

CHAPTER 8

WOMEN IN PURSUIT OF AND REPRESENTATION IN LEGISLATIVE OFFICES IN BANGLADESH: PROBLEMS AS PERCEIVED BY THE POLITICAL WOMEN

In the context of women in Bangladesh politics, one of the remarkable phenomena is the severely limited access of women to the elective offices through contesting and winning elections, which has been documented in detail in Chapter 4. The participation of women and their overall performances in national elections present a discouraging prospect for politically ambitious women in Bangladesh. It contributed, perhaps with other constraining factors, to discounting election competition as a career object by the majority of political women of this study.

The present chapter takes an exploratory look at the problems of women's participation in the electoral process at the national level in Bangladesh. The chapter is organised into two sections. The first section makes an attempt to explore factors conditioning women's desire and effort towards achieving legislative seats through contesting in elections. Specifically, it aims at discovering the causal factors responsible for the restricted supply of female candidates, as well as their electoral disadvantages. The discussion would also be worthwhile in exploring the underlying causes of low political ambition on the part of most political women studied. Section two attempts to find out how political women perceive female representation through reserved seats (RS) in the Parliament of Bangladesh. The views of political women in this respect may bear important implications on evaluating the existing system of RS as there are some controversies around it.

However, the discussion of this chapter only revolves around the problems of women's participation in the national Parliament of Bangladesh. It is expected to

enhance our understanding on the barriers limiting the scope for women in politics. The discussion will also shed some light on the roots of the gender gap and inequality in political status and power. Thus it may help policy makers to uncover an effective strategy to eliminate that inequality.

The discussion of this chapter will be based on the findings derived from the survey, as well as on the comments and view points of the respondents and other available information. While explaining the problems of women's electoral participation and representation in the national Parliament, direct and indirect quotes of the respondents' views will be presented. This helps to make the analysis more informative and also facilitate understanding of the stated problem in realistic situations.

8.1 Problems of Women's Participation in the National Elections

In order to find out the causal factors related to problems that women face in contesting general elections in Bangladesh, this section attempts to discern how the respondents, especially political women, perceive the problem. As the political women of this study are intensively active at national level politics, their perception may carry more weight in identifying the main reasons for the above phenomenon. Moreover, this effort may indicate in what way political women differ from their male counterparts in their perception of the said phenomenon.

The respondents were asked, through an open-ended question to mention the main reasons that they perceive to be responsible for the low candidature of women in the parliamentary elections. They were asked to mention as many reasons as they feel to be warranted. Table 8.1 presents the categories of responses that emerged from the respondents' answers. They are as follows:

1. Lack of eligible women to become candidates.
2. Financial problems in running the election contest.
3. Reluctance of party selection committees to nominate women.
4. Women find the election competition inappropriate.
5. Voters' negative attitude towards female candidates.
6. Lack of time due to family responsibilities.

Besides the formal question, intensive interviews were also conducted to gather the respondents' viewpoints on related matters. The political women were found to be keenly aware of the above mentioned problems. They elaborated their views and commented freely on the relevant matters. However, we will first focus on the findings of the major reasons for the stated problem, as perceived by the respondents. Then each of the factors conditioning women's electoral participation will be explained in greater detail.

TABLE 8.1
REASONS FOR WOMEN'S LESS PURSUIT OF LEGISLATIVE OFFICE THROUGH
CONTESTING ELECTIONS AS PERCEIVED BY RESPONDENTS

Reasons	Male		Female	
	No.	%	No.	%
Lack of eligible women	27	67.5	24	55.8
Financial problems in running the contest	18	45.0	23	53.0
Reluctance of party selection committee to nominate women	9	22.4	20	46.5
Women find the election competition inappropriate	16	40.0	17	39.5
Voters' negative attitude towards female candidates	10	25.0	14	32.5
Lack of time due to family responsibilities	12	30.0	10	23.2

$$\chi^2=4.22, \text{ d.f.}=5, p<0.50$$

Note: 40 males and 43 females for each of the items.

As observed in Table 8.1, the largest percentage of political women (55.8 percent) believed that one of the major reasons for the low participation of women in the national elections is the paucity of eligible women while 53 percent reported that financial problems constrain the realisation of women's desire for electoral participation, 46.5 percent attributed the low rate of female candidature to the discrimination against women by the party's selection committee, and 39.5 percent mentioned that women's own negative perception of election competition restrains their participation. Another 32.5 percent reported that, women do not want to compete because voters show a negative attitude towards female candidates. Finally, a mere 23.2 percent of the political women felt that time constraints resulting from the family responsibilities, compel women to give up the desire to contest.

Based on the above findings, it can be said that a shortage of eligible women and financial constraint are largely responsible for producing a low rate of female candidature. The majority of the political women agreed on both points. The first reason, however, seems to bear a broader implication, as the highest number of political women (24 out of 43) agree on the low eligibility of women for candidature. It implicitly indicates women's disadvantaged status in the political sphere of Bangladesh. Moreover, by mentioning this, a greater number of political women invariably admit their own limitations as female politicians for election competition.

However, three other reasons - discriminating attitude of the male party leaders, women's own negative attitude towards contesting elections and the voters' negative attitude towards women candidates - also appear important, as a considerable proportion of political women mentioned these problems. Based on the social reality of Bangladesh, one may reasonably expect that political women would more frequently indicate family responsibilities as a conditioning factor, because the prevalent normative values strongly enforce the worth of motherhood, the priority of

child-caring and other roles of women in the family. To heighten the problem institutional child-care facilities are extremely scarce in Bangladesh. It is interesting to note that relatively fewer political women consider family responsibilities as a constraining factor in their pursuit of public office. They more often find other factors more important than the often cited situational problems¹ in seeking and winning elections. The reason may be the availability of maid servants or relatives for domestic help in the families of Bangladesh society.

However, as can be observed from Table 8.1, the highest percentage (67.5 percent) of male respondents perceived that the shortage of eligible and interested women is the barrier to a larger candidature of women while 45 percent mentioned financial liability, 40 percent reported that women discount contesting elections as they perceive it as an unfeminine endeavour, and 30 percent perceived family responsibilities as a constraining factor. Finally, 25 percent and 22.4 percent of the male respondents attributed the reasons for the low rate of female candidature to the negative attitude of the voters and the party leaders, respectively.

It is obvious from the findings that, there is an agreement between the largest percentage of political women and male respondents that there exists a dearth of female politicians suitable for contesting elections. Although the second largest percentage of males admit financial liability as one of the causal factors, they are less likely than the political women to mention it. However, almost similar percentages of both groups of respondents find women's traditional outlook restricts the supply of female aspirants for candidacy. Differences are also observed in the magnitude of

¹ It has been discussed in Chapter 2 that many researchers, particularly in the developed Western countries, attribute the reasons for restricted supply of aspiring female politicians for public office to situational problems. It stems from the conflict between women's traditional feminine roles as wives and mothers and their public roles. For references, see Review of the literature in Chapter 2.

percentages of male and political women in mentioning the remaining causes. Male respondents are less likely than the political women to perceive the existence of any kind of discriminating attitude of party leaders and voters in discouraging women's electoral performance. Rather they more often than the political women perceive that family responsibilities may lead women to give up the desire for seeking elective office. According to their views women are handicapped by the lack of time to pursue this endeavour. However, despite some differences between political women and male respondents in their perception of the said problem, according to the computed χ^2 value being 4.22. with 0.50, there is no significant gender difference in the perceived reasons. As such the χ^2 value does not show a significant association between the gender and perception of the problem.

From the perceived reasons, however, it can be said that the female politicians of Bangladesh face difficulties at every step of the way in achieving elective office. They encounter hurdles ranging from getting nominations to getting through elections. Although there may exist some common hurdles for both males and females in passing through the path leading to a candidacy, women face extra barriers resulting from their gender status in the party organisations and in society at large.

