

Women Leadership in Bangladesh Politics: Symbolic or Tangible?

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Abstract

Bangladesh is a unique case in terms of women leadership in politics. The country is ruled by women leaders for twenty five years. There is no doubt that the rise of female leaders is linked to their being members of prominent political families. They are all the daughters, wives of former government heads or leading oppositionists. Their strong political family background and their predecessor's charismatic image made them sole leader within the party politics. The choice of "women" as a party leader was also advantageous as she acquired what the German sociologist Max Weber called "inherited charisma". This paper focuses on the nature of women leadership in national level politics and party politics with special focus on Bangladesh Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party, and will particularly attempt to examine the journey of women leadership in Bangladesh from the symbolic to the tangible. Politics in Bangladesh remains male-dominated with respect to number, status, power in party politics, presence and performance in the parliament, and other administrative and political structure. This paper argues that women leadership did not challenge their internalized patriarchal beliefs. Their presence in political arena failed to create any dynamic change of country's existing political culture. Women succeed to a vacated public office as a symbol in the absence of a suitable male heir. This is a qualitative study and mainly secondary sources are used for preparing the paper. This paper also identifies the barriers of women political participation to understand the status of women in politics.

Keywords: Women Leadership; Bangladesh Politics; Symbolic Leadership; Tangible Leadership

Introduction

In a political landscape apparently it seems that women are in a good position in Bangladesh. Because two women, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia strongly hold their party command and since 1991 they have been

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serving as prime ministers of Bangladesh. After the reintroduction of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh in 1991, these two ladies firmly controlled over the political ups and downs in Bangladesh politics. It's a matter of question that do their high positions in politics reflect the whole scenario of women's position in politics? Do their Leadership motivates women to join politics? To understand any country's status of women in politics it is important to know about the social and political culture of that particular country. There is no exception for Bangladesh. Bangladesh is an agro-based society with a Muslim majority, where majority people of the country live in the rural areas. In the rural society, women stay inside home and deal with household affairs. They are often ignorant about their political rights, electoral process and to become members of political parties and social networks. Women are still the backward section of the population. Traditional social values, superstitions, economic backwardness, low income, lack of education, poverty made them backward section of the society where it is not always appreciated that women are considered as leaders. Their social status and economic dependence to the male counterpart influence their political participation and position. Women leadership is a very important issue in current development discourses. Women leadership is very much related to women empowerment. But still their presence in political arena is much more symbolic than functional or tangible. In society they are dominated by the patriarchy and in politics and administration they are controlled by the male. The rise of women leadership in Bangladesh politics is the consequence of political dynasty. This brief article has been designed to analyze the status of women in politics in Bangladesh.

Objective and Methodology

The aim of this paper is to explore the nature of women leadership, challenges of women's political participation and the present status of women in politics of Bangladesh. In this regard an overview of women in politics has been discussed briefly. This paper is an analytical research essay and has been relied on secondary sources for relevant data and information. A good number of related journals, books, newspapers and reports from different organizations have been analyzed in this respect. Descriptive method has been applied to analyze the pattern of women leadership, their role in decision making process and party politics. Most of the information and data are qualitative in nature and the qualitative descriptive method has been applied for in-depth analysis of women leadership and women political participation in Bangladesh.

Unconventional role in public space: Women as a “Ruler” or “Leader”?

The conventional role of women is associated with the family – as biological reproducers and nurturers. They are trained from childhood to

obey orders of men and not to argue back or disobey men's decision (Noman, 1983). Almost all through life cycle a woman is identified as a daughter, a wife or a mother or hardly her own self (Noman, 1983). In addition, women are responsible for all the domestic household work but lack decision-making power within the household. The political gains that women have made in Bangladesh remain an unequal power relation in the political arena. Those women who have played leading roles in political parties have rarely addressed women's interest and questions of gender inequality. Srimavo Bandranaike to Chandrika Kumaratunga, Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina, Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto, south Asia has had the largest number of women heads of state of any region in the world but they didn't create any impact on women's mass participation in party politics during their tenure in office (Basu, 2005).

