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If Not Now Then When? The Reality of Women's Representation in Politics and Administration in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The political landscape of Bangladesh presents a complex tapestry of progress and challenges regarding women's representation. This study aims to identify the status of women in the top political and administrative arena of Bangladesh and shed light on the factors that are responsible for such positions. The study employed an exploratory research design, utilizing a phenomenological research approach. The study followed the purposive sampling technique to collect 13 respondents, including members of parliament, cabinet members, local government representatives, and different political party members. The findings of the study depict that women's representation in the parliament and cabinet remains insignificant in making substantive decisions. Cultural and social structural barriers, muscle politics, and reluctance to adopt change by top political leadership are considered the main barriers in this regard. This research represents a distinctive addition to the interdisciplinary fields of gender studies and political science in Bangladesh, employing both primary and secondary data to arrive at a clear and definitive conclusion regarding the subject matter under investigation.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between politics and women has historically been characterized by tension and distance. The term “polis”, which originated from the ancient Greeks, has given rise to the contemporary term “politics”, and was utilized to evoke a notion of a collective environment for living in a community and making decisions. The current understanding of the term “political” is based on the differentiation between the public and private domains, which results in the exclusion of women from the public sphere and political sphere (Siltanen & Stanworth, 2023). From ancient Greece to the recent era of the 21st century, the political exclusion of women has been constructed on the difference between the public and the private spheres, and it has also barred women from issues relating to citizenship (Stewart). In the colonial period, the British exhibited a lack of interest in the status of women for its intrinsic value, instead

prioritizing their focus on how gender divisions influenced the framework of imperialism. The perpetuation of women's subordination was utilized as a means to demonstrate that India was not yet prepared for independence (Bos et al., 2024).

The year 1947 marked the partition of India and Pakistan, which was based on the “two-nation theory” espoused by Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Bangladesh was incorporated into Pakistan as East Pakistan. During the period of Pakistan (1947 to 1971), the political system in West Pakistan was characterized by a greater degree of dominance, which resulted in the consistent denial of East Pakistan's demand for parity in political representation. Consequently, women were unable to secure a significant political role within decision-making entities. Moreover, during a short period of the parliamentary system (1947 to 1957) and particularly after 1958, a selected group of bureaucratic and military elites predominantly held

the reins of power with precluded women from representation (Devotta, 2024).

In 1971, Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan formulated a constitution, and ensured equal rights for all citizens. The government of Bangladesh has increased the reserved seats in parliament (15 to 50) through a constitutional amendment and constructed the reserved seats in local government institutions through the Act of 1997, but few women have shown a full interest in entering the political arena (Baxter, 2018). The women of Bangladesh have enjoyed legal and constitutional equal rights in political and government areas. Moreover, the socioeconomic development of women including education enrollment, employment in both public and private, entrepreneurship, and decision-making roles in the family has improved significantly in the last decade. However, the representation could not reach the substantive representation of women in parliament, cabinet, and political parties of Bangladesh (Jahan, 2016). However, this study aims to explore the status of women's representation in the political arena and administrative positions in Bangladesh and also shed light on the factors that are responsible for such positions.

The first human organization was framed by a social contract among individuals emphasizing the protection of equal rights and practicing the equality of human power (Louise, 2021). Theoretically, women's participation in politics has underpinned societal benefits, including the policy table to implement gender-friendly policies, reduced inequality, and increased coordination among political parties and societal groups (Heger et al., 2019). Nonetheless, women were not granted equal political rights until the advent of women's suffrage in 1893, when Governor Lord Glasgow signed the Electoral Bill in New Zealand. In the 20th century, international agencies adopted different approaches, including Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD), to integrate women in the development process. The concept of WID was firmly rooted in traditional modernization theory, which underscored the significance of incorporating women into the global mechanisms of economic, political, and social growth and change. In the second half of 1970, WAD was known as the "neo-Marxist feminist approach", and it grew out of the explanatory constraints of the WID approach.

The main theme of the WAD approach is to ensure equality in all political and economic institutions to improve women's positions both within and beyond the domestic sphere (Ara, 2015).