The causal factors of women's low participation in the national elections can be discerned from the responses of political women. Since a small number of them perceive family responsibilities as a constraining factor, it is only minimally significant compared to other causal factors. Thus, this factor will not be discussed in length. It would, however, be touched on while analysing the lack of motivation factor. For analytical purposes, the causal factors can be divided into selection and election barriers, and arranged in the following way:

1. Selection Barriers
 - (a) Shortage of eligible and potential women.
 - (b) Discriminating attitude of the selection committee.
 - (c) Lack of motivation.
2. Election Barriers
 - (a) Election expenses and financial constraints.
 - (b) Voters' negative attitude and problems of campaigning.

As stated before, the discussion of the above factors will be mainly based on the comments and viewpoints of the respondents and available information. The aim of this extended discussion is to discover the grounds for the respondents' perceptions and how the perceived factors function to limit women's electoral participation in Bangladesh.

8.2 Selection Barriers

8.2.1 *Shortage of Eligible and Potential Women*

The paucity of female candidates in Bangladesh can be explained by the fact that few women can usually satisfy the eligibility criteria to get through the nomination process. Seligman et al., distinguish three stages in the process of political recruitment - certification, selection and role assignment.² The certification stage entails the informal delimitation of an eligible pool of contenders. It means finding candidates from the appropriate social strata as well as with the proper political credentials.³ Eligibility for certification is in part determined by certain socio-

² L.G. Seligman, M.R. King, C.L. Kim and R.E. Smith, *Patterns of Recruitment* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1974), p.14.

³ Ibid.

economic attributes, such as education, occupation and income.⁴ Although eligibility is also partly determined by political credentials, the social scientists have given more emphasis to the socio-economic factors.

Past studies show that women are less able to satisfy the criteria of political eligibility. Thus only a few of them belong to the eligible pool from which politicians are inordinately chosen for elective public offices.⁵ The reason has been attributed to their lower income, lower educational attainment and occupational status as compared to men in politics. Women are less likely to be involved in those occupations that are viewed as vital to successful politicians, i.e., law, business and other professional jobs.⁶ Women's lack of professional credentials in these fields may depress their availability as candidates.

The question now is, how far this "eligible pool" explanation has merit in explaining the low supply of potential females for contesting elections in Bangladesh. Practical evidence shows that in Bangladesh, like in other societies, certain socio-economic factors, such as education, income and occupation seem to be considered as important criteria for political eligibility. For example, among the Members of Parliament (MP) elected in 1970 and 1973, 63.6 and 70 percent respectively had graduate and postgraduate education,⁷ the corresponding percentages for the MPs of

⁴ Lester G. Seligman, Recruiting Political elites, (New York: General Learning Press, 1971); Kenneth Prewitt, The Recruitment of Political Leaders: A Study of Citizen Politicians, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970); Herbert Jacob, "Initial Recruitment of Elected Officials in the U.S. - A Model", Journal of Politics, 24 (November 1962): 703-716.

⁵ For example, Susan Welch, "Recruitment of Women to Public Office: A Discriminant Analysis", Western Political Science Quarterly, 31 (1978): 372-80; Paula J. Dubeck, "Women and Access to Political Office: A Comparison of Female and Male State Legislators", Sociological Quarterly, 17 (Winter 1976): 42-52.

⁶ Welch, *Ibid.*, p.373.

⁷ Rounaq Jahan, "Members of Parliament in Bangladesh", Legislative Studies Quarterly, 1, 3, (August 1976): 359.

1979⁸ and 1991 Parliaments⁹ were 76 and 84 respectively. Thus it seems that higher education is one of the preferred requirements of eligibility for legislative offices in Bangladesh.

There is no available information on the income level of MPs except for the years 1970 and 1973. It was found that, 49 percent of MPs in 1970 and 68 percent in 1973 belonged to the higher income group.¹⁰ Previous elections, especially the 1991 parliamentary elections evidenced that for major political parties, the sound financial condition of the potential candidates was a great advantage. For example, in the same elections, the businessmen and industrialists constituted 66, 51 and 63 percent of legislators respectively in the BNP, AL and JP.¹¹ They also comprised the second largest group (28 percent) among the legislators of the Jamaat.¹² One recent study reported that many MPs of these groups were newcomers in politics and joined party politics just before the 1991 parliamentary elections.¹³ They might have managed to get nominations on the basis of their socio-economic resources.

In addition, the available evidence indicates that in Bangladesh, certain informal occupational prerequisites exist in candidate selection. Traditionally political leaders and candidates for the legislative body have largely come from legal and other professional occupations and businesses. For example, lawyers dominated the Parliaments of 1954, 1962 and 1965 during the Pakistan era. They constituted the

⁸ Bangladesher Jatiya Sangsad Shodoshader Jiban-Britanta, (Life-Sketches of Members of the Jatiya Sangsad) (in Bengali), Dhaka: March 1981.

⁹ Talukder Maniruzzaman, "The Fall of the Military dictator: 1991 Elections and the Prospect of Civilian Rule in Bangladesh", Pacific Affairs, 65 (Summer 1992): 220.

¹⁰ Jahan, op.cit., p.360.

¹¹ Maniruzzaman, op.cit., p.216.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Nizam U. Ahmed, "Parliamentary Politics in Bangladesh", Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics, 32 (November 1994): 368.

majority of the members of these Parliaments.¹⁴ In 1970, 29.5 percent of the MPs were lawyers and 26.9 percent were businessmen. The corresponding figures for the Parliament of 1973 were 26.5 and 23.7 percent respectively.¹⁵ Almost the same proportion of these two occupational groups belonged to the 1979 Parliament.¹⁶ In the Parliament of 1991, businessmen and industrialists constituted 53 percent and the professional classes constituted 36 percent of the total MPs.¹⁷

What is important to note from the above observation is that, high educational qualifications, sound financial standings and a successful career in business or in professional occupations seem to largely influence nomination for candidature in Bangladesh. It has been documented in Chapter 3 that women in Bangladesh generally lag far behind men in achieving socio-economic standing, such as in education and employment. Moreover, they are socially less oriented in, and discouraged from, pursuing male dominated occupations, i.e., business, law and other professional jobs, which are seen to be compatible with successful political careers.

The lower rate of education and employment of women as well as their lack of opportunities to control economic resources render them socio-economically disadvantaged in Bangladesh society. This may be partly responsible for the lower supply of women to the political sphere who can satisfy the socio-economic criteria

¹⁴ In the 1954 Provincial Assembly of East Pakistan, lawyers constituted 55 percent of the total members. The legislative composition of East Pakistan for Pakistan National Assembly was composed of 50 percent of lawyers in 1955, 42.8 percent in 1962 and 39.5 percent in 1965. Businessmen constituted 29.5 percent in 1965. See Stanley A. Kochanek, *Patron-Client Politics and Business in Bangladesh*, (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1993), pp.218-222. In 1955 and 1962, the representation of businessmen was not substantial. However, it increased gradually over the years. After 1971, the representation of businessmen in the JS has been quite high.

¹⁵ Jahan, op.cit., p. 359.

¹⁶ *Life-Sketches of Members of the Jatiya Sangsad*, op.cit.

¹⁷ Maniruzzaman, op.cit., p.214. It is mentionable here that female legislators have almost no share in the above percentages of lawyers and businessmen. In all previous Parliaments, they were predominantly housewives (see Chapter 5). Only with a very few exception of directly elected, female legislators in all previous Parliaments were nominated for the reserved seats.

of political eligibility in equal terms with men. Another reason, as mentioned earlier, is that women who engage in prestigious occupations may be less willing to enter politics because of the fear of a triple burden. Additionally, women of more affluent families in Bangladesh usually prefer civic and social work for self expression rather than politics, as it is still socially considered to be the least desirable outlet for women. All these factors may contribute to the lower availability of women with desirable socio-economic attributes within the political arena.

