

CHAPTER 4

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

The purpose of this chapter is to present a brief account of the political history of Bangladesh. Then there will be a brief discussion on the tradition and history of women's political participation and their present status and involvement in the political process. For the purpose of the study, only information on women's participation in national level politics such as their participation in the national Parliament, electoral process, party organisation and higher decision-making body of the government will be presented. In addition, this chapter will present some facts about the main political parties of Bangladesh and discuss in detail women's participation in Parliament and the electoral process for their relevance to chapter 7 and 8. These chapters will deal with the political careers and experience of the women political elites in Bangladesh. Their perceptions of the problems related to women's participation in the electoral contest for legislative offices, will also be looked into.

4.1 The Political History of Bangladesh

Although Bangladesh emerged as an independent country only in 1971, it has a long recorded political history. As has been mentioned earlier, the country, being part of the Indian subcontinent, was under the British rule from 1757 to 1947. In 1947, two centuries of British dominance came to an end with independence and partition of the subcontinent into two separate states - India and Pakistan. Pakistan created for the Indian Muslims was composed of the eastern (East Bengal) and north-western part of the subcontinent. As a part of Pakistan, East Bengal was known as East Pakistan and the other part of Pakistan was known as West Pakistan. The practical reason behind the creation of Pakistan was to secure the economic and political rights of the Muslim

minority of India through the establishment of an independent homeland for them. The creation of Pakistan was spearheaded by Mohammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League.

(a) The Pakistan Era

After the birth of Pakistan, the people of East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) found the advent of a new privileged class in this province from the west wing of Pakistan. The West Pakistan elite quickly monopolised key positions left by the Hindus (most of the Hindu elites fled to India) in the provincial government, administration, business and economics and in the armed forces.¹ The rising Bengali middle class who found themselves deprived opposed this new domination. Furthermore, the leaders and the younger generation of the Bengal Muslim League were deeply frustrated with the various undemocratic actions of the West Pakistan based central Muslim League. In 1949, they organised a new political party - the Awami Muslim League² (present Awami League) - to stage political opposition to the ruling Muslim League. Eventually, it became the most important political party, propagating first the idea of an extended autonomy, and later the independence of East Pakistan.

In the early fifties, a demand for autonomy arose in the east wing of Pakistan when the Bengalis found that their representation in the power centre of the state was virtually nil.³ West Pakistan based ruling elites disregarded the demand for proper distribution of the country's resources to remove the glaring economic disparity

¹ For details, see Lawrence Ziring, Bangladesh: From Mujib to Ershad - An Interpretive Study, (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1992), p.14; K.B. Sayeed, The Political System of Pakistan, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967), p.187.

² In 1955, the party organisation dropped "Muslim" from its name. For details on the East Pakistan Awami League, see M. Rashiduzzaman, "The Awami League in the Political Development of Pakistan", Asian Survey, 10 (July 1970): 575-587.

³ See Taludker Maniruzzaman, The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermaths, (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1988), p.19.

between the two wings. Thus the demand for political and economic autonomy in East Pakistan came into being and eventually took the shape of the nationalist movement.

The language movement in 1952 was the first important event in the history of the politics of East Pakistan. It was the manifestation of Bengali resentment to the imposition of Urdu as the only official state language of Pakistan. The central government (dominated by West Pakistanis) ignored the fact that Bengali Language of the East Pakistanis was spoken by the numerical majority of the population. However, students of East Pakistan launched a movement for the recognition of Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan. The movement finally forced the central government to declare both Bengali and Urdu as the national languages.

In the 1954 provincial elections, the first held in East Pakistan, the Muslim League suffered an unparalleled defeat. The overwhelming electoral victory of the United Front - a combination of opposition parties - was a reflection of the people's resentment to the ruling party. Nearing the end of the fifties, the political history of Pakistan entered a new phase. In 1958, military rule was introduced in the country with the disposal of the parliamentary form of government. General Ayub Khan (Ayub) subsequently established a "co-dictatorship" of civil and military bureaucratic elites without the inclusion of a single Bengali from East Pakistan.⁴ During the period of Ayub, one of the major grievances of the East Pakistanis was the disparity in the representation in decision-making bodies. The country's bureaucracy and army, two major influential elements in the decision-making process were dominated by the West Pakistanis.⁵

⁴ Ibid. p. 9

⁵ See. Rounaq Jahan, Pakistan: Failure in National Integration, (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1972), pp.51-66, 96-107; Sayeed, op cit., pp.195-211.

Although economic development had been increased in the eastern wing during the ten years of the Ayub regime, the glaring economic disparity between the two wings not only continued, but the relationship between them became exploitative.⁶ Despite the greater contribution of East Pakistan to the nation's foreign exchange earnings, it lagged behind West Pakistan in economic development. It was used as a protected market for consumer goods produced by West Pakistani industries. Thus East Pakistan was treated as a mere "colony" of West Pakistan and this generated feelings of resentment which were gradually augmented by the suppressive methods pursued by the ruling elites. Hence, the political movement in East Pakistan changed into a radical autonomy movement by the mid 1960s.