In the 20th century, the concept of the welfare state picked up widespread popularity across the globe. The concept was solidly rooted in equality, liberty, and fraternity. The premise of social welfare states was to influence the structure of social inequality both inside and across nations (Dollar et al., 2015; Bhuiyan, 2024). In addition, equity feminism originated from liberal feminism, which prioritizes the safeguarding of all political rights of women, including their rights against coercive interference (Chambers, 2024). Equity feminists believe that countries must protect their rights against coercive interference by making laws and amending existing laws that restrict women's liberty, including laws granting preferential treatment to women, engaging in political and economic activity, the right to use arms for their safety and reform the laws that limit women's employment options (Sen, 2019).

Schwindt-Bayer (2018) categorizes four distinct dimensions of women's representation that are interconnected in three significant ways. Initially, the presence of formal representation should have an impact on descriptive representation within electoral institutions. Specifically, the implementation of measures such as gender quotas and proportional electoral systems will enhance the likelihood of women being elected to legislative positions. Descriptive representation is closely linked to substantive representation, as the election of women should introduce significant political matters, particularly those about women's equality, to the political agenda. Simultaneously, women encounter a political landscape that has been predominantly controlled by men for a significant period, making it challenging for women to gain access to the informal networks that form the foundation of the power structure. Therefore, women are denied opportunities to acquire significant political resources, such as influential committee assignments, leadership positions, or support for a wide range of legislation. This leads to their marginalization in legislative politics, where they are relegated to less important legislative tasks and focus primarily on policy issues traditionally associated with women (Jahan, 2015).

Furthermore, the theory posits that formal, descriptive, and substantive representation will have an impact on symbolic representation. Gender-inclusive political institutions, the implementation of policies that support women, and a significant number of women in the legislature are expected to foster a sense of representation among the voters. This, in turn, is likely to lead to increased satisfaction with representative democracy and greater trust in the institutions that represent the people (Miller et al., 2015). Women's representation encompasses more than just the process of women being elected or the policies they enact once in office. Instead, it is a complex and interconnected concept that includes the gendered characteristics of electoral institutions (formal representation), the participation of women in legislatures (descriptive representation), the way women carry out their representation (substantive representation), and the public's perception of that representation (symbolic representation). To gain a comprehensive understanding of women's representation, it is imperative to thoroughly analyze all aspects of representation and the interplay between them (Hessami et al., 2020).

METHODS

Approach and Participants

A phenomenological research philosophy was followed to design the study, aiming to gain detailed insights about the topic instead of framing

the responses using an established framework. This approach was applied to understand the intricate scenario of individual experiences in their world, and it must be grounded in their experiences within the context of social reality (Smith & Osborn, 2015). We recruited the participants in the current study using the purposive sampling technique, a non-probability sampling method. The purposive technique was used when the study was focused on a particular sub-group or marginalized group (i.e., gender, activists) and who had the most relevant information or experiences. We recruited respondents based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) citizens of Bangladesh; (2) female politicians; (3) involvement in decision-making processes such as parliament, cabinet, and political parties; (4) a political career spanning more than 5 years in various central or local government institutions and political parties; and (5) a demonstrated interest in the study. For sampling size, at least 6 respondents are required for the phenomenological study (Boddy, 2016). Therefore, the quality of the data determines the sufficient sample size, with data collection continuing until similar data is found or one participant replicates each other's experiences (Sim et al., 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2019; Tran et al., 2017). After conducting 10 interviews, the researchers found reliable and similar findings. To prevent missing data, we collected an additional 3 interviews, but the data appeared to be identical.

Table 1. Demographic and Background Characteristics of Respondents

ID Number	Organization	Political Career	Present Status
ID-1	Parliament of Bangladesh	15 Years	Reserved seat member
ID-2	Parliament of Bangladesh	18 Years	Reserved seat member
ID-3	Parliament of Bangladesh	22 Years	Reserved seat member
ID-4	Parliament of Bangladesh	16 years	General Member
ID-5	Parliament of Bangladesh	17 Years	General Member
ID-6	Cabinet	25 Years	State Minister
ID-7	Bangladesh Students League	7 Years	Vice-President
ID-8	Bangladesh Students League	5 Years	Organizing Secretary
ID-9	Socialist Students' Front (SSF)	6 Years	Executive Member
ID-10	Socialist Students' Front (SSF)	5 Years	Executive Member
ID-11	Union Parishad	12 Years	Member (Reserved)
ID-12	Union Parishad	8 Years	Member (Reserved)
ID-13	Union Parishad	9 Years	Member (Reserved)

