as compared with men. Such imbalanced gender relations at the household level, one may say, mirror the situations outside the home: in the local community, the market, and the state (Panda, n.d.).

During the British period, local government remained almost the exclusive domain of men. The entry of women into the political process through a broadened franchise and the contesting of elections on both reserved and general seats was first introduced through the enactment in 1935 of the Government of India Act (Forbes, 2002).[2] Women's public status in Bangladesh received a boost when the Union Parishad Ordinance was promulgated in 1976, reserving two seats for women in each union parishad.[3] Later, an amendment in 1983 increased the quota of seats for women to three. After 1983, women's participation in local government institutions increased sharply with the enactment of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act in 1997 (Rahman, 2000: 391). The Act provided for women filling three seats in each union parishad through direct elections.

Similarly, quotas for women in Parliament have also experienced a remarkable journey in reaching their present level of 45 out of a total of 345 seats. Since independence in 1971, the state has sought to bring women into national politics through electoral quotas. Under the constitution, 15 seats for women (4.8 percent of total seats) were reserved in Parliament. In 1979, the number of seats reserved for women was increased to 30 (or 9.7 percent of the total). But this provision lapsed in 1987, and for the next three years there were no quotas for women in the national Parliament. The situation was ended in 1990, when a constitutional amendment restored the 30 seats reserved for women (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1999: 28). However, the provision reserving 30 seats lapsed again in 2000. Since then, there have been numerous controversies regarding the number of seats to be reserved for women in the Parliament and the methods for filling these seats. Several women's organizations along with some political parties demanded augmentation of the quota for women and the introduction of direct election to

fill that quota. Finally, a constitutional amendment was passed in 2005 increasing the size of the quota for women in Parliament to 45. The amendment also specified that the quota for women would be distributed among political parties based on their strength (number of seats) in the Parliament.

## The Present State of Women's Participation in Bangladesh

Women's participation in politics in Bangladesh is at two levels, national and local. At the national level, they can play a role as law- and policy-makers, while at the local government level, they play a role only in development-related implementation. The two women, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, who dominated the politics of Bangladesh from 1991 to 2006 were related to powerful leaders and their political advancement did not ensure significant advances in government for women otherwise.[4] Overall, women's position in politics has not been significantly improved.

### Women in the National Parliament

However, Bangladeshi women lacking family credentials have not failed to make a mark on politics nor has Bangladesh been insensitive to the issue of gender justice in the political arena. In the 2001 elections, 48 women contested non-reserved seats in Parliament, and 13 were successful. It is important to note that two women (Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia) among the 48 contested 10 seats (both contested five seats each) and were successful in nine of these.[5] Sheikh Hasina failed in one among the five seats she contested. Other than these two women, only six women were successful in elections for general seats. Among the rest of the candidates, only 10 women managed to get more than 15 percent of the total vote cast, while other candidates' figures were negligible.[6] A subsequent by-election brought in another woman legislator, bringing the total number of women members from non-reserved seats to seven (Bangladesh Election Commission, 2008). The scenario of the past six parliamentary elections was more vulnerable than the situation prevailing in 2001. Table 1 illustrates the vulnerable status of women in electoral politics in Bangladesh.

TABLE 1. *Women Contesting for General Seats in Parliamentary Elections*

| Election year | % of women candidates for general seats | % of general seats won by women |
|---|---|---|
| 1973 | 0.3 | 0.0 |
| 1979 | 0.9 | 0.7 |
| 1986 | 1.3 | 1.7 |
| 1988 | 0.7 | 1.3 |
| 1991 | 1.5 | 1.7 |
| 1996* | 1.4 | 2.3 |
| 2001 | 2.48 | 4.33 |

*Note:* Figures for election held on February 15, 1996 have not been included in the Table because that parliament was in operation for only seven days and there were serious controversies regarding the election.
*Source:* Chowdhury (1994: 42), Naribarta (1996) and www.ecs.gov.bd.

Table 1 shows that the percentage of women contesting general seats in parliamentary elections from 1973 to 2001 was very low. The process of reaching 2.48 percent women candidates in parliamentary elections took 27 years (in the election of 1973, the number was 0.30 percent). Along with the low number of women candidates in parliamentary elections, the rate of success of women is also very low (in the election of 1973, the rate of success was 0.00 percent, while the rate for 2001 was 4.33 percent). In the beginning having a quota of reserved seats was considered the sole avenue for women's entry into the legislature and the situation has changed only slightly even after the emergence of two women as the leaders of two major political parties.

There are some inherent contradictions in the fact that both women leaders treated the general seats controlled by their own party (and filled by men) as a reservoir of political power, not to be tampered with. This attitude caused them to remain inactive in taking proactive measures that could have encouraged women of their respective parties to contest and win these seats. This approach of limiting women politicians to quotas has left almost the entire electoral field open to male politicians. The nominations awarded by the parties, especially the party that expected to win the majority of seats, reflected their stand on the issue. Whether novices or experienced, women who aspire to legislative seats must find their way into the legislative arena through the pathway of the quotas. However, a few women in each of the four parties that have held state power in Bangladesh since independence have received party nominations to contest general seats and have won those seats (Chowdhury, 2002: 3).[7]

How do women win nomination within a political party? Chowdhury (2002: 3) has pointed out that women who are nominated fall into three categories: (1) those with a close relationship with the current leadership, (2) a wife or daughter of a deceased Member of Parliament, and (3) those whose political strength has accrued from years of association with the party organization. In reality, political parties do not want to take any risk by nominating "ordinary" women candidates, and that perpetuates women's marginal presence in the Parliament. Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the nomination of women by political parties in the parliamentary election in 2001 and the state of women members in the Bangladesh Parliament from 1973 to 2006, respectively.

