

Politics

Women have been more politically stable in the last two decades. A quota has ensured women's presence in the local government and National Parliament. Among women politicians, the older group entered politics through social work, while some among them and the new generation of have emerged from student politics. Despite many odds, statistics and analyses reveal a slowly growing trend towards women's political participation. However, they face an ominous challenge. There has also been a growing influence of money in Bangladesh politics, particularly in electoral politics and in guarding/promoting spheres of influence. This acts as a further constraint on women's political participation since fewer women have access to financial resources. It is very difficult for women to work effectively in this system unless such practices are eradicated.

Political Parties

Party affiliation depends on membership drives and on the organizational and electoral needs of each party. The actual number of women members in different political parties, however, cannot be determined, since gender-specific records are not maintained. Nevertheless, a slow trend towards women's greater participation has emerged over the decade. As party workers, women render valuable contributions in the mobilization of voters, especially among other women. Although there are only a few women in leadership positions, their numbers have increased over the last two decades. There is limited female involvement in party hierarchical structures. However, women occupy the top leadership positions in each of the two largest parties. They became leaders during crisis periods and have been successful as driving forces and unifying factors of their respective parties. Significantly, neither of them inherited the mantle of leadership when their party was in power. Once placed in the position of leadership, they were able to generate their own dynamics and momentum to lead their parties through difficult times. Nevertheless, their close and inner circle of advisors mostly consists of men. In occupying the role of a leader in public life, they have perhaps contributed to liberalizing values in a predominantly Muslim culture where traditionally men had exclusive prerogative in politics. They played a crucial role toward democratization and brought about a certain degree of continuity into the political process. They have a strong potential to be positive role models for women of all ages in Bangladesh, provided they demonstrate a commitment to gender equity by involving more women in their parties and in government. The election manifestos and constitutions of different political parties reveal that there is little emphasis on gender equality in party platforms.

Electoral process

Although women do not hold key positions during the electoral process, they render significant contributions during election campaigns by taking part in organizing public meetings, processions, and rallies. Women leaders and party workers engage in the task of mobilizing and canvassing voters, particularly women, for their party candidates. By making special arrangements such as separate election booths for women, and females presiding as polling officers, the turnout rate of women voters has increased. During the general elections of 1991 and 1996, and local level elections in 1993 and 1997, the level of enthusiasm among women to exercise their voting rights was very encouraging. Because of the special arrangements and security measures taken by the Government, there were few disturbances and the presence of women in polling centers was significant.

Local Government

Women were first elected to local bodies in 1973. The Union Parishad Election of 1997 is a milestone in the history of political empowerment of women in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh enacted a law for direct elections to reserve seats for women in local level elections. In 1997 through an Act, the Government reserved three seats for women in the union *parishad* where women members are elected from each of the three respective wards. Apart from the reserved seats women can also contest for any of the general seats. Previously, the process of selection of the women representatives was on the basis of nominations and/or indirect election. Around 12,828 women were elected as members in the 1997 local level elections. A total of 20 and 110 women were elected as chairpersons and members, respectively, for general seats. The Government has already issued different executive orders to ensure women members' participation in various decision-making committees.

The majority of women representatives regularly attended *parishad* meetings, but only a few of them participated in the deliberations and decisions. The female representatives usually involved themselves with mass education, family planning, immunization, handicrafts, relief activity, and *shalish* (mediation in the village court). The women representatives have the potentials to become change agents for rural women and various NGOs. A few government institutions such as the National Institute of Local Government are training women on various development-related issues, legal aid, and organizational structure of local bodies and their roles and functions to enable them play their role effectively.

Cabinet and Public Services

Although two women Prime Ministers have headed the Government during the last six years and the leaders of the opposition in Parliament were also women, this does not reflect the gender composition of participation and decision making at the highest policy level. At the ministerial level, women's representation has never risen above 3 percent.

Before 1996, women were never given full responsibility over any important ministry. Apart from being Prime Minister, others were state or deputy ministers responsible for insignificant ministries such as Culture, Social Welfare, and Women. Currently one woman Minister, who had become a Member of Parliament in 1991 and 1996 through direct elections, is responsible for a ministry, i.e., Agriculture. Another woman minister is responsible for the Ministry of Forest and Environment.

Violence Against Women

Violence against women is difficult to quantify because of unreliable statistics, but recent reports indicated that domestic violence is widespread. A report released by the U.N. Population Fund in September asserted that 47 percent of adult women report physical abuse by their male partner. The Government, the media, and women's rights organizations have fostered a growing awareness of the problem of violence against women.