Interview Process

Primary data was collected using a Key Informant Interview (KII) method with an open-ended or unstructured questionnaire. We developed the KII question after conducting an extensive literature review. We primarily use this technique to gather qualitative data and gain profound insights into the topic (Palinkas et al., 2015). The researchers chose respondents who were more experienced in sharing the real scenario of women's participation in different political arenas like parliament, cabinet, and local government institutions. After getting permission, five trained and experienced data enumerators displayed the questionnaire and built a rapport with their respondents before asking the main questions. In addition, the data enumerators obtained their consent and discussed the study's purpose. Each interview lasted roughly 45 to 60 minutes. The interviewers recorded the data after obtaining permission using a tap recorder and documented it in their hand notes. Moreover, all interviews were conducted in their comfortable locations (offices or residences) at convenient times, ensuring the interviewees felt at ease. We collected the data from December 2022 to July 2023. However, the data was collected through Bangla as the state language. The study collected secondary data from journals, books, and government reports, such as the Bangladesh Election Commission.

Data Analysis

After gathering the data, the researcher transcribed all records verbatim. The researchers read and listened to the recordings several times until they comprehended the real meaning of transcripts to capture the research objectives. The study followed the (Graneheim et al., 2017) procedure to define the theme in qualitative data. This procedure emphasized that all transcripts were read several times to comprehend the content and identify the meaningful words and paragraphs by specific code to explain each content and situation. Then, codes were analyzed based on similarities and dissimilarities, and the study identified 12 sub-themes following this procedure. Finally, the study determined eight sub-themes under two broad themes by comprehensive discussion to explain the result.

Moreover, these sub-themes help the researchers comprehend the respondents'

experiences much better. To ensure the validity and credibility of the research, transcripts were coded separately, and available participants were asked to read transcripts to make sure they represented their real experiences. In this procedure, only 8 respondents were found to read the description after completion of the data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bangladesh became liberated from Pakistan in 1971 and formulated a constitution in 1972. This constitution allowed women to participate in national politics which was the first time in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It institutionally set up fundamental rights for women in both the public and private sectors. The Constitution provision 15 was reserved for women from 1973 to the next 10 years. However, the country faced a military regime and passed several years of political unrest since 1975. During this period, the country couldn't any remarkable attempt to ensure women's empowerment in the political arena. The country revived democracy from a military government in 1991. In 1995, Bangladesh endorsed the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) at the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW). To implement the agenda of this plan, the government took different women-friendly policies including the Women's Development Policy (NWDP) in 1997 and ratified the Local Government Act 1997 where provision was at least 3 reserved seats at the Union level and the Upazila level, two elected vice chairmen, with one them must be a woman (Nazrul, 2024). These initiatives created a new wave for women to be involved in local politics. In 2004, 2008, and 2011 the government of Bangladesh amended the National Women's Development Policy to make the path smooth for women in the political arena. In 2013, the government of Bangladesh developed the National Action Plan to implement the NWDP and now it has been updated to align with the SDGs. However, the present government declared a mandate of this policy to raise female participation to 33% in national parliament. Moreover, the government implemented an EVM system to conduct both national and local elections where females showed more interest in casting votes (Sayem, 2023). However, through implementing these initiatives, women's participation is increasing

gradually at both national and local levels (Sultana et al., 2018).

Women's Representation and Decision-Making Role in the National Parliament of Bangladesh

The present leader of the ruling party and opposition party and the speaker of the national parliament in Bangladesh are female, but their presence does not accurately reflect the actual scenario of gendered participation at the highest level of policymaking. Patriarchal ideology and

masculine culture determine the fate of the legislation here in Bangladesh despite a good number of female Members of Parliament preside over the assemblies. On the 30th of June 2011, the National Parliament passed to reestablish quotas for women and ratified the 15th constitutional amendment and Article 65. The total number of seats in Parliament has been increased to 350, with a current quota of 50 seats set aside specifically for women (Huq, 2016).