Table 2 shows that in the parliamentary election of 2001, the percentage of women candidates nominated by the major political parties was less than 5 percent (the percentage of women candidates in the Awami League (AL) was 4.67 percent, while the percentage in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was 3.57 percent). This table also shows that some smaller political parties offered nomination to more women candidates than the major political parties. For instance, the percentage of women candidates in the Gono Forum and Samridha Bangladesh Andolon was 17.64 percent and 20.00 percent, respectively. But these parties did not win representation in the Parliament. On the other hand, Table 3 confirms the lower number of women Members of Parliament in general seats as compared with those in seats set by quotas for women. The highest number of women elected from general seats was in the seventh parliamentary election (1996–2001) and the number then was only eight. It is important to note that Members of Parliament in general seats are elected on the basis of universal adult suffrage. But women within quotas are elected by Members of Parliament elected to general seats in the past seven parliamentary elections (1996–2001). Furthermore, from 2001 onward,

TABLE 2. *Women Candidates Nominated by Political Parties in the 2001 Election*

| Name of political party | Number of seats contested by each political party | Number of women candidates contesting | % of women candidates in relation to seats contested |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bangladesh Awami League (AL) | 300 | 14 | 4.67 |
| Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) | 252 | 9 | 3.57 |
| Jatiya Party (Munju) | 140 | 6 | 4.23 |
| Islamic Jatiya Oikya Front* | 281 | 4 | 1.42 |
| Gono Forum* | 17 | 3 | 17.64 |
| Samridha Bangladesh Andolon* | 5 | 1 | 20.00 |
| Bangladesh Progressive Party* (BPP) | 20 | 1 | 5.00 |
| Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal* (Based Khalekuzzaman) | 37 | 1 | 2.70 |
| Bangladesh Communist Party* | 64 | 1 | 1.56 |
| Independent# | 486 | 9 | 1.82 |

*Source:* www.ecs.gov.bd.
* Political parities having no representation in the Parliament.
# Independent candidates belonging to no political party.

the distribution of quota seats to women has been limited to those belonging to political parties having representation in the Parliament.

## Women in Local Government

In 1976, with a view to securing a minimum representation of women in local government bodies, the Bangladeshi government promulgated the Local Government Ordinance and introduced a three-tier local government system. In this ordinance, the structure of the local government system underwent changes and provision was made for selecting two women to serve as members of the union council (Ahmed, 2001: 3), the first time women had ever been included in local government. During the years since independence, every successive government has tried to incorporate more women in local government bodies. In 1983, changes were brought about in the structure of union parishads by promulgating the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance. The provision of direct election for the post of chair and nine members remained the same, but the quota for women members was set at three, with one from each ward. In 1993, the Local Government (Union Parishad) (Amendment) Act was passed in Parliament to secure the minimum representation of women in local government. The Act provided for the division of each union parishad into nine wards. In addition, a quota of three seats for women was introduced. These women were to be elected by the votes of the elected chair and members of the union parishad (Ahmed: 2001: 3). Thus at this time quotas for women were always filled either through nomination or by indirect election.

The Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act (1997) is a milestone in the history of women's participation in Bangladesh. In this Act, provision was made for three quota seats for women in each union parishad,

TABLE 3. *State of Women's Representation in Parliament, 1973–2006*

| Parliament | Number of Women Parliament Members in General (G) and Reserved (R) Seats | | | Number of Women Parliament Members in Each Political Party | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. of quota seats for women (R) | Women MPs from general seats (G) | Total number of women MPs (R+G) | Women MPs from AL (R+G) | Women MPs from BNP (R+G) | Women MPs from JP (R+G) | Women MPs from JEI (R+G) |
| 1st Parliament (1973–75) | 15 | – | 15 | 15 (R) | – | – | – |
| 2nd Parliament (1979–82) | 30 | 2 | 32 | – | 30+2 (R+G) | – | – |
| 3rd Parliament (1986–87) | 30 | 5 | 35 | 1 | – | 30+4 (R+G) | – |
| 4th Parliament (1988–90) | – | 4 | 4 | – | – | 4 (G) | – |
| 5th Parliament (1991–95) | 30 | 4 | 34 | 3 (G) | 28+1 (R+G) | – | 2 (R) |
| 6th Parliament (1996–96) | 30 | 3 | 33 | – | 30+3 (R+G) | – | – |
| 7th Parliament (1996–01) | 30 | 8 | 38 | 27+3 (R+G) | 3 (G) | 3+2 (R+G) | – |
| 8th Parliament (2001–06) | 45* | 7 | 52 | 2 (G) | 36+4 (R+G) | 4+1 (R+G) | 3 (R) |

*Note:* The table shows the distribution of 43 reserved seats for women. The remaining two seats belonged to Islami Okkojot and Bangladesh Jatiya Party (Naziur Rahman group). Their figure has been excluded since they had very few representations in the Parliament.
*Source:* Firoj (n.d.) and www.ecs.gov.bd.

but this time they would be elected by direct election based on universal adult suffrage (Sultana, 2000: 14). However, the number of women elected as members or serving as chairs in union parishads remained extremely low. Table 4 shows the number of women candidates contesting general seats.

Table 4 also shows two important features of women's participation in the elective position of general members. One is the marginal number of women contesting the posts of general member and the other is the declining trend of women candidates contesting the posts of member in general seats even after the introduction of the provision of direct election for quotas for women. One possible explanation might be that in the elections of 1988 and 1992–93, there were no options for women to contest quota seats, forcing interested women to run for general seats. In 1997 and 2003, the situation was different as provisions were made for direct election for quota seats, meaning that interested women might now run for seats requiring them to compete with fellow women only. In a patriarchal social structure it is very difficult for a woman to win elections in which she has to contest a seat with several male candidates. Table 5 depicts the total number of women elected to be chair of a union parishad from 1973 to 2003.