It has been found in Chapter 5 that even political women who are part of the national political elites in Bangladesh possess socio-economic resources different from their male counterparts. There are indications in the data that except for family income, political women under study are at a disadvantage vis a vis men in terms of educational attainment and occupational status. Their ambition for legislative offices may be partly conditioned by those disadvantages.

It is observed by certain researchers that differences in employment status can inhibit the development of skills and the acquisition of the prestige required for leadership within party organisations and even within representative bodies.¹⁸ It is suggested that the presumed superiority of males in political matters is largely associated with their occupational achievements.¹⁹ Thus the differences in occupational status may affect the extent of the influence of political elites within the party or even outside the party.

For political women, however, housewifery or a less important occupational status presumably do not provide them with the credibility deemed appropriate for a

¹⁸ M. Kent Jennings and Barbara G. Farah, "Social Roles and Political Resources: An Over-Time Study of Men and Women in Party Elites", *American Journal of Political Science*, 25 (August 1981): 466; M. Kent Jennings and Norman Thomas, "Men and Women in Party Elites: Social Roles and Political Resources", *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 12 (November 1968): 469-492.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

strong political position. It has been found that male politicians of this study more frequently combine their political work with private law practices, business or other self-employed professions (see Chapter 5). These professions may provide them security against risky endeavours such as election contests. Lack of this advantage may impose impediments to a certain extent on women in getting through the certification stage to be included in the eligible pool.

However, apart from socio-economic attributes, proper political credentials are also important for inclusion of one in the eligible pool.²⁰ Respectable and powerful positions in the party hierarchy, wider reputation, familiarity and strong constituency base, etc., may have weighted bearing in this respect. It has been noted in a past study that one of the constraints on women putting themselves forward as candidates is lack of opportunities to establish themselves in the party leadership in Bangladesh.²¹ During the course of discussion and interviews, many respondents, particularly male respondents, also attributed the reason for the shortage of potential female candidates to the lower availability of female political leaders who have political experience, skills and wider acquaintances in the constituency. In addition, the existing examples also show that only a small and in most cases nominal number of women are able to rise to the higher ranks of the party organisations in Bangladesh (see Chapter 4). It may partly explain the often-cited shortage of "qualified women" for legislative selection.

Another reason for this shortage, as stated by political women, is the way female politicians of Bangladesh acquire political experiences which provide less

²⁰ Seligman et al., op.cit.

²¹ Najma Chowdhury, "Women's participation in political process in Bangladesh: Nature and limitations", in Women and Politics in Bangladesh, Lecture Series, (Dhaka: Centre for Women and Development, 1985^a), p.5.

respectable credentials for getting legislative selection. It has been mentioned earlier that female political activists in Bangladesh generally remain confined in the party's women's wings, where they perform organisational work among women and mobilise women's support for party candidates.²² A number of political women stated that although women can develop leadership potential by working within the women's wings, they are accustomed to working particularly among their own community within a protected environment. Thus, the female activists are poorly prepared for the rough-and-tumble of political life. In addition, some emphasised that experience of working only among women inhibits acquisition of skills and the necessary confidence to compete with men in the party organisation as well as for legislative offices. Some of the political women also pointed out that isolation from the main organisation prevents party leaders from getting acquainted with the women's credentials.

Another matter repeatedly mentioned by many political women was that women activists are confined only to the women's wings and therefore, it is usually difficult for them to enter the main party organisation.²³ In practice, it is observed that, leaders of women's wings are assimilated in the party central committees to a very limited extent only. They again mostly perform limited roles as women's affairs secretaries or leaders of the women's wings. The political women emphasised that to a large extent it inhibits their recognition and familiarity within the party and in the wider sphere. Based on these views it can be inferred that women in party

²² Najma Chowdhury, "Women in Politics", paper presented at the seminar and workshop on Women in Politics organised by the Dhaka Business and Professional Women's Club, (Dhaka, January 28-29, 1994), p.9.

²³ During the pre-testing of the survey questionnaire and later on discussions were made by the researcher with some of the leaders of women's branches of the AL, BNP, JP and Jamaat. Except women leaders of the Jamaat, all these women reported the same problem. They also stated that, relegation in the separate branches for a long period, lack of incentives and limited works disheartened the female activists and compel them to be more active in the non-political organisations, i.e., voluntary social work, non-governmental organisations, women's organisations, etc.

organisations have inadequate opportunities to form a pool of female leaders with wider reputations from which female candidates can be drawn.

In the context of the shortage of potential females for contesting elections, a number of the political women point out another important fact. They feel that although there are many veteran female politicians active in the women's wings of the different parties, they are not considered as potential candidates for the general seats of Parliament. This is because the women's wings do not function as a "spring board" for contesting elections. It is to be noted here that out of eleven women of the present female sample who have ever contested for general seats of the Parliament, none was holding any position in the women's wings, or acting as the women's affairs secretary during their nomination. Their relatively stronger position in the main party organisations might have provided the credentials for getting nominations. Based on the above observations, however, it can be argued that women's very limited opportunities for upward mobility in the party hierarchy and restricted chances to prove their abilities have been largely responsible for the small supply of prospective female candidates for legislative selection in Bangladesh.

8.2.2 Discriminating Attitude of the Selection Committee

According to political women's perceptions, the discriminating attitude of the party selection committee is one of the major factors that prevents women from being nominated for contesting elections. The researcher is unable to present any firm evidence to justify the validity of this fact, partly because of the difficulty of collecting reliable information from the party sources. Moreover, no research has been carried out in the candidate nomination process in Bangladesh.²⁴ There are considerable past

²⁴ Usually the parliamentary board of the respective party is empowered to nominate party candidates for elections to Parliament.

studies conducted elsewhere indicating the discouraging role of party leaders in making women's race to elective offices difficult.²⁵ In the present study, 46.5 percent of the political women reported that the inhibiting role of party selection committees discourages female party activists from becoming aspirants. Their assertion may carry some weight as they presumably mention it from their own experiences.

However, when asked to specify the reasons for discrimination against women by the party selection committee, they have expressed the following common views. Some mentioned that, party leaders in the selection committees may have refused to nominate women because of their own prejudices against women's candidacy. The most repeatedly expressed view was, the competition among male leaders for getting nomination is always so keen that women hardly come under consideration. Thus, nominating a woman would virtually deprive a man's opportunity. Some political women assert that because of their leading positions within the party, male politicians have the advantage to manipulate the members of the parliamentary board to reserve nominations for themselves. In this context one of the political women reported that,

"Female party leaders can hardly be members of the parliamentary board, so naturally, they do not have any significant degree of influence in determining the course of nominations."

It has been shown by the data that male respondents are far less likely than political women to agree with the fact of discrimination. Some of the male respondents had past experiences as members of the parliamentary board of their respective parties. They denied any sort of discrimination in selecting party nominees. Rather they stressed that the number of women seeking nomination have always been

²⁵ See for examples, Vicky Randall, *Women and Politics*, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), pp.92-98; Wilma Rule, "Why Women Don't Run: The Crucial Contextual Factors in Women's Legislative Recruitment," *Western Political Quarterly*, 34 (1981): 68-69; Susan Welch and Donley T. Studlar, "The Effects of Candidate Gender on Voting for Local Office in England", *British Journal of Political Science*, 18 (1988): 273-286.

very small.²⁶ They further assert that women are chosen for candidature in about the same proportion as they seek seats and there is no discernible bias against women aspirants among party selectors.