Dynastic syndrome or political dynasty is one of the major features of south and south-east Asian politics. Political dynasty means a prominent political family runs the party. A number of women gained the highest leadership positions in the government and the opposition through their family connections. There is no doubt that the rise of female leaders is linked to their being members of prominent families. They are all the daughters, wives, or widows of former government heads or leading oppositionist. Their strong political family background and their predecessor's charismatic image made them sole leader within the party politics. The choice of 'woman' as a party leader was also advantageous as she acquired what the German sociologist Max Weber called 'inherited charisma' (Thompson, 2015). It began in India with the passing away of Jawaharlal Nehru and rise of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, his daughter, then her son Rajiv Gandhi to Sonia Gandhi. In Sri Lanka Bandaranaike dynasty made it known to all chronically for a long. In south-east Asia Aung San Suu Kyi is the continuation of her father Aung San, founder of Burma, now Myanmar. Late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto shall be named in the political history of Pakistan for being the root of dynastic succession of leadership in the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) as his death by capital punishment paved the way for his daughter Benazir Bhutto, the first female prime minister in Muslim world. These are all the example of women leadership from south and south-east Asia. By their family connections, they could overcome the problems that women otherwise face in politics in the world (Jahan, 1987).

Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia (the two women leaders) emerged in Bangladesh politics due to the low level of political institutionalization in the absence of suitable male heirs (Chowdhury, 2009). Both women were young and politically inexperienced at the moments of their ascensions to power (Chowdhury, 2008). A male dynast successor is more likely to be judged on his own merits, making it more difficult for him to inherit the

mantle of charisma from a father or brother to whom he may be compared unfavorably. But a widow, wife or daughter is often seen to better embody their husbands' or fathers' charisma. Dynastic politics restricts the level of internal democracy of the parties: decision-making, including leadership selection, becomes a 'family affair' (Amundsen, 2013). In fact uneven level of institutionalism and low political culture always permit a wife or daughter to succeed to a vacated public office as a symbol of or stand-in for the former male occupant (Kearney, 1981). They are the symbol of unity within the party and hold their post for indefinite time.

In a country like Bangladesh, with a patriarchal social structure, political position for women are privilege rather than a right. Since Bangladesh is an agriculture based country, with a Muslim majority, it is not always appreciated that women are considered as ruler. There is a common mentality of males dominating over the females. Here Islam plays a very important role both in society and in politics. People are very sentimental on religious ground. That's why women leaders make some symbolic gestures to demonstrate their loyalty to Islam. For instance, women mass leaders they always visible to the public place by covering their head. As a first female Prime minister in Bangladesh in 1991 a debate sparked among religious and right-wing parties, as to whether women can lead the nation? But later they changed their stance and accept women as leader in the political field (Chowdhury, 2008). To win the election the present Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also made some symbolic gesture to demonstrate her loyalty to Islam.

Politics is often referred to as the last "glass ceiling" with women being vastly underrepresented in political office (Kornblut, 2009). Study after study finds that when women seek and serve in political office – elected or appointed they are as successful as their male counterparts. Bangladesh is not unique in terms of women being underrepresented in political office. Nationally, women are underrepresented at all levels of government. In the last two decades women have achieved many "firsts" in politics. Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia both were elected through free, fair and credible election. Despite the fact that women have been elected to high profile public offices in Bangladesh, the total number of women serving in appointed and elected offices has changed little over the last twenty five years. The situation is particularly acute in rural areas. The main reason so few women are in appointed or elected office is not overt discrimination and structural deficiencies in the processes used to appoint or elect candidates to office, but the fact that so few women seek these offices. In an increasing frequency, when women run, women win. So does gender diversity in political office matter?-a question can rise in this regard. American political scientist David B. MacLennan (2015) in

his study pointed out three of the most important reasons political offices should more accurately reflect the gender make up. These are:

1. Women are role models for other women and, as such, become an inspiration to women becoming interested in public service;
2. Women bring a different approach to public service and enrich the public discussion about important issues; and
3. Women often use a different leadership style that encourages more inclusiveness and outreach.