As Table 5 shows, only one woman was elected as chair out of 4350 union parishads in the election of 1973, while four and six women candidates were elected as chairs in the elections of 1977 and 1984, respectively (Sultana, 2000: 14). In the union parishad election of 1988, 79 women among 18,566 candidates contested the post of chair for 4401 union parishads, women constituting only 0.43 percent of candidates (Ahmed, 2001: 3). Again in 1992, available data indicate that for the position of chair of 4450 union parishads, women constituted only 0.66 percent of the contesting candidates, that is 115 out of a total 17,444. Among them 24 women were elected as chair. In the election of 1997, 102 women directly contested the post of chair, and of these, 23 were elected (Islam, 2000: 112–13). One important fact is that the number of female candidates who contested the post of chair in the 2003 election almost doubled, compared with the 1997 election. Thus, we can observe an increasing trend of contesting as well as succeeding in gaining the post of chair, although the number remains quite negligible – still less than 1 percent.

TABLE 4.  *Women Candidates for General Members of Union Parishad*

| Year of election | Number of Union Parishads | Total number of candidates contesting for general membership | Total number of women candidates contesting | (%) of women candidates contesting |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1988 | 4401 | 114, 699 | 863 | .75 |
| 1992–93 | 4450 | 169, 683 | 1135 | .67 |
| 1997 | 4479 | – | 456 | – |
| 2003 | 4283* | 137, 909 | 617 | .45 |

*Note:* The Election Commission (EC) postponed elections in the remaining 267 UPs due to having problems relating to electoral boundaries of the previous term.
*Source:* Sultana (2000: 15) and www.ecs.gov.bd.

TABLE 5. *Women as the Elected Chair of Union Parishads*

| Year of election | Number of Union Parishads | Total number of candidates contesting for the post of chair | Total number of women candidates contesting | (%) of women candidates contesting for the post of chairs | Elected women chairs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1973 | 4352 | – | – | – | 1 |
| 1977 | 4352 | – | – | – | 4 |
| 1984 | 4400 | – | – | – | 6 |
| 1988 | 4401 | 18566 | 79 | .43 | 1 |
| 1992–93 | 4451 | 17444 | 115 | .66 | 24 |
| 1997 | 4479 | – | 102 | – | 23 |
| 2003 | 4223* | 21376 | 232 | 1.09 | 22 |

*Notes:* The Election Commission (EC) postponed elections in the remaining 267 UPs because of problems related to electoral boundaries of the previous term.

Total number of candidates contesting for the post of chair in the Union Parishad Election 1997 is not available.

*Source:* Sultana (2000: 15), New Age (2006) and www.ecs.gov.bd.

As noted above, the Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act (1997) introduced direct election for women's quota seats in union parishads. In the election of 1997, 44,134 women contested quota seats reserved for them, and of them, 13,437 women were elected (among the 13,437, 592 were elected unopposed) (Islam, 2000: 112–13). In the election of 2003, the total number of women contesting 12,669 quota seats in 4223 union parishads was 39,419. There is thus a recent decline in the number of women contesting quota seats (Steps Towards Development, 2003: 7).

A possible explanation of this decline may be that previously elected women candidates gained bitter experience while discharging their duties, which may have discouraged them from standing for election again. Moreover, the followers and associates of those women may also have been influenced by their experience. Studies by different scholars have substantiated such claims. One example cited was Rokeya Sultana, a graduate and daughter-in-law of a well-known local family who was elected as a union parishad member for Shikdar Para village in the Cox's Bazar district in the election of 1997. In the process of getting elected, she had to face serious challenges from the supporters of her opponent, who utilized different threat mechanisms to attempt to compel her to withdraw her candidature. Despite such threats, she decided not to withdraw, whereupon the opposition set fire to her house. Receiving no justice from the community, she felt frustrated and held aloof from the welfare activities of the locality. This bitter experience made her reluctant to take part in elections again. She pointed out that security and equal opportunity for women must be ensured in order to involve women in local government politics (Shamim and Nasreen, 2002: 68).[8]
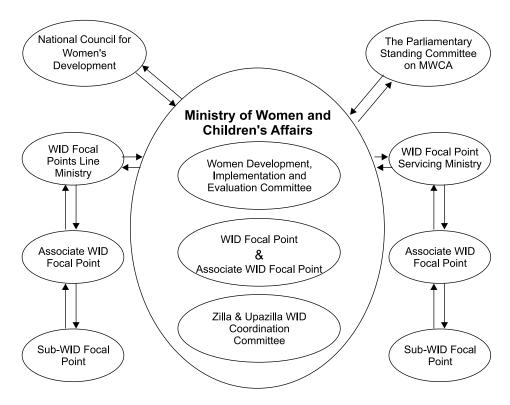
## Actors in the Introduction of Quotas for Women

It has been stated earlier that the government of Bangladesh initiated several reforms in order to introduce quotas for women in Bangladesh. Now the question

is who the actors behind those reforms were. Here, we examine the roles of the government, women's organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and donors.