Table 2. Women's Participation in the National Parliament of Bangladesh

Parliament Election	General Member	Percentage	Reserved Member	Total Member	Total Percentage
1973	0	0.0	15	15	4.76
1979	2	0.67	30	32	9.70
1986	5	1.67	30	35	10.60
1988	4	1.33	00	4	1.33
1991	4	1.33	30	34	10.30
1996	8	2.67	30	38	11.51
2001	7	2.33	45	52	15.07
2008	20	6.67	50	70	20.00
2014	19	6.33	50	69	19.71
2018	24	8.00	50	74	21.14
2023	20	6.67	50	70	20.00

Source: (Election Commission of Bangladesh, 2024)

The above table indicates a consistent rise in the percentage of exclusively reserved seats for women, yet the proportion of women taking up general seats remains inadequate. Whereas the half of total voters are women but very few of them have chosen to become party candidates in the national election. For example, only 0.3% of the total candidates were women at the first national parliamentary election in 1973. The rate was slightly increased 2nd and 3rd parliamentary national elections but the rate was radically dropped when the army came to power. After the reintroduced of the democratic movement and government of Bangladesh took some initiatives resulting in women's participation in the national parliament increasing marginally but general seats remained inadequate until 2008. On the other hand, women's representation in India (14.3%), Nepal (32.8%) and Pakistan (20.2%) are slightly high in parliament.

A female member of parliament said that Our society does not allow women to take the lead. They attempt to humiliate and invalidate female

politicians' activities by exploiting women's patriarchal oppression. She argued that gender-based barriers limited her political actions. Parliamentary sessions prioritized male members over female or reserved members, thereby depriving women of political representative activities' (Personal Communication, April 30, 2024).

However, the proportion of female representation in the Parliament of Bangladesh has experienced a notable increase, rising from 4.76% in 1973 to 20.0% in 2023 but it isn't reaching the substantive representation. The Global Gender Gap Report (2021) showed that women hold only 26.1 percent of the parliamentary seats and 22.6 percent of the ministerial positions in the 156 countries throughout the world. Article 32.3 of the National Development Policy-2011 of Bangladesh affirmed a minimum of 33% of women representatives in all political parties which intends to fulfill the magic figure of Critical Mass Theory. The governments of several nations have instituted gender quotas in both national and subnational elections to mitigate the gender disparity in the political arena. Gender

quotas have emerged as a prevalent solution to address the issue of women's inadequate representation in legislative bodies (Hughes, 2017). But only the presence of women in parliament is not enough rather their active participation in the legislation should be given importance in the

academic literature. We can count how many female MPs are there in different national assemblies but seldom draw attention to what contribution those MPs make in running the state machinery (Pandey, 2016).

Women's Representation in the Cabinet of Bangladesh

Table 3. Women's Participation in the Cabinet of Bangladesh

Government	Minister	Total Ministers and State Minister	Percentage
1972-1975	02	50	4.0
1979-1981	03	101	2.97
1982-1990	06	133	4.51
1991-1996	03	39	7.69
1996-2001	04	46	8.70
2001-2006	03	60	5.00
2009-2014	05	36	13.89
2014-2018	05	49	10.20
2019-2023	04	47	8.51
January 2024- July, 2024	7	44	15.90

Source: (Election Commission of Bangladesh, 2024)

The cabinet is the top-notch authority institution to formulate public policies and take valuable initiatives to run the government. Consequently, a significant proportion of women participate in cabinet divisions, indicating a desire to formulate women-friendly policies for national development. However, their appearance often leads to their underrepresentation in the country's highest decision-making process. Even though there have been two women serving as heads of government from 1991 to the present, women's representation in cabinet positions has been historically quite minimal. The above table shows that women's participation in cabinet divisions has been increasing since 2009, and the present government has achieved the highest percentage of 18.60%. Interestingly, Sharma (2020) pointed out that women are assigned some ministers, state ministers, and deputy ministers that are perceived as feminine or gentle, such as cultural affairs, social welfare, and matters related to women.

For example, only one woman except the prime minister is playing a full ministerial role (the Ministry of Social Welfare), and the other five women are playing state ministerial roles in the present government body of the cabinet division. Here, the symbolic representation has increased slightly where substantive representation is not well

received. Panday (2016) identified two possible reasons why women's participation in the cabinet division is underrepresented: female leaders are hesitant to promote more females to the cabinet due to concerns about offending their male party leaders, and political parties have an apathetic attitude towards women. Furthermore, Tonsing (2017) contended that men restrict women in Asia Pacific Region countries to submissive roles in the home, thereby diminishing their overall influence in decision-making. Bhopal (2019) stated that the prioritization of women's empowerment tends to be lower and disregarded in a patriarchal society.