Much of the violence against women is related to disputes over dowries. According to a human rights group, there were 81 dowry-related killings during the year. Human rights groups and press reports indicate that incidents of vigilantism against women--sometimes led by religious leaders--at times occur, particularly in rural areas. These include humiliating, painful punishments, such as the whipping of women accused of moral offenses. Assailants who fling acid in their faces disfigured numerous women. One human rights organization reported that 181 women suffered acid attacks during the year. The most common motivation for acid-throwing attacks against women is revenge by a rejected suitor; land disputes are another leading cause of the acid attacks. Few perpetrators of the acid attacks are prosecuted. Often the perpetrator flings the acid in through an open window during the night, making cases difficult to prove. Some arrests have been made, and one person has been given the death sentence.

The law prohibits rape and physical spousal abuse, but it makes no specific provision for spousal rape as a crime. A total of 3,516 rapes and 3,523 incidents of spousal abuses were officially reported during the year. Of the spousal abuse cases, 2,814 were related to disputes over dowry. Of the 2,130 alleged rapists that were prosecuted, 63 persons were convicted. The Government reports that other rape cases are under trial. During the year, the Government acceded to the U.N. Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The Government also has enacted laws specifically prohibiting certain forms of discrimination against women, including the Anti-Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980, the Cruelty to Women Law of 1983, and the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act of 1995, which was replaced by the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act of 2000. However, enforcement of these laws is weak, especially in rural areas, and the Government seldom prosecutes those cases that are filed. According to a human rights organization, there are 7 government-run and 13 privately run large shelter homes available for use by women who are victims of violence. Some smaller homes also are available for victims of violence. However, these are insufficient to meet victims' shelter needs. As a result, the Government often holds women who file rape complaints in safe custody, usually in prison. Safe custody frequently results in further abuses against victims, discouraging the filing of complaints by other women, and often continues for extended periods during which women often are unable to gain release.

There is extensive trafficking in women for the purpose of forced prostitution within the country and to other countries in Asia.

Education and Employment

For the most part, women remain in a subordinate position in society, and the Government has not acted effectively to protect their basic freedoms. Literacy rates are approximately 26 percent for women, compared with 49 percent for men. In recent years, female school enrollment has improved. Approximately 50 percent of primary and secondary school students are female. Women often are ignorant of their rights because of continued high illiteracy rates and unequal educational opportunities, and strong social stigmas and lack of economic means to obtain legal assistance frequently keep women from seeking redress in the courts. Many NGO's operate programs to raise women's awareness of their rights, and to encourage and assist them in exercising those rights.

Under the 1961 Muslim Family Ordinance, female heirs inherit less than male relatives do, and wives have fewer divorce rights than husbands. Men are permitted to have up to four wives, although this right rarely is exercised. Laws provide some protection for women against arbitrary divorce and the taking of additional wives by husbands without the first wife's consent, but the protections generally apply only to registered marriages. Marriages in rural areas often are not registered because of ignorance of the law. Under the law, a Muslim husband is required to pay his ex-wife alimony for only 3 months, but this rarely is enforced.

Employment opportunities have been stronger for women than for men in the last decade, which largely is due to the growth of the export garment industry in Dhaka and Chittagong. Eighty percent of the 1.4 million garment sector workers are women. Programs extending micro-credit to large numbers of rural women also have contributed to greater economic power for them. However, women still fill only a small fraction of other wage-earning jobs. According to a report by the Public Administration Reforms Commission publicized in October, women hold only 12 percent of government jobs, and only 2 percent of senior positions. The Government's policy to include more women in government jobs only has had limited effect. In recent years, about 15 percent of all recruits into government service have been women.

The garment and shrimp processing industries are the highest employers of female laborers. Forty-three percent of women work in the agriculture, fisheries, and livestock sectors, but 70 percent of them are unpaid family laborers. Many women work as manual laborers on construction projects as well, and constitute nearly 25 percent of all manufacturing workers. Women also are found in the electronics, food processing, beverage, and handicraft industries.

Sources:

Bangladesh: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (2000)

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2000/sa/692.htm>

ADB Country Briefing Paper: Women in Bangladesh (2001)

http://www.adb.org/Documents/Books/Country_Briefing_Papers/Women_in_Bangladesh/default.asp