## The Role of the Government

The government of Bangladesh has played a pivotal role in opening up new avenues for women, enhancing their status and ensuring their participation in key activities. To begin with, it has become a signatory of many international programs of action on behalf of women, such as the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) in 1995 (Karim, 2000: 55). In order to transform the objectives of the PFA into reality, the government took several initiatives. In partnership with civil society actors, the government increased investment in education and health, with a special focus on girls. New laws were enacted to uphold the rights of women. Women's representation was increased in decision-making bodies, in particular in the local councils with the enactment of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act (1997). The last legal barrier for women to participate more in all areas of national development was overcome when the national defense force opened its doors to the women of Bangladesh. Moreover, special programs for female education, female employment, and the provision of credit facilities for women have been established to ensure that women have a mainstream role in the development process. Primary education has been made compulsory, and female education is being vigorously encouraged. In addition, stipend programs for girls in secondary schools have been introduced, making Bangladesh a pioneer in this regard (Khan, 1993). All told, the government of Bangladesh has set up a comprehensive network of mechanisms and institutions for the advancement of women (see Figure 1):

> The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs is responsible for coordination of the implementation of the national policy on women. A National Council for Women's Development under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister has been formed at the highest level and consists of representatives of various ministries and also of the civil society. A Parliamentary Standing Committee was formed to advise the government to take specific initiatives for women's development after reviewing different development programs for women. Women and Development (WID) focal points were established in different ministries of the government for overseeing the concerns of women in the programs of the government. An implementation and evaluation committee comprising of representatives from all focal points, ministries and divisions of the government and civil society organizations has been set up and is chaired by the Minister in charge of [the] Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs. Its main responsibility is to coordinate and evaluate programs relating to the advancement of women and to suggest guidance for future implementation. A district level coordination committee had been formed to review all empowerment and advancement related activities on behalf of women at the levels of the district administration, the district council, *pourashave* [the lowest tier of urban government] and the local government. In order to strengthen self-reliant women's groups at the grass-roots level, these groups have been organized as registered groups. (Khan et al., 2005: 41–2)

FIGURE 1. *Comprehensive National Mechanism and Institutions for the Advancement of Women in Bangladesh*

*Source:* Adapted from Khan, et al., 2005: 41–42.

## The Role of Women's Organizations

Women's voice in Bangladesh has also grown in strength due to a significant increase in the number of women's organizations. The Bengali Muslim Women's Movement was formed in Calcutta in 1916 with the establishment of a women's organization named Anjuman-e-Khawateen-Islam under the sponsorship of Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain (1880–1932). During the pre-partition (1947) and Pakistan period, a number of women's organizations were established with active support from urban elite groups (both male and female), but none was able to act as an effective pressure group or to mobilize public opinion and rights (Khan, 1993: 103–4), in part because these urban organizations did not reach into rural areas where the majority of the population lived and in part because the objectives of these organizations in furthering women's issues were not unified.

At the time of Bangladesh's independence in the early 1970s, there were about a dozen women's organizations, primarily based in urban areas and oriented toward welfare-related activities. But by 1990 many changes had taken place. First, the number of these organizations had grown rapidly during this period. Second, these organizations shifted their emphasis from welfare to development, stressing

the importance of enabling poor women to obtain access to credit, employment, income, literacy, health care, and family planning. Third, these organizations had begun to expand their activities into rural areas and were mobilizing rural women on a regular basis.

These shifts of focus have opened up windows for women to take part in regular group meetings and activities organized by several women's organizations in ways that had been totally impossible in the 1970s. Nowadays, thousands of women fieldworkers are engaged in projects intended to link poor women with development resources and services. Women's organizations have begun to establish links with NGOs in order to focus on programs intended to raise the consciousness of women at the grassroots level, helping these organizations to raise gender issues in other forms (Jahan, 1995; Jahan, 1991). Organizations such as Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Ain O Salish Kendra, Women for Women, Nari Pakkha, Ubining, Nijera Kori, Saptogram, and so on are working on developing a women's agenda. Apart from mobilizing women around specific issues,[9] these organizations are expanding the scope of the women's agenda to include many other developmental issues, such as the debt crisis, the environmental crisis, population control policies and programs, women's health issues, legal reforms, and enhancing the participation of women in the political process. Training programs have been established to educate women for positions of leadership.

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), a women's organization committed to building a society based on gender equality, democracy, and peace, provides an interesting example. In order to address problems of isolation, hostility, and disregard that women experience from their male colleagues, the BMP carried out a project in three constituencies of Bangladesh. Its strategy was to develop support groups for three women representatives (one from an urban council and two from union parishads). Each support group consisted of 15 women from the representative's constituency, including BMP members who were trained to provide support to the elected representative. They organized constituency meetings, built alliances with influential political leaders, and linked the representatives with government officials. They also enhanced the capacity of elected women and organized joint training for female and male elected members of the councils. The result was that elected women attended council meetings and questioned procedures (helping to develop transparency), succeeded in getting development projects for their areas, took up gender-specific issues, and set up an autonomous women's cell (Mukhopadhyay and Meer, 2004: 94–8). Once these women were organized and grouped together, they realized their individual potentials better and gained confidence in their ability to challenge social norms and other forms of discrimination. As a result, they learned to negotiate new roles and opportunities for themselves without much hesitation.

## The Role of NGOs

The success story of nongovernmental organizations in Bangladesh is very impressive. Whereas women's organizations are associations that act as advocates for women's issues, are not donor driven, and are nonprofit, NGOs are organizations that are mostly donor driven and that focus on carrying out micro-credit programs for women.

A majority of the NGOs in Bangladesh operate different micro-credit programs as a means to empower women through poverty reduction. One classic example

is the success of Grammen Bank in Bangladesh. Grammen Bank and its founder, Dr Muhammad Yunus, won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of the contribution made to poverty reduction in Bangladesh. Nowadays, a good number of NGOs are working to ensure equal rights for women in every sphere by expanding their roles in the political arena and carrying out several training programs for them. For example, the Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh (ADAB)[10] played a proactive role in national politics during the mass movement of the mid-1990s.[11] In the election of 1996, ADAB coordinated a Democracy Awareness Education Program through which 15,000 trainers ran awareness-raising workshops across the whole country. This program contributed to an impressive voter turnout of 74 percent in the election of 1996 (Ashman, 2000).