An essentialist view of women's political participation suggests that the entry of women into politics will be conducive to cleaner politics because women by their very nature tend to be honest; in other words, when in power they would not compromise with corruption (Chowdhury, 2008). In Bangladesh women have a considerable position in politics. Are they just a "symbol of presence" or did we see considerable improvement for women in our society? – It's a matter of question. In our existing political system women leaders (Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina) are controlled by a hand full of male dominated bureaucrats. Moreover, we have been ruled by female politicians for last 25 years and still there is no National Collective Policy against women violence or discrimination. There are few pockets of improvement which actually is formulated to get some vote banks by our leaders.

Women in Bangladesh Politics: A journey from the symbolic to the tangible

Gender equity and political participation are the preconditions of democracy. Complete democratization of a political system cannot be possible without women's participation. Meaningful progress of a nation depends upon the women, the half of the total population. In Bangladesh patriarchal values and institutions do not demonstrate positive and supportive views about women leadership and nobody takes into account the patriarchal norms and institutions which are deeply rooted in the country's politics (Rahman & Siddika, 2010). The constitution of Bangladesh provides for formal equality of men and women. Article 10 of the constitution ensures participation of women in all spheres of national life (Bangladesh constitution amendment, 1979, Article 10). But the real scenario is different. If we look at the statistics, we see that in the 1st parliament no women was elected in general seats (Rahman & Siddika 2010). In the 2nd parliament there were only two women elected from general seats. The scenario was the same in the 3rd to the 8th parliaments (Rahman & Siddika, 2010). In the ninth parliament the percentage of directly elected women members is 6.33% (Chowdhury, 2009). There were also six female ministers and state ministers in the 44-member cabinet, including the leaders of important ministries such as defense, foreign, energy, agriculture and home. There are 69 women lawmakers in

the parliament which is 19.7 percent of the total seats. Nineteen of these women were directly elected and 50 women were elected through the gender quota system (Majumdar, 2012). Inadequacy of women's political participation is an important barrier to their empowerment. It is very difficult for a woman to reach the apex of the political power without any influential political family background.

Symbolic Nature of Women Leadership

CPD report (2000) pointed out that over 70 percent of women voted in the 1996 parliamentary elections, with women being actively engaged in the electoral process as voters and campaigners. Though political parties made commitments to women's advancement in their respective election manifestos, in reality the major political parties nominated very few female candidates in past elections. Women MPs sit on every standing committee but their effectiveness was not at all visible to the public.

It is noteworthy that factional trends were clearly visible among the dominant political parties in Bangladesh. Present Awami League president and Prime minister Sheikh Hasina formally joined the Awami League as its leader following the tragic assassination of her father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other member of his family on 15 August 1975. While living in self-exile with her husband in New Delhi, Sheikh Hasina was elected the president of Bangladesh Awami League in 1981, and since then she has been the president of the party, ending six years in exile, she returned home finally on 17 May 1981. But within this time Awami League was getting reconstituted under the leadership of Mrs. Johra Tajuddin, the widow of former top Awami League leader late Tajuddin Ahmed. Its council meeting was held in July 1977 and following the earlier BAKSAL line. Other Awami League Leaders like Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury who were anti-BAKSAL and held different ideas, abstained from attending the above council meeting (Hasanuzzaman, 1998). Later in 1978, Abdul Malek Ukil and Abdur Razzak were elected as the President and General Secretary respectively, of the main Awami League and, in August of the same year, the breakaway section, led by Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury formed a separate Awami League (Hasanuzzaman, 1998). The rightist and liberal Awami Leaguers also separated themselves and established their own parties. Thus, Maulana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish formed Gana Azadi League, General (Retd.) M.A.G. Osmani formed Jatiya Janata Party (JJP) and Khandker Mushtaque Ahmed, ex-President and an associate of the bloody 15th August coup, formed the Democratic League (Hasanuzzaman, 1998). It is to be noted that there was serious factionalism within the Awami League before Sheikh Hasina elected as the President of the Party. Initially the leadership of Hasina was required for Awami League for its own survival. The fact is at that stage the leadership of Hasina was very much symbolic which latter changed that will be discussed in the later part of this paper.

