

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS

This study was motivated by a desire to research a small number of women who are intensively active in a male-dominated area - politics - in a less developed and tradition-bound society like Bangladesh. Based on primary data collected from 43 women drawn from highly placed female party officials at the central level and members of the fifth Jatiya Sangsad, this study has attempted to analyse certain selected aspects related to their personal qualities, development as political activists and political participation. The female group was compared with a comparable group of men. A comparison between the two groups on each of the areas identified was deemed necessary because of the predisposition of Bangladesh society to favour males in politics and the small number of women who have finally achieved a similar status with their male counterparts. The comparison enables the researcher to highlight their distinctive qualities, the process responsible for their becoming political activists and their relative status and achievements in the political arena.

The areas that were identified for the study were personal characteristics and socio-economic backgrounds, political socialisation process, political career and experiences, perception of problems related to contesting in parliamentary elections by women and attitudes towards the reserving of seats for women representatives in the national Parliament of Bangladesh. The study used a socio-psychological paradigm as a conceptual framework to explain the socio-cultural and political climate in Bangladesh within which the political women developed, participated in politics and achieved their respective positions.

The analysis of the data revealed some interesting findings. It showed clearly that the women differed significantly from their male counterparts in a majority of the

variables discussed, while there were hardly any differences in the remaining ones. These findings are summarised below.

Findings and Conclusions

9.1 Personal Characteristics and Socio-economic Backgrounds

Chapter 5 of this study has delineated the distinctive qualities of political women in terms of their demographic and socio-economic backgrounds. As shown by the data all the political women except for one were married or widowed. However, while all but one of the male respondents were also married, they significantly differed from the political women in their marital status as none of them were widowers (see Table 5.1).

The data on the age of the respondents revealed interesting findings. On the one hand, they showed a prominence of older persons among the political women (see Table 5.2) which seems to suggest the importance of age in attaining a high position in the political process. However, on the other hand, they also showed that the political women tended to be younger than their male counterparts. This differentiated the political women of Bangladesh from their female counterparts in other countries who were repeatedly found to be older than the men.

The data on place of origin and present residence (see Tables 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5) revealed that the women in this study tended to be born and brought up in urban settings, and lived in the capital city, Dhaka. Thus, it was clearly found that women political elites at the national level in Bangladesh were mainly composed of urbanised and Dhaka based females who belonged to a small segment of the population.

In addition, when the political women were compared with men on the above variables, it appeared that they were more likely to originate from an urban segment than their male counterparts who were largely from a rural background. However, in terms

of the place of present residence, the respondents of both sexes showed a propensity to be based in the capital. This coincides with the trend of capital based political activities in Bangladesh.

The findings on the educational background showed some interesting similarities and differences between the political women and men. Both sexes were similar in that the majority of the people involved in the study were university educated (see Table 5.8). In a developing country like Bangladesh where education is a scarce commodity for women, the fact that about three-quarters of political women had bachelor's to graduate degrees seem to imply that education is a pre-requisite for high level political achievement for women.

However, the political women differed significantly from their male counterparts when educational achievement was compared. Nearly all the males (95 percent) had either a bachelor's or graduate degree while only 72.1 percent of the political women had achieved this status (see Table 5.7).

The data on occupational backgrounds clearly showed that the majority of the political women (55.8 percent) did not have any occupational involvement and were, by and large, housewives (see Table 5.9). The men, on the other hand, were mostly (52.5 percent) engaged in the legal profession and business. These are the fields from which politicians usually come in Bangladesh. A mere 9.3 percent of the political women were found to be in such professions. This seems to indicate that women who are engaged in professional careers are less inclined to take up politics.

However, the political women who were noted to be occupationally active were generally engaged in the teaching profession. Thus, unlike men, their occupations were not those usually considered to confer politically useful skills and resources. This significant difference between political women and men in their occupational status could

mean that a lack of occupational achievement is instrumental in keeping women in a politically disadvantaged position. As such they operate in the political sphere with less resources (financial resources as well as politically useful skills) caused by their lower occupational achievement.