As women are the focal point of concern for most of the NGOs in Bangladesh, they have gained immense knowledge from these programs.[12] One example is the effort of Gono Shahajjo Sangstha to encourage its landless group members to stand as candidates in local union parishad elections in the Nilphamari district. Although this NGO's program encountered brutal opposition from local landlords, it succeeded in encouraging its members to participate (Hashemi, 1995).[13]

These activities of NGOs have built awareness among women members in regard to their involvement in the political process and created immense pressure on the government to make necessary changes in their policies regarding women's participation.

### *The Role of Donors*

Most of the donor agencies, including the United Nations as well as bilateral donors such as Canada, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands, provide funds to promote gender equality and related programs and projects. There is some evidence that states with weak bureaucracies are more responsive to demands for gender equality, and possibly more influenced by international norms (Goetz, 1995; Sikoska and Kardam, 2001).

Since donor states set priorities and identify the type of program to be chosen for implementation, the true extent of government interest and determination to implement projects remains under doubt even when gender-related projects have been accepted by them. On the other hand, various donor agencies, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and so on, have taken the issue of gendered government as a priority objective. For instance, although the World Bank is mainly an economic institution and expected to maintain political impartiality, the belief that "good government is essential for development" is gaining importance within it and it is widely accepted that to ensure good government, women's political participation must be assured.

Donors build links with women's organizations and NGOs though networking, information building, consultation, conferences, and workshops in order to promote gender issues within the political agenda (Sikoska and Kardam, 2001).

## Major Factors Affecting Women's Involvement in Politics

In previous sections, an effort has been made to present the extent of women's participation both in politics and in local government decision-making in Bangladesh. The overall extent of women's participation in the political process is much lower than that of their male counterparts, despite determined efforts to

create change. One may ask why this situation persists, despite the many efforts by the government to increase women's participation. In fact, there are several factors hindering the process of women's participation in the political process: educational backwardness, lack of economic resources, inadequate mobility, structural deficiencies, religion, culture, and patriarchy.

## Education

Education makes women knowledgeable, skilled, and self-confident in their participation in the ongoing development process of the country (Villaluz, 2000). However, most Bangladeshi women are still illiterate. They lack information on the political process and do not know how to mobilize for policies that respond to women's interests, or even how and where to vote or who to vote for (Kabir, 2003). They are often ignorant about their right to vote and contest elections and to become members of political parties and social networks. Consequently, they lose interest in participating in political activities (Vijaylakshmi, 2002; cited in Mukhopadhyay, 2005). They remain engaged in the informal economy or the subsistence sector at low wages or none it all, members of the low-skilled or unskilled labor force. The services that they offer remain invisible, unrecognized, and devalued and they are therefore unprotected by laws and legislation. Their incomes, however inadequate, are still seen by themselves and their families as an income to be paid to the family instead of spent as they themselves decide. In such a situation, women cannot afford the expenses that are required for political participation, such as election campaigning, attending meetings, or visiting and interacting with government officials.

## Mobility

An underdeveloped infrastructure and transportation system hampers the mobility of women. The location of polling booths and their relative distance from homes and workplaces often deter women from exercising their right to vote. Inconvenient times, location, distance, and the lack of an escort are impediments for women elected as representatives to attend meetings. Family is also an impediment to mobility: it is difficult for a woman to move away from the home and involve herself in other activities. In order to keep women from taking part in the decision-making process, emergency meetings are sometimes called at deliberately inconvenient times. Moreover, lack of access to transportation is also a factor. Women in Bangladesh do not ride bicycles, a popular and convenient means of transport at the village level. Male-dominated local cultures tend to portray women's use of bicycles as inappropriate and unwomanly. There are a few women in urban areas who ride bicycles, but their number is still too few to set an example. Women using bicycles are violating social traditions, and are treated as "behaving like men" and "unfit for marriage."

## Structural Deficiencies

In Bangladesh, women representatives are disadvantaged by political and structural constraints arising from the way in which quotas for seats for women are incorporated. As discussed earlier, a union parishad is made up of nine wards and the electorate in each of these wards elects a general member – usually a man, although women are not barred as candidates for general seats. The quotas for women were instituted by providing three additional seats within each union

parishad, and potential women representatives for these seats were elected by and were responsible for three wards. This meant that women candidates had to canvass across and be responsible for an area three times larger than that of a general (male) member. Women were further disadvantaged by resource constraints because they received the same budgetary and other resources received by a general member, even though women covered a wider area. There was also role confusion in terms of who would do what, how, and when. More specifically, the Local Government Second Amendment Act (1997) did not specify the role of the woman representative in a constituency which also has three general members (Mukhopadhyay and Meer, 2004; cited in Mukhopadhyay, 2005). On the other hand, the law has restricted women members to performing certain activities such as issuing birth certificates, which also reflects the negative attitude of the lawmakers toward women. Goetz (2004) and Beall (2004) have noted that affirmative action for enhancing the participation of women in local government elections in many countries has been taken as an extra measure, rather than considering women as credible and legitimate political actors (Mukhopadhyay, 2005: 14). The scenario is not different in the case of women Members of Parliament. The whole country is divided into 300 parliamentary seats. But, in the case of quotas for women, the whole country is divided into 45 constituencies, which means that a woman parliamentarian needs to work in a constituency that is almost six times larger than an elected Member of Parliament's. This is also a sign of major political structural deficiency and inequality.