BNP also witnessed almost same experience. Begum Zia's debut into politics after the assassination of her husband President Ziaur Rahman. Before that Khaleda Zia did not take much interest in either politics or in public life. Even when Ziaur Rahman assumed power after the political changes in 1975, she remained a shy housewife spending most of her time raising her two sons. Zia's vice-president Justice Abdus Sattar took over as the acting president and also as chairperson of the BNP. On 24 March 1982, Army Chief of Staff General Hussain Mohammad Ershed overthrew Justice Sattar. At that time many BNP leaders left the party and joined the military government. At this critical juncture, Khaleda Zia became the vice-president of BNP and on 1 May 1984 she was elected its chairperson. She was the first women Prime minister in Bangladesh. So both the top women leader of Bangladesh assumed the apex of political power in absence of suitable male heir and successfully organized their party and became the symbol of their party unity. But both of them failed to bring the qualitative change in political arena.

Indirect election of the reserved seats for women also turns women symbolic representative in parliament. Through article 65 of the constitution, fifteen seats were constitutionally reserved for women in parliament in the first election held in 1973. In 1979 the quota was raised to thirty. The women's representatives filled the thirty reserved seats not through direct elections but by nomination of the three hundred elected representatives. Through the 14th amendment of the constitution, the number of reserved seats was raised to 45 in the 9th parliament. After the 15th amendment of the constitution the numbers of women reserve seats were increased to 50 from the existing 45. The reserved seats played an important role in making constitutional amendments, and it has been seen that the women occupying the reserved seats could only play a subservient role with respect to the wishes of the ruling party (Rahman and Siddika, 2010). Indirect election cannot ensure women to gain power, authority and honor. It just makes them dependent on male members of their party. Certainly there is a question of responsibility and accountability. Whether directly elected to a territorial constituency or indirectly elected to a reserved seat, only a handful of women members of parliament have ever explicitly defined their roles in relation to a constituency of women, but for those parliamentarians, the decision that women's concerns were worth pursuing was related to their gender consciousness, not to the method of their election (Chowdhury, 2008).

Whether Tangible? Understanding the challenges of Tangible Leadership

Bangladeshi women today are more aware of their rights than they were a decade ago. Various surveys show that when equipped with the proper resources, women have the power to help their families and entire communities. They also contribute to our national economy. In RMG

sector female garment workers have created a social revolution. In Bangladesh women's participation in politics has increased. The Speaker of the National Parliament, the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Leader of the House are woman. A critical look of functions, activities, leadership traits and above all success of the two main political leaders of Bangladesh in last three more decades i.e. the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia clearly shows that they are no longer a symbolic leader. It is rather, in many cases, particularly Sheikh Hasina has proven that she too, like her father, has the charismatic leadership quality. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been ranked 36th among the world's 100 most powerful women in 2016 by influential business magazine Forbes. In the list of 100 most powerful women published recently, Hasina jumped 23 spots from last year's 59th. She came 47th in 2014. This achievement proves her leadership ability. Although the success story of women leaders are very few in Bangladesh today, many still in trap of symbolic nature of leadership. For example, despite long career in politics, the current opposition leader Roushan Ershad is still a symbolic leader. Akin to the leadership limitation of Rowshan Ershad, thousands of field level women leaders are still playing their leadership role as a symbolic leader.

Why is women leadership not as tangible / functional as their counterpart male leadership?

There is a strong connection between decision making and women empowerment. Basically women are dependent on men. They cannot take their decision independently and to some extent they have lack of control over their own income. Apart from that women's active participation in politics is not visible mostly on the ground of family involvement, sometimes non-cooperation of husband and in laws. Women also look after their children that is why they cannot concentrate on their own political career.