Overall, most of the male politicians were of the opinion that the shortage of qualified women to stand for election is so acute that it is not possible for any party to put up female candidates in any significant number. One of the male respondents' view seems to be relevant here,

"The selection committee seeks candidates who are "fighters" with a firm base in the constituency, which can hardly be found among the female politicians."

Opinions of both political women and male respondents may have some real basis, but it can be argued that there may be some other considerations that lead the selection committee not to nominate women. First, women may be less able to push their claim to the selection committee, and secondly, women may be viewed as less electable than men.

The selection criteria of candidates may vary from party to party in Bangladesh. From the characteristics of candidates of the past elections, however, it can be assumed that educational and occupational achievements, seniority in a party, a firm base in the constituency and previous incumbency, etc., are arguably the preferred selection criteria in most parties. It has been discussed earlier that female political activists may less often satisfy the eligibility criteria which militate their claim.

²⁶ To cross check this statement, party offices were contacted to get the list of female nomination seekers in the previous elections, but no record was available.

Moreover, a support base in organisations other than political parties can be an important asset for a potential candidate. But the fact is, women of Bangladesh have less membership in business and professional organisations and they do not comprise the leadership of trade unions, chambers of commerce, etc., because of their backward economic status. All these organisational leaderships often effectively influence one's chances of seeking nomination. Women political leaders may be members or leaders of women's organisations but it is mentioned earlier that women's organisations in Bangladesh generally maintain a distance from politics and thus from the political parties. Therefore, they have almost no influence on the selection committees of different parties. As such, they cannot manipulate party selectors in favour of women's candidature.

In addition, the electoral system of the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) of Bangladesh is the single member territorial constituency (SMTC). This system tends to lead to a focus on the appeal of the individual candidate for the electorate. The factor of vote polling power may play an important part in the selection of candidates. Considering various limitations party selectors may rate the winning chances of women candidates lower than those of men. Thus women may come under less consideration for nomination.

8.2.3 *Lack of Motivation*

According to data analysed earlier (see Table 8.1), almost the same proportion (40 percent) of political women and men consider women's own negative perceptions towards election contests may be one of the primary reasons for their paucity in electoral participation. When they were asked in this regard, the researcher was given the impression that female activists hold such attitudes from their internalised normative values regarding women's ideal roles and behaviour. Besides that, it may

have also stemmed from the observed constraints involved with contesting elections.

One political woman's statement seems relevant here,

"Female activists mostly avoid competitive strategy because of the fear of social disapproval. It is not desirable for a Bengali woman to be involved in conflicts of interest or personal gain. Thus they are less willing to take positions of conflict or competition with men for personal gain which may virtually distort their reputations."

In Bangladesh, like elsewhere, the nature of electoral politics is contentious. It can be pictured as a battle, a fiercely competitive game that puts weight on aggressiveness and dominance. For men, such attributes may be considered desirable characteristics for a successful political career, but for women these behaviours may not be approved of by the societal norms and values. As such these are not consistent with the socially desired ideal and submissive behaviours of the women of Bangladesh. In this connection, one female politician of Bangladesh writes that,

"The sobriety combined with the softness of attitude makes women backward in political careers."²⁷

Some of the political women of this study alleged that most of their male colleagues hold a conservative attitude towards their female counterparts. They used to criticise those female colleagues who show dominance and aggressiveness in their behaviour. These political women further added that as women they find problems in taking more active stances in politics. For advancement one needs to be taken seriously by the party leaders. For that one must demonstrate expertise, political know-how and an ability to function in the rough and tumble of politics. But women find it difficult to work in the same manner as men, as it could bring forth negative

²⁷ Farida Rahman, "Women in Politics", paper presented at the seminar and workshop on Women in Politics organised by the Dhaka Business and Professional Women's Club, (Dhaka, January 28-29, 1994), p.5.

evaluations of their reputations. Thus female politicians have to be aware of all these negativities. As such, they may perceive that the pursuit of power through competition with men is out of range of their expected behaviour.

Political women, particularly those who mention family responsibilities as one of the constraining factors, reported that, election contests demand a large amounts of time. Moreover, the candidate has to spend most of the time in the constituency for the purpose of campaigning. It may hamper one's family life. To avoid such situations a woman may give up her desire for candidature.

8.3 Election Barriers

The discussion turns here to a delineation of the factors constraining the final step of the pathway to elective office - the election. The factors which are discussed below, not only hinder one's electivity but may also play a role in lowering the intention of others to seek elective offices. Thus the election barriers also may be responsible for yielding paucity of female aspirants for legislative competition.

8.3.1 *Election Expenses and Financial Constraints*

It has been observed that a majority of the political women perceive that financial barriers block women's candidature and their electoral success. Election campaigning in Bangladesh, as elsewhere, is a very expensive task. One estimate placed the total cost of the election at Tk 3.4 million (about Tk 500,000 to 600,000) per candidate in the 1991 general elections.²⁸ Most of the political women stated that considering the huge amount of money involved with contesting elections, they cannot

²⁸ Kochanek, op.cit., p.227.

even think of becoming a candidate. Others mention that, even if a woman contests an election, her winning chances are constrained by the lack of campaign funds as well as other factors.

Although financial drawbacks could affect the candidature of both sexes, political women emphasise that raising money for campaigning poses an especially more difficult challenge for the female candidates than for the male candidates. It is relevant to mention here that, money for elections in Bangladesh comes from a variety of sources. First, each candidate must secure some support on his own. A candidate who is well-off financially is expected to pay for his own election - expenses.²⁹ A second source of funds comes from relatives, friends, supporters and local businessmen. A third source of funds for candidates comes from the party.³⁰

From the opinions of the political women, it seems that women politicians are less able to mobilise campaign funds from any of the above sources. Most political women express the view that women seldom enjoy financial independence to an extent that would enable them to finance campaign expenses by themselves. Even if women belong to wealthy families, they are rarely permitted to use family wealth for political purposes. It is also pointed out by the social scientists that traditionally women of Bangladesh do not control financial means or family resources.³¹ They are again deprived of independent earnings because of their low rate of employment. Thus, many of the political women assert that women contestants have to rely on their husbands for finance. It is quite likely that men encounter less problems, since they control the family wealth.

²⁹ Ibid., p.228.

³⁰ Ibid, pp.228-29.

³¹ Rafiqul H. Chaudhury and Nilufer R. Ahmed, Female Status in Bangladesh, (Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, 1980) p.8.

Moreover, men may gain easier access to the other sources of campaign funds. Certain political analysts noted that presently the political culture of Bangladesh is dominated by the values of patron-client politics.³² Businessmen, business houses, and traders have become an increasingly important source of electoral funds to the parties. They secure state patronages and special privileges that enable them to make economic fortunes. In return for these benefits they contribute generously to their patrons, ruling party.³³ They again largely contribute to the campaign funds of the other major parties to ensure future gains. However, it can be assumed that in the male-dominated election politics, men are the exclusive beneficiaries of this patron-client sponsorship. Not only are they backed by the parties, they are also able to raise campaign funds on their own through donation drives and various other means. Fund raising capability comes from the basis of manifest political support resting in political parties and constituency areas. Women political activists, by and large, have not been central actors in such processes because of their lack of political strength.³⁴

Moreover, in a conservative society like Bangladesh, women may face great difficulties in accessing the male dominated financial network and support mechanism. While mentioning this problem, a number of political women said that they neither have the contact with the top financial resources, nor can they enter the patron client network responsible for huge campaign donation. One of the political women under study delineated this problem as follows:

“Fund raising not only depends on the name of the party, but also on the candidate’s own effort and capability. What male politicians can easily do, women can not. It is almost

³² Kochanek, *op.cit.*, pp.228-29.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp.228-29; Rehman Sobhan, *Bangladesh - Problems of Governance*, (New Delhi: Centre for Policy Research, 1993), p.36.