## Religion

Religion also plays a crucial role in keeping women at home. According to the 1991 census, Bangladesh is close to 90 percent Muslim and their religion is Islam. Islamic practices are patriarchal and are explicit about the sexual division of labor and responsibility, effectively sanctifying male dominance. According to this practice, man is the earner and woman is the server of man. Being the server of man, woman should be kept in the house and movement outside the house is restricted. Mukhopadhyay (2003) has pointed out that, "as one husband said, this is a Muslim country; she (a women member) is a woman so she could not go out in the evening. He (the husband) saw his wife's responsibility as caring for the children." Women are instructed to use "purdha"[14] while they are outside their home, so that they can hide themselves from others.

A new form of oppression and violence against women in Bangladesh has been introduced due to the expansion of fundamentalism. The numbers of cases of the oppression of women in rural areas due to fatwas[15] and mullahs[16] are reportedly increasing. Moreover, religious fundamentalism has grown stronger in the mainstream political space over the years. Successive governments have helped the growth of this force (Shamim and Nasreen, 2002; Shehabuddin, 1999).[17] A fundamentalist political party becomes a positive threat to greater women's empowerment when it achieves a dominant position among political forces. Major political parities in Bangladesh (all of which have at least some sort of gender program and a women's branch in the party) have been trying to negotiate and align with Jammat-E-Islami Bangladesh (JIB).[18] If the policy of negotiation and alignment with the JIB continues, then the process of women's emancipation and the struggle for empowerment will be greatly impeded (Huq and Khan, 1995: 22).

## Culture

Cultural norms operate as both a restriction on a woman's mobility and an impediment to her participation in the public sphere. These cultural norms are perpetuated and sustained by the powerful institutions of family, caste, and religion, and have significant impacts on gender-related issues. It has been noted by the Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics that the empowerment of women in terms of access to decision-making positions is considerably affected by cultural stereotypes that exist in most societies. In the Asia-Pacific region, the major forms of cultural stereotypes include (1) that women's primary responsibility is to take care of the family and children, and it is only a secondary obligation to get involved in social and political institutions, (2) that women lack experience, and thus are not capable of assuming leadership positions, (3) that the public domain is mainly for men, while the private household domain is for women, and (4) that women's involvement in the public sphere should be an extension of their roles in the family sphere (Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics, 2000; cited in Haque, 2003: 580–1). Such gender stereotypes are rooted in social norms and Bangladesh is not an exception in this regard. There is a saying in Bangladeshi culture that "A woman's paradise is at the feet of her husband." Women who believe this are naturally less likely to resist marital violence or get involved in activities outside the home.

## Patriarchy

The traditional patriarchal[19] society of Bangladesh is based on class and gender divisions. Class mobility allows movement between rich and poor, but the division of social space and the difference in behavioral norms between men and women are rigidly maintained. The family, which constitutes the basic unit of social organization and control, sets the norms for male and female roles. Within this system, the father, or in his absence, the next male kin, is the head of the household. As a result, both decision-making powers and economic control are vested in the hands of men. Furthermore, the family operates through a clearly defined system of rights and obligations. This is demonstrated when Muslim women waive the right to inherit their fathers' property in favor of brothers or, in the event of inheriting property, pass control to their husbands or sons. In both cases, the man gives protection to the woman in return for control over her property, thus directly reinforcing a patriarchal tradition. A husband often threatens his wife with divorce if she refuses to manage her daughter and see to it that she marries the husband he has selected for her. In the extreme patriarchic culture of Bangladesh, it is the responsibility of a mother to convince her daughter if she disagrees to do something the father demands and women do not have the right to decide whom to marry.

## Representation Without Participation

Although, as we have seen, successive governments in Bangladesh have introduced quotas for women in order to ensure their participation in the political process, it remains an important question to determine whether these provisions have in fact ensured the representation of women in decision-making or have simply ensured the attendance of some women in government institutions. In fact, the

domination of male members is still taken for granted in the public world of politics. Moreover, these male members use their patronage networks to influence the decision-making process. The existence of "de facto politics" clearly hinders the meaningful participation of women in politics despite the introduction of quotas (Vijaylakshmi, 2002; cited in Mukhopadhyay, 2005: 31).[20] It remains difficult for elected women to be seen as legitimate political actors, both in the national Parliament and in local government bodies in Bangladesh.

At the same time, we should not imagine that it is impossible for some women politicians to have a real impact on politics. As noted, the leaders of two major political parties in Bangladesh are women and they have performed their duties and responsibilities with great success. There are also a few successful women in local government who have been elected chairs of their union parishad, although their number is so small that they are viewed as exceptions.

In order to get a better idea of the extent of any serious representation of women in political decision-making, we draw on the experiences of women members in the political process as they have been reported in other studies. Findings of the Asian Development Bank (2004) suggested that more than 70 percent of women councillors interviewed in Bangladesh were not aware of their rights and responsibilities as representatives. An even greater percentage (more than 80 percent) expressed their lack of confidence in their ability to conduct meetings (cited in Mukhopadhyay, 2005: 32). The patriarchal society offers little space for women to develop their authority and agency. As a result, women play a largely symbolic role in the decision-making process. Goetz (2004) offers the argument that the decentralization process tends to reinvigorate and strengthen existing traditional institutions and local elites.