Criminalization of politics is another very common feature of our political culture. Political parties in Bangladesh rear criminals. Particularly during election candidates use mastans, illegal arms and black money. Male politicians have strong connection with the underworld arms network but generally women do not want to link themselves with criminal activities. Funding is another important issue for female candidates. In the patriarchal society of Bangladesh, women do not have any control over business where the opportunities for corruption exist. Political support and strong financial backup are required for participating in the elections of Bangladesh. Women cannot afford the expenses such as election campaigning, attending meetings or visiting and interacting with government officials. In this respect political affiliation is extremely important in shaping women's representation in politics and giving strong position in grass root or local level politics. As

per section “90B” of the Representation of the People Order (RPO) 1972 (As amended upto October 2008) requires political parties to set the goal of reserving at least 33 percent of all committee positions for women including the central committee, progressively achieving this goal by the year 2020. But the real picture is quite different. Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS) arranged a round table conference titled “Political Empowerment of women and the Representation of People Order (RPO): The present state and necessary steps for ensuring presence of at least 33 per cent women in all political parties” on October 19, 2016. BNPS committee members claim that the involvement of women in political parties enlisted in the election commission is poor.

Table 1: Women in Party Central Committee (%)

Leading Political Parties in Bangladesh	Women in Central Committee (%)
Bangladesh Awami League	12.33
Bangladesh Nationalist Party	11.11
Jatiya Party	7.69

Source: The Daily Observer, 29 October, 2016.

Since women is always considered as sexual object in patriarchy so during procession or street agitation or election campaign there is a fear of sexual harassment. This type of incident certainly damages her image and destroys her political career. On 11 May 1999 during the opposition half day hartal (general strike) a female political activist was harassed by law enforcing agency and next day different national dailies exposed the picture of her harassment (Chowdhury, 2009).

There are at present two types of local government institutions in Bangladesh: one for rural areas and the other for urban areas. The Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act 1997 of Bangladesh can be seen as a milestone towards ensuring women’s equal access and increased participation in political power structures (Siddika & Rahman, 2010). This amendment provided direct elections to reserved seats for women in local level elections to several seats for women in local level elections. It gave the structural framework for women’s participation in political decision-making and provided an opportunity to bring women to the center of local development and develop new grassroots level leadership. But the number of women in elective positions of chairperson and member in the Union Parishads was abysmally low ever after 3 seats were reserve for women candidate, because women elected from reserved seats do not get institutional support and are often not included in mainstream activities and their responsibilities are sometimes not stated clearly. Even those who are elected as chairperson or general member are often ignored during

decision-making only because they are women (Siddika & Rahman, 2010). Women's gender identity, refrain them from playing their roles effectively. Due to socio-political and religious bindings, elected women cannot play their role and thus people's aspiration and expectation to them are not met up. Women's participation in local level government is a critical issue because it is one of the most effective instruments to improve the condition of women at grass root level.

Lack of institutional training at local level and political awareness is another challenge for women. Women seldom know about their rights and privileges. Special efforts are needed to promote women leaders from the grassroots level to higher political offices by imparting institutional training and guidance. Political participation of women at local level is a means of gaining access to the power structure as participation and empowerment is closely related.

Concluding Remarks

Women in Bangladesh live in a social system where the socialization process plays an influential role in pushing them into an inferior and subordinate position in society. This socialization process starts almost with the birth of a child. Through different treatment in their everyday lives, a sex identity is acquired. This socialization process associates girls with the home and boys with a wider environment. This result is an unfavorable attitude of woman towards politics. Throughout the history of political participation, women have always been involved in politics but their participation has been ignored. Good governance needs not only fair representation but also effective participation of women. Since independence every government has taken several steps to create level playing field for women that is appreciable but not enough. In political landscape indirect election failed to ensure their power and position and create dependency on male members. Virtually direct election of reserve seats can make a level playing field for women. To improve the status of women in politics first of all we need to change our perception towards women and women must fight her against patriarchy so that women are considered as human being. Practice of democratic culture in true sense, corruption and criminal free politics will make women's entrance into the country's politics easy.

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