The findings on family income, however, suggested that political women were in an advantageous position. A great majority of them came from affluent families (see Table 5.10). It clearly indicates that the women of privileged families are more likely to take up political careers in Bangladesh. In a sharply class-stratified society like Bangladesh, the women from wealthier sections have a distinct advantage, i.e., more leisure time, financial support, etc., over their poorer counterparts. Thus the study highlights the inability of women from lower status families to attain elite positions in politics.

However, on the question of family income, there was no significant difference between the political women and men. Both came from financially sound families. This is an important finding because in most of the previous studies done in other countries, women political elites mainly from lower-income groups compared to men (see review of the literature in Chapter 2). In Bangladesh, the political women had the further advantage of having spouses who were highly educated, had high status occupations (see Tables 5.11 and 5.12) and were well placed in society. Thus through their spouses' position political women enjoyed more privileges which might have facilitated their political achievements.

9.2 Process of Political Socialisation

One of the main objectives of this study was to explore how the selected women acquired their predisposition for politics and a desire for a political career. The development of a woman political activist is assumed to go through two processes.

First, she grows up in a family where she perceives a nontraditional adult role which favours the female. Secondly, through a process of political socialisation, politics becomes an important part of her life. Two stages are associated with this process. The first stage is the stimulation of the woman's interest in politics, and the second is her active involvement in politics.

The findings presented in Chapter 6 substantiate the fact that political women tended to come from high status and politically involved families in Bangladesh. The overwhelming majority of the political women were found to originate from middle-class and upper middle-class families (see Table 6.4). Their fathers were highly educated with prestigious urban occupations (see Tables 6.1 and 6.3). This kind of family background seemed to provide opportunities for political women to look beyond their socially-sanctioned roles to politics. This was because in Bangladesh society, women from higher social classes enjoyed more opportunities for personal development and public role than those from the lower social classes. Furthermore, the findings showed that political women more frequently originated from educated and higher status families than their male counterparts.

The study showed that political women learned political values differently from the male politicians. Distinguishable factors which appeared to operate in the political socialisation experience of political women were the great influence of family and in most cases, politically active male relatives who served as inspiring role models.

The findings suggested that political women tended to come from families with strong political inclinations. The majority of them grew up with a politically active father and relatives in the immediate family environment (see Tables 6.10, 6.12). Moreover, it is interesting to note that the majority of the political women were equally involved with their husbands in politics. Thus the obtained data and findings on the

family backgrounds showed that political women internalised an interest and sensitivity to politics through their families as the majority had inherited the proclivity to politics from the parental home and which were later reinforced by their spouses.

The assumption regarding the impact of family on the political socialisation of political women was further supported by the findings on the politicised family environment (see Table 6.11). It showed that political women tended to have grown up in a politicised home environment. Their identification of the political socialisation agent also confirmed the role of family in their initial political orientation (see Table 6.14). It is interesting to note that family impact did not vary according to the time of initial political socialisation such as adult and pre-adult political orientation (see Table 6.16). A significant relationship was found between the family and the pre-adult political socialisation of political women as well as between the family and the adult stage of political orientation. The majority of both groups - adult and pre-adult - derived their initial political orientation from their families. This seemed to indicate that the family was a constant and reinforcing influence on the women concerned. One can safely conclude from this that the family plays an important role in moulding the minds of female children. A highly charged political family can change a submissive stereotype women into an active and politically conscious person.

However, in the case of male political elites, the family variable appeared less salient in their political socialisation. Peer groups were more prominent in provoking their earliest political interest. Thus the study found that the agent of initial political socialisation varied according to the gender of political elites, i.e., family for women and peer groups for men (see Table 6.15).

The study has interesting findings on the motivating factors which provided the personal impetus for political women towards political participation. It was found that

although the family was salient in awakening their political interest, their actual participation in politics was not equally motivated by the family (see Table 6.17). Three-quarters of them were inspired by extra-familial factors such as the political movements of the mid to late sixties, the influence of ideology and the appeal of a particular political leader. The rest of the political women's participation was influenced by their families.