Moreover, society is not yet ready to accept women dominating the process of decision-making or playing a positive role. We quote here a speech by a former Member of Parliament, Tasnima Hossain,[21] who in her address at a round-table meeting in Dhaka on the "Role of Civil Society and New Media to Prevent Violence against Women," told the audience:

> I was not treated as a colleague by other Members in the Parliament. Rather I was mostly treated as "bhavi"[22] or the wife of Anowar Hossain Munju although I was an elected MP. While I was entering ... the Parliament I had to hear ["]why [was] I ... alone? Why [had] I ... not come with my Husband?["] The situation was like that I would have to come with my husband [to] the Parliament every time. (*Prothom Alo*, 2006)

The above example reflects a situation in which women suffer from an identity crisis. In a highly stratified and gender-biased society such as Bangladesh, women members are not viewed separately from their identity as "women." For instance, women representatives at the local level do not have specific responsibilities, their opinions are not heard during decision-making, and male colleagues behave negatively toward them (Shamim and Nasreen, 2002: 52). The sufferings of women members are not restricted to problems of identity only. Sometimes they are treated badly if they speak up for their rights. At the local government level, women's marginalization is reinforced by the paternalistic and discriminatory attitudes of male representatives and male chairmen, and their belief that women should not get involved in local politics and that while men get into office on

merit, women get in through institutionalized favors in the form of quotas and so forth (Mukhopadhyay, 2003: 44). The following three cases make obvious a situation of dismissiveness, conflict, and smear tactics.

## Case 1

*Hasnehena: A Case of Dismissiveness*

Hasnehena, a Union Parishad Member, stated that

> After my oath I went to the chairman and asked him to assign me some work. The chairman became annoyed and said the government has brought out the women from their houses to create unnecessary trouble in the *Union Parishad*. [He said] "What will you do in the *Union Parishad*? Go upstairs and sit with my wife and spend your time. I do not find any work for you. No specific work is mentioned in the manual for women." (Mukhopadhyay and Meer, 2004; cited in Mukhopadhyay, 2005: 33)

## Case 2

*Khadiza Khanom: Conflict with the Chair*

> Khadiza Khanom, elected from the reserved seat of Chakmerpull Union of Cox's Bazar, came from a renowned family. She was a ... widow [who received] moral support from her educated son. However, Khadiza gathered measurable experiences as a woman Union Parishad member. At the meetings the chairman misbehaved [toward] woman when they talked about their rights. The chairman misappropriated government allotments with the help of his musclemen. No one had [the] courage to protest against the chairman's illegal activities for fear of being harassed by his musclemen. However, Khadiza published all the chairman's illegal activities in the newspaper. The chairman became angry and published false news in the newspaper about Khadiza to smear her image. The Deputy Commissioner of Cox's Bazar helped to minimize the dispute between the two and compelled the chairman to apologize to Khadiza. The chairman, however, felt insulted [and] there was no change in his behavior towards Khadiza. Khadiza felt the necessity of the interference of the higher authority to solve the problem. (Shamim and Kumari, 2002: 51)

## Case 3

*Aparna Rani: A Story of Smear Tactics*

> Aparna Rani was a women Union Parishad member of Moulvibazar. Her husband, who was a Primary School Teacher, encouraged Aparna to compete in the Union Parishad election ... During the early stages of her time in the Union Parishad, Aparna did not face any problem but the situation changed later. She was more vocal than other women members and often argued with the chairman, which took a serious turn. The chairman did not approve of her active participation in the meetings and tried to teach her a lesson. A friendly male colleague used to help Aparna in performing different Union Parishad

activities. The chairman spread rumours using Aparna's friendly relationship with her male colleague. This shattered Aparna's married life. She was almost ostracised in the society. Finally she had to leave the Union Parishad. (Shamim and Kumari, 2002: 55)

These cases illustrate how women were treated by their male counterparts in office. They were not only neglected, but often faced serious challenges to family life that forced them to lose interest in taking part in politics. Thus, it is obvious that extending the scope for the participation of women through the introduction of quotas does not ensure their active participation in the decision-making process. To ensure full participation in decision-making, it is necessary to overcome the rigid social and cultural barriers that women faced and are still facing.

## What Should Be Done?

Genuine participation by women in decision-making remains limited despite the introduction of quotas for them. The major causes of such poor representation of women have been sociocultural, political, structural, educational, and economic factors. These factors have restricted women's participation within the quota system. In such a situation, several improvements are required in order to ensure greater female representation in the process of politics in Bangladesh.

First, cultural norms and perceptions have stereotyped women's role as limited to the family domain. It is essential to bring changes to such cultural norms by initiating appropriate cultural, educational, and informational policies. Discrimination against women should be made clearly unacceptable and educational curricula should be redesigned to highlight the significance of women's participation in development at all levels (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 1993). Television, radio, and newspapers should help policy-makers and administrators realize the importance of gender inequality and also work to stimulate women to reorganize their roles and affirm themselves as the equal partners of men in all sectors (Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics, 2000; Haque, 2003: 586).

Second, it is the responsibility of the government to initiate further reforms in constitutional and legal provisions intended to ensure gender equality in every sphere. Additional legal measures need to be passed in order to implement enacted legislation effectively. The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs must focus on issues of importance to women in every sector.

Third, since women's representation in the legislative and executive bodies greatly depends on their representation in political parties, there is a need for the major political parties of Bangladesh to take appropriate initiatives to expand such party representation. The use of quotas for women should be adopted in political parties as well. In the case of Bangladesh, it might be easier to bring about such reforms in the political parties as both the largest political parties are directed and steered by two women who hold supreme power over their parties. Such female quotas in political parties exist in countries such as Denmark, Germany, Norway, and Sweden (United Nations Population Fund, 2000). The commitment of political leaders, especially those at the top, to gender equality and to adopting and implementing existing and future reforms is critical (Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics, 2000).

Finally, government-initiated policy measures intended to empower women cannot go beyond rhetoric if adequate funding, in the form of budget allocations, is not provided. In order to be effective, political will must be translated into both policies and resources. At the same time, in order to develop and strengthen women's capacity as political leaders, develop media relations, and help women generate their own resources, the government should work to ensure women's equal access to career patterns in Bangladesh (Villaluz, 2000: 5).