A female former member of Cabinet stated that A male political colleague got preferential treatment in doing political tasks and getting the top position for gender preference, despite having the capability of taking on the responsibility of holding the top position. She contended that male colleagues view women as second-class citizens in politics and do not provide them with any benefits. As a result, society tends to prioritize non-political jobs over motivating females to participate in politics' (Personal Communication, April 30, 2024).

Again, non-cooperation from the male colleagues and subordinates creates glass cliff issues for women holding senior positions in the central government. Women cabinet members are

often blamed for their inefficiency or slow responses but the actual scenario behind such action is bureaucratic inertia and defiance (Jahan, 2018).

Women's Representation and Decision-Making Role in the Local Government Institutions

Table 4. Women's Participation in Local Government

Year	Number of Union Parishad	Female Chairperson in Union Parishad
1973	4352	1
1977	4352	4
1984	4400	4
1988	4401	1
1992	4451	24
1997	4479	23
2003	4223	22
2011	4500	23
2016	4562	29
2022	4562	45

Source: Bangladesh Election Commission (2022)

Local government is usually a more important institution than central government, as most policies and programs are implemented in local areas. These institutions increase citizens' demand for government services, and they allow citizens to feel in touch with the government. However, without the equal participation of men and women in these institutions, they will be unable to be competent and efficient in achieving their goals (Gino et al., 2015). The above table demonstrates the real picture of women's participation in Union Parishad, which is the lowest tier of local government in Bangladesh. When Bangladesh held its first local government elections in 1973, only one woman emerged victorious. Women's participation in local government institutions was inadequate and minimal until the reintroduction of democracy in 1991 when the military government controlled the administrative authority. In the 1992 election, the number of female representatives increased gradually after taking some women-friendly initiatives motivated by CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration (Uddin, 2019). However, in the last election, women's participation achieved the highest number (45), which is equivalent to only 1.1% of total chairmen. This observation suggests that local government institutions particularly ignore women when it comes to making decisions, raising their voices, organizing a gender-based power alliance, and playing a more conservative role in policy implementation (Prodip, 2021).

A female politician said that, In the local area, society frequently criticizes women in politics in different circumstances. She said that she wanted to participate in politics, but she has a daughter. Society has already fixed her household duties and raised her baby. She couldn't participate in political activities after completing her household responsibilities. Despite this, she expressed her belief that male politicians often make negative comments and sexually assault female politicians. Consequently, women ignored political involvement and instead focused on household duties' (Personal Communication April 30, 2024).

Moreover, village politics and central politics are completely different because of institutional processes, societal values, and political culture at the local level. The women are not conscious of their political rights in rural areas of Bangladesh due to a lack of proper political knowledge, a gender power imbalance, and cultural lag. Paul et al. (2016) assert that rural women encounter numerous fundamental socio-cultural obstacles, which hinder their advancement into leadership positions at both local and national decision-making levels. The Bangladeshi government has made sure that female candidates receive a minimum of 25% of the seats at these local levels to ensure substantive representation in local government institutions to raise their voices from the grassroots level. Reports suggest that ongoing prejudice against women has limited the impact of these

positions (Karim et al., 2018; Kabeer, 2017; Sultana et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

The level of female representation in the political and administrative spheres of Bangladesh is significantly increased by the numbers but remains substantially ineffective or it can be categorized as descriptive or formal representation according to the representation theories. In this regard, government policy interventions like the proportional representation system and quota reservations in local and national elections might play a crucial role. However, when discussing the presence of women in high-ranking positions within the central and local governments, it is evident that the process of attaining these positions is still predominantly controlled by men and influenced by patriarchal norms. The symbolic presence of women in high-ranking positions enhances trust and legitimacy in the government, although their substantive representation is not well-received. Barriers such as glass ceiling issues, muscle politics, illegal financial transactions, and weak connections with influential policy actors and interest groups are keeping women behind their counterparts. While family heritage, wealth, influence, and political party affiliation are important factors for the selection of women in higher positions in politics and administration, these factors often restrict them from making courageous decisions as they feel obligated to follow their family's instructions. The policymakers will get some insights from this article on how to increase women in politics and administration to enhance women's engagement in societal activities, strengthen democracy legitimacy, and ensure marginalized people establish inclusive society. Moreover, the policymakers should revise the existing policies and laws, and initiate different initiatives to establish a women-friendly political and administrative environment. This study has some limitations due to time, availability of data, and financial constraints. The inclusion of more key informants in the interview procedure would yield more contribution and rigor in the study findings.

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