In addition, the study found that the time of earliest political socialisation had a significant bearing on the motivating factors. Political women who acquired early orientation to politics were more frequently inspired by political movements. This was found to be far less frequent among those who had no early orientation to politics (see Table 6.18). These women were mostly motivated by their family members or relatives to enter politics.

However, a significant difference was found between political women and men in motivating factors. Unlike political women, all men who entered politics had been inspired by extra-familial factors regardless of their time of socialisation. The family did not significantly relate to their political participation.

Thus the study found that women political elites tended to have different political socialisation experiences from their male counterparts. The agents of political socialisation, the circumstances of the development of interest in politics and the entrance into the political sphere were found to be different for men and women.

9.3 Political Career, Experience and Aspirations

Chapter 7 substantiated the assumption that political women tended to have different political careers and experiences from men. There were significant associations between gender and most variables related to political career, experience and political ambition. It was only in some variables, such as age of starting party career and longevity in party politics, where male-female differences were found to be not

significant.

The findings suggest that political women and men differed significantly in the means of recruitment to the party organisation. Political women mainly used two channels to enter party politics - student organisations and voluntary social organisations whereas most of the male politicians were recruited from student organisations to their respective parties (see Table 7.1).

Political women in Bangladesh also exhibited different patterns in their recruitment process compared to their Western counterparts who mainly used voluntary social organisations to enter party politics. Unlike them, many political women in Bangladesh entered party politics with some prior political experience and competency acquired from their involvement in student politics.

Another interesting finding was that the majority of the political women were early starters in politics like their male counterparts (see Table 7.5). Gender did not create significant difference in the respondents' age when starting a political career. An early start produced a long-standing party career for the majority of the political women. There was no significant gender-difference in the length of party career, and thus, political women were close to their male counterparts in longevity in politics (see Table 7.3).

However, in the other areas of political experiences, political women appeared to be different from men. Significant gender-difference was exhibited in party office holding experiences (see Tables 7.6, 7.7, 7.8 and 7.9). It was found that although 60.5 percent of the political women currently belonged to the higher body of the central organisation of their respective parties, only a few of them were associated with the highest decision-making body. This indicated that they were almost totally excluded from instrumental functions like decision-making. Furthermore, most of these women

were mainly responsible for either running the women's wings of their respective parties or carrying out the responsibilities of the secretary of women's affairs.

However, the remaining 39.5 percent of the political women exclusively belonged to the women's wings and were detached from mainstream party activities. From the analysis it is possible to infer that in Bangladesh, women political elites at the national level are relegated to certain areas of party activities. This results in the "ghettoisation" of women politicians and limits their political role, activities and influence.

The analysis of the respondents' present and last party position offers evidence that the majority of the men were associated with the higher body of the central party organisation both in their present and previous position. A relatively smaller proportion of political women were in a similar position (see Tables 7.6 and 7.7). Interestingly, the last party positions of most of the political women who currently belong to the higher body of the central organisation were in the central and main party organisations at district level. Only a small number of them moved from the women's wings to the central organisation (see Table 7.8). This implies that attachment with the main organisation gives more weight on recruitment to the higher party offices. The experiences acquired through the involvement in the women's wing have less bearing on this respect.

Another finding was the difference in the experience of holding party office between the respondents. The analysis shows that although the majority of the political women had distinctly long political experience in the party, only a small proportion had long-standing experience in running party office (see Table 7.9). More political women had assumed their present party position quite recently, whereas most of the men had been holding their present party office for a long period. Consequently, men had a longer period of experience in running party offices than political women.

This seems to suggest that for many political women, a long association with the party organisation did not necessarily produce a longer career as a party official. From this one could conclude that political women were more likely than men to have served as general members in their respective parties for a long time.

The analysis of data on the legislative office seeking behaviour between the sexes seems to imply that the drive for elective office and winning is a completely male preserve in Bangladesh (see Table 7.10). Political women were found to be conspicuously lagging behind the men in the behaviour patterns which conferred more political power and prestige.