³⁴ Chowdhury, 1994, *op.cit.*, p.13.

impossible in our society for a woman to drive for donation or subscription from the businessmen and other financial sources. These activities may give her a bad reputation. Moreover, if she is able to manage funds from the sponsors but unable to win then the huge money raised through donation drives and subscription will become liabilities. Again, if she is able to win the election, it would not be easy for her to fulfil the expectations of the sponsors. Viewing this problem, family members usually disapprove of a woman being a contestant."

Another one of the political women mentions that,

"Women party activists are far less likely to be involved with the party's fund raising activities. So they are less acquainted with the fund raising techniques known to be effective. Thus women can not boldly claim their candidature as they are not confident fund raisers."

Some of the political women who were unsuccessful in the past elections, asserted that without sufficient money to run credible campaigns, nobody will find it easy to win. On this point these women expressed frank opinions. At least two political women attributed their failure in past elections to lack of adequate funds. One of them was a well-known politician and a member of the previous legislature. In addition, two of the political women reported that considering the financial constraints, they were forced to withdraw their nominations for the general elections of 1991. One quite familiar female politician who had unsuccessfully contested in the same elections, expressed this problem in these words:

".....money is a big factor in elections. Since women are not solvent they are more susceptible to losing the election. Women cannot raise funds by coercion, nor can they threaten the opponents. Therefore, they are prone to losing the election irrespective of whether they are capable or not. Although these are not relevant for leaders like Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina, yet for the general women these are important things that come under scrutiny."³⁵

³⁵ Rahman, op.cit., p.5.

It appears from the above discussion that the campaign fund-raising is a major problem for women seeking elective offices. It may discourage parties from nominating women as candidates and also restrain women from pursuing candidacies.

However, although the second largest percentage (45 percent) of male politicians perceive financial constraints as one of the major hurdles, the rest did not find it crucial. Rather they emphasised that a weak constituency base and inadequate party involvement are responsible for the lower rate of electoral success of women. Against the view of financial hindrances, some male politicians from the major parties again put more emphasis on the shortage of qualified females. They claim that, financial constraint does not inhibit any woman from candidacy. If one has a strong political base and familiarity, she will be backed by the party. This view seems somewhat contradictory, when a researcher comments on the parliamentary elections of 1991 in the following way:

“High expenditure involved in effective election campaigning discouraged many formidable aspirants of low financial ability to contest the parliamentary elections. Consequently, economically affluent people got an upperhand in the nomination process of the major parties.”³⁶

If this is the situation, then the political women's assertion that the selection committee is less likely to select women due to lack of economic resources bears some truth.

8.3.2 *Voters' Negative Attitude and Problems of Campaigning*

From the political women's perceptions, the negative attitude of voters towards female candidates appears as one of the impediments of winning elective offices by

³⁶ Muhammad A. Hakim, *Bangladesh Politics: The Shahabuddin Interregnum*, (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1993), pp.47-48.

women in Bangladesh. In the absence of existing empirical works, the percentages of votes polled by female candidates in the past elections may lend some support to this proposition. In the successive elections women candidates polled proportionately fewer votes than men in their respective constituencies. For example, an overwhelming proportion of them performed poorly in the polls of 1979. Out of 17 female candidates, 7 women polled below 1 percent of total votes, 4 women polled between 1 to 5 percent.³⁷ Among these women at least 7 were well-known politicians with a fairly long record of political participation, and some also had belonged to the previous legislatures. Similarly in the parliamentary elections of 1986, 3 women candidates out of a total of 17, polled below 1 percent and another 3 between 1 to 2 percent, and 5 between 17 to 39 percent of votes in their constituencies.³⁸ This information supports the fact that female candidates could create less "credibility" amongst voters in these elections.

However, the votes received by women in the following elections may indicate that they are now slowly able to create political credibility as candidates. In the 1991 elections, women polled about a third of the valid votes cast in 16 constituencies out of 300. In five constituencies, they registered more than fifty percent electoral support.³⁹ In a few other constituencies women candidates lost only by narrow margins.

³⁷ Najma Chowdhury, "Women in Politics in Bangladesh", in Situation of Women in Bangladesh, (Ministry of Social Welfare and Women's Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, May 1985^b), p.257.

³⁸ Calculated by the researcher on the basis of data obtained from, Report on Parliamentary Elections, 1986, (Bangladesh Election Commission, 1988). In the elections of 1973, no women contested for general seats. Information was not available on the elections of 1988.

³⁹ Chowdhury, 1994, op.cit., p.8.

In a study, Chowdhury mentioned that prevalent sex-role stereo-typing may affect voting behaviour discriminating against women politicians in Bangladesh.⁴⁰ From the discussion with the political women, it seemed to the researcher that, voters may discriminately vote for female candidates out of two considerations - social prejudices against women's participation in a male dominated sphere such as politics and the perception that women candidates are less capable when compared to men, in holding public office.

The conventions of segregated roles of males and females and the range of controls to exclude women from the public sphere can be considered as formidable obstacles in the path of gaining success by female contestants in Bangladesh. Public resistance towards those few female candidates who had run in the general elections was found to be fairly strong.⁴¹

Eleven political women of the present study, who had past experiences in contesting general elections, emphasised the problem of having access and motivating male voters, who regard a woman in election politics as someone who aspires above her proper status and goals. It has been noted earlier in Chapter 3, in Bangladesh society, there are certain restrictive norms and values for women regarding mobility and interactions with men. Some political women stressed that social restrictions tend

⁴⁰ Chowdhury, 1985^b, op. cit., pp.257-258.

⁴¹ For example, Razia Faiz, a veteran politician, active since 1961 and elected to the Parliament in 1979, describes her experiences during the election campaign (in rural areas) in these words: "The local people reacted strongly to the idea of a woman candidate, saying it was against Islam. They took away the microphone being used by the canvassers, stoning and abusing them in the process. Public opinion had to be built painfully and slowly. Another day.....while I was waiting to begin a meeting, no one would come forward to recite the holy Quoran, as is the usual practice for beginning any public gathering. The reason — a woman was going to address the meeting and therefore it was against religion. I took a bold step and announced over the microphone that if none came forward in 5 to 10 minutes, I would assume there were no Muslims in that area and I would recite verses from the Quoran myself.....After a few minutes, an old man came forward and performed the task, but he insisted that he was doing it because he did not want a woman to prove herself superior to the males present.....Many such incidents were encountered during the campaign period". Razia Faiz, "Experiences of a woman Politician", in Women and Politics in Bangladesh, Lecture series, (Dhaka: Center for Women and Development, 1985), pp.15-16.

to limit women's range of interactions with party workers, who are largely men and instrumental in campaign work. It also affects the canvassing capability of women candidates in reaching voters across the constituency. Moreover, because of social resistance, women candidates may not get adequate supports from their families and social networks in their campaigns.

In addition, the said political women also mention that the contentious election campaigns, particularly the personal attacks by the opponents, prevent potential females from contesting the elections. The reason is women are more fearful of appearing disreputable through the opponent's publicity. Thus, the political women were of the opinion that, if dignity and decorum are maintained in the deliberations of the electoral meetings and speeches, more women are likely to be attracted to electoral politics.

However, it has been mentioned that the voters may doubt the women's abilities to run for public offices. One political woman stated from her experience during election campaigning in 1991 that rural people directly questioned her ability to perform constituency work. She was even asked why she was not accompanied by her husband or family members. Furthermore, she reported that opponent male candidates also highlighted the limitations of a woman legislator to the public. They tried to convince the public that women are less able to fulfil the people's demands and to bring enough allocation from the government for the constituency, etc. Thus the said political woman emphasises that this type of propaganda increases the voters' reluctance to back female candidates for important public offices. It is noteworthy in this context that, women who have succeeded in Bangladesh politics and occupied strategic positions had to prove that they possessed political strength not less than male politicians. Incumbent female politicians such as Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina, Motia Chowdhury, Shajeda Chowdhury, and Razia Faiz, etc., are the best examples

to be mentioned in this context.