## Conclusion

Quotas as a strategy to ensure women's political participation are as controversial in Bangladesh as elsewhere. But the fact is beyond doubt that where quotas have been implemented, the popular political culture has gradually become more accepting of women taking part in politics. Women's issues have been nurtured well in emerging democracies in which the governments of these countries have shown commitment to women's increased representation. In fact, enhanced political representation of women depends more on the political will of the government than on a nation's world economic standing or any other economic factor (Tripp, n.d.: 7). For instance, Mozambique, one of the poorest nations in the world, has made improvements in the field of female legislative representation beyond those of many advanced industrialized countries.

Greater female representation in Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa, and several other African countries has been credited to the initiation of party quotas and reserved seats (Tripp, n.d.: 8). In South Africa, women made a noteworthy political advance through the introduction of quotas. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) has made remarkable advances: 89 of the 117 women in the National Assembly and the Senate are from the ANC and women now constitute 25 percent of the legislature in South Africa, a striking break from the previous apartheid regime, in which they comprised less than 3 percent of the legislature (Tripp, n.d.: 8). As in developing countries, the women's movement has also gained momentum through the process of democratization in developed countries. In Turkey, women's rights and the diversity of women's voices gained momentum through the processes of economic transformation and democratization (Kardam and Ertürk, 1999). Similarly, the emerging democracy of Bangladesh since the 1990 overthrow of autocratic rule has set the stage for the enhanced participation of women in the political process.

Nevertheless, inequity against women in Bangladeshi society remains common. Along with sociocultural obstacles, structural deficiencies and attitudinal problems remain the major obstructions to greater participation by women in the political process. Although the constitution guarantees equal opportunity for men and women in every sphere, the women of Bangladesh are still fighting to enter the political process. The introduction of quotas for women in Parliament as well as in local government has increased the number of women in the political process, but has not yet ensured their genuine representation in the decision-making process. It is true that the battle for women's active participation in the political process has just started. Illiteracy and cultural restrictions must not prevent women representatives from grasping the new opportunities offered to them. As they overcome these obstacles, they will create a strong political ground for improving the lot of women in Bangladesh.

# Notes

1. Bangladesh is a South-Asian country that became independent on December 16, 1971.
2. A total of 56 women (41 in reserved constituencies, 10 in general seats, and five that were nominated) were elected in the election under the Act in various provincial legislatures (Forbes, 2002; Mumtaz, 2005).
3. The union parishad is the third tier of the existing local government structure of Bangladesh.
4. Sheikh Hasina's father, Bongo Bondhu Sheikh Muzibur Rahman, was the founder and the first prime minister of Bangladesh. Begum Khalada Zia's husband, General Ziaur Rahman, was the president of Bangladesh.
5. The existing electoral law in Bangladesh permits an individual to contest five seats in one parliamentary election. Once elected, he or she is allowed to be a member for one parliamentary seat only.
6. It is important to note that a 15 percent vote is not a threshold for winning a seat. However, only 10 candidates managed to get 15 percent of the total vote cast while competing with other candidates.
7. The four political parties are the Awami League (AL), the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Jatiyo Party (JP), and Jammat-E-Islami Bangladesh (JIB).
8. More detailed analysis of this issue will be made in the section entitled "Representation Without Participation."
9. Such women's issues include rape, dowries, violence, wife abuse, and trafficking in women.
10. ADAB was the leading umbrella organization of NGOs in Bangladesh.
11. In 1996, a political crisis took place in Bangladesh when all opposition political parties boycotted the parliamentary election, raising the demand for a free, fair, impartial, and credible election under a nonpartisan caretaker government. Ignoring the opposition's demand, the then government decided to call an election, which was only contested by the candidates of the BNP. But the government lasted for only 15 days, as a continuous mass movement compelled it to promulgate an Act establishing a nonpartisan caretaker government and to resign from power.
12. For instance, we can refer here to the case of Grammen Bank, whose main stakeholders in the micro-credit program are women.
13. Different forms of confrontation included burning down the NGO's schools, attacking NGO staff and members, and carrying out a house-to-house search to seize books and publications (Hashemi, 1995).
14. "Purdha" is a sort of veil used by Muslim women in Bangladesh for physical exclusion from males.
15. The term "fatwa" in Islamic legal parlance refers to a clarification of an ambiguous judicial point or an opinion by a jurist trained in Islamic law (Shehabuddin, 1999: 1012).
16. A "mullah" is a term that is used for someone who is known or believed to be learned in religious matters.
17. These factors are the constitutional adoption of Islam as the state religion, the growing dependence of the government on aid from Middle-Eastern Islamic countries, the formation of successive governments with the support of Jammat-E-Islami Bangladesh, and the increasing governmental allocations to religious educational institutions (Shamim and Nasreen, 2002: 64).
18. Since the restoration of democracy in 1991, on various occasions major political parties have contacted the JIB either to seek power or to organize a mass movement against the government. In 1991, the BNP got the support of the JIB to come to power, as they did not get a majority in the election. In 1996, the AL allied with the JIB to organize a mass movement against the BNP government. The BNP contested the 2001 election with a four-party alliance and won, which helped the JIB to become a part of the last government of Bangladesh (2001–06).

19. "Patriarchy" can be defined as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women.
20. "De facto politics" refers to a political situation in which despite being the elected representative, the person elected does not actively participate in the functions of governance. In the case of women, the male family members, or elites who were politically active, or both, managed the functions of the union parishad on behalf of women members.
21. Tasnima Hossain is the wife of Anowar Hossain Munju, who is the chair of the Jatiya Party (Munju group) and also a former Member of Parliament and a member of cabinet in Bangladesh.
22. In Bangladeshi culture, the wife of a brother is generally called "bhavi."

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