Another important finding was that not only did political women have little experience in electoral participation, their desire for contesting in parliamentary elections in the future was also found to be weaker than that of men (see Table 7.11). About half of them did not aspire for or had no interest in seeking legislative office through contesting in elections. The number who wanted to be candidates for legislative seats in the near future was the lowest percentage. It is clear that although political women could sustain a political career for a long period and many had even achieved high party positions, they could not imagine putting themselves up for future candidacy in the parliamentary elections. This suggests that their desire for electoral participation directly conflicted with the circumstances within which they were conditioned because of practical constraints, which in turn made them less ambitious.

9.4 Problems Related to Participation of Women in Electoral Contests and Their Representation in the National Parliament

This study has explored the underlying reasons for the underrepresentation of women in the general seats of the national Parliament of Bangladesh. The reasons perceived by the political women and men indicate that certain factors restrict the supply of potential women candidates for parliamentary elections and reduce the electoral

success of women candidates (see Table 8.1).

Most of the political women as well as male respondents agreed that the shortage of eligible and potential women for election contests and the lower availability of financial support inhibit women's ambition for legislative office. The other often-mentioned reasons were women's own negative attitudes toward election competitions and discrimination against them by the party selection committee and the voters.

The analysis of each of the constraining factors based on the viewpoints of the respondents and the available information shows that all of them have some logical basis in the realistic perception of the problem. The paucity of potential women candidates results from the following conditions.

First, women politicians are less able to certify the eligibility criteria for nomination. They are often not thought to have the necessary educational, economic and occupational credentials. These shortcomings can be overcome through extensive political strength, i.e., experience, strong base in the constituency, political networking and the capacity of manipulating voters. The present study provides evidence that even at the elite level, women have fewer opportunities to develop close links with the main party organisation. In fact certain factors affect women's political participation in such a way that they have few opportunities to engage in serious political activities, develop extensive political connections or have access to political networking.

As described in Chapter 4, women party activists generally remain confined in the women's wings of the respective parties, where they perform limited functions. In fact, the women's wings are removed from policy-making and public leadership and hardly enjoy autonomy. As such, they have no real influence within the main party organisation. There is evidence in Chapter 7 that even when women attain higher positions in the main party organisations, they are confined to limited roles among

women. Thus the way women political activists acquire political experiences gives them fewer opportunities to develop a broad-based image and a strong political base. The shortage of eligible women for contesting elections partly results from this fact.

Another contributing factor is the absence of a pool of women political leaders from which candidates can be drawn. The main reservoir of potential candidates of the Jatiya Sangsad comes from the political parties. The higher party offices at the central and district levels are used by the men as "stepping stones" to legislative office. But, as shown in Chapter 4, in all political parties only a few women can get past the threshold of the main party organisation and attain party office. The reason for this is that in most political parties, women's entry into the main organisation is necessitated by the party's need for a women's affairs secretary or a representative for women. It practically looks as if it is a symbolic rather than a real representation of women in the higher party echelons. Thus it can be argued that as long as women fail to hold a substantial number of significant positions in the party organisations, they will remain severely underrepresented in the pool of candidates.

Lack of financial support appeared to be another formidable obstacle as more than half of the political women mentioned this fact. The growing election costs deter women from contesting. Although the lower availability of campaign funds also affect men's candidature, it becomes more serious for women because of their financial dependence and lower accessibility to financial resources.

It can also be seen that the political women find the discriminating attitude of the selection committee of the party towards female nominees a barrier in their candidature. It might be due to the fact that party leaders view women either as being less suitable for contesting in elections, or consider them as having less winning potential in getting votes.

Another identified barrier is the voters' negative attitude towards female candidates. Voters might discriminate against women candidates because of prevalent conventional norms against women's political involvement. Moreover, women candidates might be regarded by the voters as less competent in dealing with public affairs. Considering the practical constraints involved, women are likely to find themselves vulnerable in seeking elective office. Consequently, they tend to have relatively low aspirations in the political sphere.