However, we have also sought the male politician's views about the campaign liabilities of female candidates. It was found that they mostly attribute the reason for women's lower campaign ability to their own limitations, such as insufficient strength and stamina, lack of time due to family responsibilities, general lack of public visibility and lack of confidence in handling election campaigns, etc.

8.4 Women's Representation Through Reserved Seats in the National Parliament of Bangladesh: Attitude of Political Women

Now we will analyse the respondents' perceptions towards the system of reserved seats for women in the national Parliament of Bangladesh. Before looking at the survey findings, it is necessary to present the background information that led the researcher to enquire the respondents' view regarding this system.

As it was mentioned earlier, in the national Parliament of Bangladesh 30 seats are constitutionally reserved for women in addition to the 300 generally contested seats. The provision for special "reserved seats" for women was intended to be transitory till women gained the necessary political strength to be elected in sufficient numbers through direct election to occupy the general seats. Originally the Constitution of Bangladesh which came into effect on 16 December 1972, provided for the reservation of fifteen seats for women for ten years, within which time it was presumed that women would be adequately equipped to contest in the open parliamentary general elections. But, as discussed before, subsequently the number of reserved seats (RS) for women has been increased to 30, and the period of "reservation" has also been extended to 15 years. Finally, the Tenth Amendment of the Constitution enacted in June 1990 restores the provision of "reservation" of seats for women in the Parliament and provides for 30 reserved seats for 10 more years

from the commencement of the next Parliament.⁴²

It should be pointed out again that according to the constitutional law women in Bangladesh enjoy the right of 'dual' representation in the JS. The reservation provision does not prohibit them from contesting for the general seats. They enjoy the right to stand for general seats and further enjoy the safeguard of representation under the reservation provision.

The reality of the political inadequacy of women in the social milieu of Bangladesh prompted the Constitution - framers to make the reservation provision to guarantee women's representation for a fixed number of seats. It has been shown in Chapter 4 that over the past elections only a few women could show political strength to be elected in general seats of the JS. Thus it can be said that the reservation provision could ensure some representation of women in the JS. Despite that, the system is increasingly criticised by the political analysts and observers,⁴³ women's organisations and political activists. They point out the drawbacks of this reservation approach and particularly criticise the nomination process and the electoral method of candidates for the RS. Their arguments revolve around certain points, which are discussed below:

First, as mentioned earlier, according to the constitutional provision, the RS is to be elected by the sitting members of the JS who are directly elected from the single-member territorial constituencies. The critics point out that this electoral system undermines women's representation. Previous elections confirm that only the party

⁴² See The Bangladesh Gazette Extraordinary, (June 23, 1990).

⁴³ See Rehman Sobhan, Planning and Public Action for Asian Women, (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1992), p.66, Chowdhury, 1985^a, 1985^b and 1994, op.cit.

obtaining majority seats in the JS and having the prospect to form the government is able to fill these seats with their nominees. The election procedure virtually precludes women politicians from opposition parties, from seeking the RS. Thus, in all previous Parliaments, women candidates for the RS were elected uncontested and represented only by the majority party of the Parliament. Only in the JS elected in 1991, did two women from one of the opposition parties of the Parliament - Jamaat-i-Islami - win RS uncontested with 28 women candidates from the BNP. These two seats were obtained by Jamaat through a political deal with the government bench.⁴⁴ Except for the 1991 JS, previously none of the women from parties other than the ruling party could enter the JS through RS.

Hence it is observed that because of the electoral procedure of the RS there is great likelihood that the JS will be unrepresented or underrepresented by women from opposition parties, unless of course they are able to win the general seats. In the case of general seats, however, women have little hope of being selected and getting through elections. It is noteworthy that opposition parties had no female representation in the JS of 1973 and 1988. Only one woman was elected to the general seat and represented the opposition parties in each of the JS of 1979 and 1986. However, for the first time four directly elected women sat in the opposition bench in the 1991 JS. All of them were members of the AL - the main opposition party in the respective Parliament. Thus, from the observation of previous Parliaments, the critics argued that the present system of RS cannot be effective in providing a set of female legislators from different parties. Observing this in the 1979 JS elections, the Election Commission also stated that,

"A system should be evolved for holding election to the reserved seats in such a manner as will provide equal

⁴⁴ See, Craig Baxter, "Bangladesh in 1991 - A Parliamentary System", *Asian Survey*, 32 (February 1992): 164.

opportunity to all women candidates irrespective of their party affiliations.”⁴⁵

Despite this realisation no attempt has yet been taken by the Election Commission with this regard.

Secondly, it is argued by the critics that the election procedure results in the diminution of the political significance of the RS.⁴⁶ It was observed over the past elections that once nomination for RS is obtained, election is virtually secured. Thus the nomination process often results in a kind of ‘patron-client’ relationship between the local and national party elite groups and the female aspirants.⁴⁷ The patronage of local and national leaders seemed to be more crucial factors than the candidates’ own credibilities. As a result the patronage of the local and national party leaders for nomination often falls within the immediate clientele of the local or national power structure including their immediate relations.

Thirdly, because of the limitations accompanied by the electoral procedure, women in the reserved seats have no popular base and are denied an equal status with those who have been directly elected by the voters. This is because, although women in the RS theoretically enjoy the same rights and privileges as elected members in general seats, they are considered by the directly elected members as “nominated” and not elected members. Hence, with a few exceptions, women in RS are less able to function as equals of their male colleagues.⁴⁸ Moreover, their process of entry

⁴⁵ Report on Parliamentary Elections, 1979, Bangladesh Election Commission, p.iii, cited in Chowdhury, 1985^a, op.cit., p.7.

⁴⁶ See, Commission Report of Status of Women in Bangladesh, (Dhaka: Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, June 1992), p.11; Report of the Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategy for the 1990s, 2 (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1991), p.434; Sobhan, 1992, op.cit., p.66.

⁴⁷ Chowdhury, 1985^b, op.cit., p.259.

⁴⁸ For details, Ibid., pp.258-259; Sobhan, 1992, op.cit., p.71.

(nomination and election by party leaders rather than voters) also compels them to play a passive role in the Parliament. Therefore, the reserved seats insufficiently empowered the women members who remained self-conscious about their nominated status and could thus exercise little autonomy in promoting agendas.

Thus, women who hold RS in the Parliament are seemingly subjected to the limitations inherent in a system of indirect election. There is the realisation that on the one hand, under the existing system of election to the RS, women from other than the majority party would not be represented and on the other hand, awareness of the women's less effective roles as representatives, leads many to think about the direct election of the RS. Even in 1972 (when the reservation provision was introduced) women's organisations argued strongly for franchise in stipulated constituencies.⁴⁹

Many activists of the women's organisations in Bangladesh feel that the perpetuation of an indirect system of election since 1972 is far out of date and needs to be revised in the interests of democratisation. They assume that direct elections to the RS would create a greater popular base for women members which in turn would increase the effectiveness of their roles as Members of Parliament, especially in voicing women's issues.⁵⁰ Thus women's organisations are demanding a review of the system of indirect elections for women, to make their participation meaningful both for the women elected to office as well as to the voters. For example, one of the major demands of the 17-Point programmes of the 'Oikkya Baddho Nari Somaj (United Women Community) - an alliance of 17 women's organisations of the country

⁴⁹ The Daily Star, (Dhaka: March 3, 1994).

⁵⁰ Interview with Ivy Rahman, Vice-president of Bangladesh Mohila Somity (Women's Association), December 20, 1993, Dhaka; Aysha Khanam, General Secretary of Bangladesh Mohila Parishad (Women's Council), interviewed on January 22 and 23, 1994, Dhaka.

- was direct election to the reserved seats.⁵¹ The 17-Point programme has been submitted to all the parties in 1989 and in 1990.⁵² The 'Bangladesh Mohila Parishad' - the largest women's organisation in the country - also demands the same amendment.⁵³ Even the 'Task Force' employed by the interim government of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, on the development strategies for Bangladesh in 1990, has suggested direct elections to the RS.⁵⁴

8.4.1 *Attitude Towards Reserved Seats in the Parliament*

On account of the controversies stated above the researcher attempted to seek the respondents' view on the reservation provision. They were asked whether they consider the present system of reserved seats for women in the JS to be reasonable or not. They were told to use as many arguments as they wanted with their responses. They were further asked whether they wanted any kind of amendment to the present system. If they did they were requested to specify the kind of amendments. Since among female respondents many were leaders of the major and minor parties, many held RS in the JS and some were also directly elected from the SMTC, a real assessment of the system was expected from them.

Similarly, the male respondents' view in this regard can also be valuable, as many of them are the electorate of the RS as well as the policy makers of their respective parties. Some are even the leaders of the minor parties. Thus, the views of both groups of respondents may provide some important insight into the present

⁵¹ "Sotero Dofa Kormochuchi" (17-Point Programme), Oikya Baddho Nari Somaj, Dhaka. No date of publication.

⁵² The Daily Star, op.cit.

⁵³ Ghoshonapatra O Ghottonantra (Declaration and Constitution) (in Bengali), Bangladesh Mohila Parishad ((Women's Council) (Dhaka: 1994).

⁵⁴ Report of the Task Forces, op.cit., pp.438-39.

system. Moreover, their assessment may provide some important clue to finding appropriate measures for women's representation in the elective bodies.

The responses of respondents regarding the above questions, are summarised in Tables 8.2 and 8.3. It can be observed that 72.1 percent of the political women consider the existing system of the RS as reasonable and they want the system to be continued without any modification. Only 27.9 percent of the political women think of the present system as not reasonable. Of these, 11.6 percent are of the opinion that the present system should be abolished and 16.3 percent think that the RS should be elected by the direct vote of the people or female voters, as shown in Table 8.3. It is noteworthy that only 4.7 percent of the latter suggest it should be directly elected by the female voters and 11.6 percent suggest direct election of the RS by voters of both sexes. Thus it appears that, the majority of the political women are against the breaking of the status quo. The rest are diverse in their opinions as some of them want total abolition of the system and some support the RS, but would like the present system to be replaced by a modified election system of the RS.

TABLE 8.2
OPINIONS OF RESPONDENTS REGARDING THE RESERVED SEATS FOR
WOMEN IN THE NATIONAL PARLIAMENT OF BANGLADESH

Opinion	Male (N=40)		Female (N=43)		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Reasonable	22	55.0	31	72.1	53	63.9
Not reasonable	18	45.0	12	27.9	30	36.1
Total	40	100.0	43	100.0	83	100.0

TABLE 8.3
SUGGESTIONS OF RESPONDENTS ABOUT THE PRESENT SYSTEM OF RESERVED SEATS
FOR WOMEN IN THE NATIONAL PARLIAMENT OF BANGLADESH

Suggestions	Male (N=40)		Female (N=43)		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Should be continued as it is now	22	55.0	31	72.1	53	63.9
Should be abolished	14	35.0	5	11.6	19	22.9
Should be directly elected by the people or female voters ^a	4	10.0	7	16.3	11	13.2
Total	40	100.0	43	100.0	83	100.0

$$\chi^2=6.51, \text{ d.f.}=2, p<0.05$$

Note: a. Two male respondents (5 percent) and 5 female respondents (11.6 percent) suggested election by the people. Whereas 2 male respondents (5 percent) and 2 female respondents (4.7 percent) suggested election by the female voters.

Of the male respondents, the majority (55 percent) support the present system while 45 percent do not consider the present system reasonable (see Table 8.2). Among the latter, the largest percentage (35 percent) suggest total abolition of the system. Only 10 percent suggest the RS should be directly elected by the people or female voters, of which 5 percent suggest direct election to the RS by the female voters and the other 5 percent suggest direct election by the people (see Table 8.3).

It is obvious from the data that, although the majority of the male respondents appear as supporters of the present system, they constitute a bare majority since a large percentage of them are to be found against the present system. It is interesting to find that male respondents are more likely than political women to speak against the present system and propose its abolition. Compared to male respondents a substantially larger percentage of political women are found to be in favour of the present system. However, Table 8.3 shows that the computed χ^2 value is 6.51 significant at 0.05 level of significance. Thus, this is to say that there is a significant association between the sex of the respondents and their views regarding the present

system of RS. This implies that there is a significant difference between political women and male respondents in their opinions.

Since the respondents were provided with the open-ended questions, they took the opportunity to give further views and interpretations. Moreover, intensive discussion had been made with them in this respect. The researcher found that, most of the political women as well as male respondents who support the present system express ambiguous views, as they are aware of the limitations associated with the present system and are dissatisfied with it. Still they advocate for it on practical grounds. Political women repeatedly mention that, because of the weighty practical considerations, they have accepted the present system. They were of the opinion that the present system could at least make women visible in the Parliament.

All the women legislators of this study, who entered the JS through the RS in 1991, with few exceptions, more or less agreed with the fact that the electoral method has to some extent undermined their representative status. Still they prefer the system primarily due to financial reasons that greatly inhibit women from participating in the direct elections. They also emphasised the other drawbacks which we have already discussed in the first section of this chapter.

Two veteran female politicians of the present sample, who were directly elected to the general seats from the SMTTC in 1991, expressed their views supporting the present system. They find that most of the female political activists are not competent for direct competition. Two female legislators, who occupied the RS in the 1991 JS, prefer the present system of RS as they consider direct competition with men to be anti-religious and unfeminine. However, some political women argued that since the reservation provision does not deter women from contesting in direct elections for general seats, there is no reason to abolish it.

The above political women who supported the RS, were asked their views about direct election to the RS. They strongly assert that it would not be a realistic or ideal solution. They have placed some arguments in favour of their opinion. Firstly, most of them argued that direct election may not be accepted since there exists enormous problems in handling election campaigns and mobilising voters. Their arguments further state that women are so disadvantaged in our society that, they are less able to handle massive campaigns across the constituency. They find that, even if the electorate constitutes the female voters only, most women candidates would be unable to mobilise them especially because of their financial dependence.

Secondly, the said political women feel that, the shortage of female political leaders is so acute that it is almost impossible for most of the parties to name even thirty qualified female candidates for thirty RS. Finally, some argued against the view of female electorate of the RS, and stated that the concept of limited franchise is not acceptable in the days of mass politics.

Now we analyse the views of those respondents who did not consider the present system of RS as reasonable. It was observed in Table 8.3 that these respondents were diverse in their opinions. Some of the political women suggested its complete abolition. Although compared to them more male politicians suggested that, both groups of these respondents used almost the same arguments to support their opinions. So, their opinions can be grouped together for the purpose of analysis.

Firstly, they consider the present electoral procedure of RS as undemocratic and the system works against the development of women's political strengths and potentials. They find that the reservation provision reduces women's competitive zeal, risk taking propensity and willingness to pursue strong relationship with the constituency - which are the essential attributes of a potential candidate. In this context

one political woman's statement can be quoted here,

"The longer the women enjoy the provision of reservation the slower will be their progress towards becoming a political force, to be competent for competition with men in the election battle."