Being aware of the barriers limiting women's electoral participation, it seems natural that the overwhelming majority of political women (72.1 percent) support the present system of providing reserved seats for women representation in the Parliament in Bangladesh (see Tables 8.2 and 8.3). The largest proportion of men (55 percent) also expressed the same view, but political women were substantially more supportive of the system. Most of the respondents from both groups were found to be aware of the limitations associated with the reservation provision, but they still accept the present system on account of the constrained situation.

A relatively smaller proportion of the political women (27.9 percent) were against the present system of reserved seats. Some of them said that the present system should be abolished while some thought that the present electoral system of reserved seats should be replaced by direct election either by the voters of both sexes or only by female voters.

On the other hand, more men (45 percent) were discontented with the existing system of reserved seats. The largest proportion of them advocated its abolition while the others preferred to see a modification of the electoral system. Thus a significant difference was found between political women and men in their opinion about the reservation provision.

However, the political women's supportive attitude to the reservation provision highlighted the weaker and more vulnerable position of women activists in the political arena. This becomes even more evident when we see that the majority of the political women opposed the direct election to the reserved seats even by female voters. Such views might be the outcome of their negative perception of their own disadvantaged position in the political sphere.

9.5 Concluding Remarks

It must be noted at this point that the importance of political participation lies in the fact that it gives access to the decision-making process and control over resources of the society. Therefore, political participation is considered central to any consideration of women's issues. It is "an indicator of their status as well as a tool to improve their condition in society".¹ Women's participation in politics is essential to their advancement because without that their voice cannot be heard at the decision-making level.

This study has highlighted the fact that even when women held high positions in politics they did not enjoy equal status with men and were not close to being an effective political power in themselves. The study has also pinpointed the problems related to women's participation in the National Parliament of Bangladesh - an important decision-making body at the national level. Not only does it represent the interests of the people of the country, but it is also a major source for the recruitment of the highest level of decision makers. Thus, women's proper and effective representation in the Parliament is a vital issue. Therefore, it is desirable that all political parties undertake effective measures to expand the pool of potential women candidates, increase their

1 WINAP (Women's Information Network for Asia and the Pacific), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, No. 5 (December 1989).

candidature and provide supportive measures to ensure their success in the parliamentary elections in Bangladesh. The Election Commission also should find possible alternatives for the electoral procedure of reserved seats for women in the Parliament on the basis of extensive interaction and dealings with political parties, women's organisations and through conducting a survey of the peoples' views on the subject. It is also necessary to undertake more research to examine the attitudes of political activists of both sexes active at different levels of the political process. This may help in providing a proper evaluation of the system and to find effective measures to ensure the meaningful participation of women in the Parliament of Bangladesh.

Moreover, active efforts should be undertaken by the government and respective authorities to minimise the gender-differences in the educational and employment opportunities at the mass level. It may help to reduce the disparity that exists at the political elite level and provide women with an advantageous position similar to that of men in order to play an effective role.

9.6 Implications for Further Research

This study has presented data and findings on certain aspects of women political elites at the national level in Bangladesh which future researchers may find useful. The study has also opened up some areas which may be worth exploring for further research.

The researcher has focused on those women who have broken the stereotyped notion that politics is inappropriate for women in a tradition bound society like Bangladesh. Hence, the implications of their development as political activists are significant and demand further research.

A follow-up study could be done on women at local level politics such as in the local branches of political parties, and local government institutions, i.e., Union

Parishads, Pourashavas (Municipalities) and City Corporations. It could attempt to find out whether women at local politics share the same socio-economic characteristics, political socialisation experiences and political experiences with the women who were active at national level politics.

The women activists who belonged to the women's wings of different political parties could be of future research interest, particularly in their nature of participation, problems related to upward mobility and effective participation, and their perception of the reservation provision for women in the Parliament. It may provide important insights to policy makers to find out a more acceptable way to reduce problems related to women's political participation.

Finally, researchers should undertake more studies of women at various levels of the political process to find out whether gender is a vital factor to their effectiveness. Such research will provide the basis for future directions and strategies to ensure a more equitable position for women in the public representative and decision-making arena.