Secondly, these respondents find that the RS acts as a 'vote bank' for the ruling party as it practically shuts out chances for women from other parties. Another argument placed by these respondents is that the provision of RS inhibits the parties, particularly major parties from putting up women candidates for the general seats. From practical evidence, this opinion seems realistic. For example, the AL in the parliamentary elections of 1973 and the BNP in 1979 put up only male candidates for the general seats.⁵⁵ Both the parties were confident of winning majorities in the respective elections and expected to accommodate their leading female members in the RS. Even when several women of both parties had expressed interest for nomination in general seats, it was ignored by the party leadership who assured them that they would consider their candidature at the time of nomination for reserved seats.⁵⁶

However, it has been observed in Table 8.3 that 16.3 percent of 43 political women and 10 percent of 40 male politicians accept the reservation provision on practical grounds but they assert that the present electoral procedure of the RS should be replaced by direct elections either by both sexes or only by the female voters. These respondents all belong to the parties other than the BNP and the AL. Since the present system is not open to all women irrespective of party affiliation, they think that the modified system may broaden the opportunity to women of all political parties. However, political women who support the direct election of RS by the male

⁵⁵ The AL was in power at the time of 1973 parliamentary elections. The BNP had been formed prior to the 1979 parliamentary elections with the backing of the military government of Ziaur Rahman.

⁵⁶ See footnote 10 in Chowdhury, 1985^b, op.cit., p.275 also p.255.

and female voters advance some arguments. First, all parties may be willing to place women on the ballot when the RS opens to all. Second, voters would be more cooperative in electing women when they have two votes and can also vote for men. Finally, in the absence of competition with men, more women would be interested in putting themselves forward as candidates. Further, election costs could also be reduced.

As shown in Table 8.3, the smallest number of political women and male politicians advocate the direct election of RS by the female electorate. They consider it a transitory arrangement to train women for future candidacy for general seats. They argued that through this practice women would be more able to develop extensive political connections with and familiarity in the constituency. Moreover, through mobilising female electorates and handling election campaigns among them, female activists will gain more experience in election politics. In addition, they find that this measure would be conducive in generating political enthusiasm and awareness among general women and would work to reduce social conservatism against female candidacy.

Overall, it appears from the above discussion that all of the respondents under study are aware of the limitations of the present system of RS. Still, it is widely preferred by the women who are active at national level politics. Despite the increasing demand for direct election to the RS, a relatively small proportion of political women show a supportive attitude towards that.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the underlying reasons for women's underrepresentation in the general seats of the national Parliament of Bangladesh. Moreover, as there exists some controversies about the reservation provision for

women's representation in the Parliament, an attempt has been made to assess the respondents' views in this respect.

From the reasons perceived by the political women, it seems that women who seek elective office confront special hurdles at every step in that process. Factors ranging from getting nomination for candidacy, to the election itself, have been reported as barriers.

However, the data show that the majority of the political women consider shortage of eligible women for contesting elections and the lack of financial support, inhibit women's greater quest for legislative office. The following observation of political women perceives that, women's own negative attitude towards the pursuit of political offices through competition with men, and discrimination against women by both the party selection committee and the voters account for this phenomenon. The lowest percentage of political women have referred to family responsibilities as obstacles to their electoral participation.

An agreement between the majority of the political women and male respondents was found on the shortage of eligible women. Additionally, almost the same percentages of the political women and their male counterparts perceive women's own conventional attitude towards electoral participation which resulted in their lack of motivation, as a problem. Although the second largest proportion of the male respondents reported financial constraints, they were less likely than the political women to perceive it. Additionally, compared to political women, a smaller percentage of male politicians admit to any sort of discrimination against women amongst the party selectors and voters. Rather, more of them perceive family responsibilities as a conditioning factor. However, despite some gender differences in data, both groups of respondents do not differ significantly in their perception of the reasons for the low rate of participation of women in national elections contests.

Constraining factors drawn from perceived reasons have been explained on the basis of respondents' views and available information. From the discussion it can be said that all factors may have some logical basis in the perspective of reality. The paucity of potential female candidates may result from women's lower inclusion to the eligible pool of potential candidates. Female political activists may be less suited to the socio-economic factors of political eligibility, i.e., higher educational attainment, income and prestigious occupational status, etc.

In addition, a shortage of potential female candidates may be the consequence of lower availability of female political leaders. Women may have fewer opportunities to establish themselves in the party leadership. Moreover, women's marginality is probably intensified at the elite level by the fact that previous political experiences in the women's wings may provide few skills, expertise and recognition, that would allow them to prove their credentials in equal terms with men.

However, financial problems also can be considered as a formidable obstacle. Although it may equally affect a man's candidature, for a woman it has additional bearings and thereby constitutes one of the biggest handicaps. Women are financially dependent and have less accessibility to financial resources.

Political women also find yet another barrier hindering women's candidature. It is the discriminating attitude of the party selection committee towards the female nomination seekers. Women are rarely nominated because party selectors are likely to consider them less appropriate for legislative candidature, or they are rated less electable than men in terms of vote winning potentialities.

Even if the problems related to the selection, and financial barriers could be overcome, women may face another special barrier in their efforts to gain election to the Parliament. According to the political women's perception voters have negative

attitudes towards female candidates. Voters may discriminately vote against women because of the influence of prevalent conventional societal norms against women's participation in the male dominated political sphere. In addition, they may regard female candidates as less competent in dealing with public affairs. As a result women may confront social resistance in their electioneering practice.

Due to the practical and potential constraints or out of the instilled conventional beliefs, some women may not see themselves as qualified for seeking nomination and therefore, do not voice their candidature.

From the discussion of barriers perceived by political women, it can be concluded that women may find themselves more vulnerable to the circumstances encountering them, thus hindering them from being in equal terms with men in their race for legislative office. This explains why the largest proportion of political women of this study were found to be reluctant to pursue legislative office.

However, since political women are found to be aware of the difficulties involved in getting elected to the general seat, the great majority (72.1 percent) of them support the present system of women's representation in the Parliament through reserved seats. Slightly more than half of the male politicians also express the same view, but political women are found to be more in favour of the system. Interestingly, while expressing their views most of these respondents admit the limitations of the reservation provision, but on practical grounds they accept the present system.

A relatively small percentage (27.9 percent) of political women are against the present system. They again expressed diverse views in this regard - 11.6 percent of them advocate for its abolition while 16.3 percent support the reservation provision, but they feel that the present electoral system of the RS should be replaced by direct election of the RS by the male and female voters or by the female voters only.

However, compared to political women, more male politicians (45 percent) expressed their views against the present system. The largest proportion (35 percent) of them are found to be in favour of abolition of the system. And the rest (10 percent) would like to see the introduction of direct election of the RS either by general electorates or by the female electorates. Hence, a significant difference has been found between political women and male respondents in their opinion about the present system of RS for women in the Parliament.

Although the critics and political analysts precisely suggest the direct election of the reserved seats either by the people or female voters, the majority of the political women do not find it a logical and realistic solution. Due to practical constraints, they consider women even less able to mobilise only female voters across the constituency. However, the acceptance of the present system of RS by the majority of the women political elites under study signify the weaker political position of women in Bangladesh. It seems that after 23 years of the introduction of the reservation provision, women still could not reach that position or acquire confidence to get themselves directly elected to the Parliament. Although outside the political sphere there may exist opinion against the present system, the women political elites adhere to the present system to a great extent. They might show such adherence due to their own experiences and realisation of the practical difficulties women face in the political sphere. It however, suggests the need for further research in this area to clearly specify the reasons for women's disadvantaged position in the politics of Bangladesh and to find out the ways of strengthening their political status.