Under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib), the Awami League (AL) and other political forces began to prepare a mass movement in support of "full regional autonomy". This was accelerated by the Indo-Pakistan war of September 1965. The war highlighted the vulnerability of East Pakistan and consequently generated separatist feelings among politically discontented and economically frustrated Bengalis. The following incident created the spontaneous mass upheaval of 1969. The mass upsurge turned more dynamic and for the first time became radical when the Student Action Committee took over the leadership.

The 1969 mass upsurge, however, consequently put an end to the rule of Ayub who resigned his office and transferred power to the army chief, General Yahya Khan (Yahya). In the situation of agitational politics in both wings of Pakistan, Yahya quickly announced a national elections (the first in Pakistan's twenty-three year history) which commenced on 7 December 1970. Bengali support for the demand of regional autonomy led to a complete victory for AL enabling it to achieve an absolute majority

⁶ Jahan, *Ibid.*, p.62.

in the National Assembly. The military government, however, was determined not to accept the people's verdict. The Pakistani army tried to reverse with bullets the gains the Bengalis had achieved through the ballot box. The military suppression aroused a keen sense of unity among the Bengalis and hardened their resistance. After nine months of bloody liberation war, Bangladesh emerged as an independent state in December 1971.

(b) The Post-Independence Era

In the first phase following the birth of the country, the AL formed the government on the basis of the overwhelming mandate the party received in the 1970 national and provincial assembly elections. Mujib, the leader of the nationalist movement, organised the government along the model of the British Parliamentary System. The Constituent Assembly produced a Constitution for the country within seven months in 1972. According to the provisions of the new Constitution general elections were held in March 1973.

Thus the government initially performed well to handle the problems faced by the new nation. Soon, however, it began to show its incapability in handling the problems of an increasing economic crisis, social and political instability and deteriorating law and order.⁷ Prompted by the situation and desperation Mujib turned more authoritarian. The AL's rule, however, came to an end in August of 1975 when Mujib was assassinated in a military coup. Thus began the second phase of Bangladesh politics.

⁷ For Mujib regime, see Rounaq Jahan, Bangladesh Politics: Problems and Issues, (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1980), pp.132-138; Maniruzzaman, *op.cit.*, pp.154-197.

In the second phase, General Ziaur Rahman (Zia), a hero of the Bangladesh liberation war, emerged as the strong man. He restored a bureaucratic military state. Similar to other military rulers, Zia tried to legitimise his regime by "civilianising" and "democratising" his rule through the restoration of multiparty politics, the creation of his own political party and the conducting of parliamentary elections. He launched a new political party - the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) - which was created through the amalgamation of fractions of various other parties.⁸ These diverse forces, however, were held together by Zia's strong leadership.

On May 30, 1981, Zia was killed in an unsuccessful coup spearheaded by a handful of discontented officers. The armed forces under the leadership of Ershad took power through a bloodless coup in March 24, 1982.

The Ershad regime was marked by the creation of a military-dominated authoritarian state. Ershad also floated a new political party - the Jatiya Party (JP) - as part of his civilianisation process to seek legitimacy. Despite that, an acute legitimacy crisis stemmed from his using unconstitutional means to occupy state power, kept the government under constant opposition and pressure from his political opponents.⁹ However, the opposition forces launched a movement for the removal of Ershad and the restoration of democracy. On the first day of December 1990, the movement reached its climax and culminated in the fall of the Ershad regime.

A new era of Bangladesh politics began with the parliamentary elections held on February 27, 1991. It was a remarkable event in the country's political history

⁸ For details of BNP, see Golam Hossain, *General Ziaur Rahman and the BNP*, (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1988); M. Rashiduzzaman, "Bangladesh 1978: Search for a Political Party", *Asian Survey*, 19 (February 1979): 191-197.

⁹ See for good analysis, Stanley A. Kochanek, *Patron-client Politics and Business in Bangladesh*, (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1993); Muhammad A. Hakim, "Legitimacy Crisis and United Opposition: The Fall of Ershad Regime in Bangladesh", *South Asia Journal*, 5 (1991): 181-193.

because for the first time parliamentary elections were held under a neutral caretaker government. The BNP emerged as the single largest party capturing 168 seats followed by the AL with 88 seats in the fifth Parliament.¹⁰ The JP of Ershad emerged as the third party and Jamaat-e-Islami as the fourth in the Parliament. The BNP under the leadership of Khalida Zia formed the government and ruled the country until March 1996.

4.2 History of Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh

As was dictated by history, the women of Bangladesh participated little in the politics of the land. Unlike women in most of the Western countries, the initial political participation of Bengali women did not evolve from a suffrage movement. The women of the Indian subcontinent managed to obtain voting rights without much of a fight on their part. In 1929, all the provincial legislative councils had extended the franchise to women on the same basis as to men i.e., property and education.¹¹ The Government of India Act, 1935, finally enfranchised all adults, women and men.

Although Bengal had led the country in social reform and was the vanguard of the nationalist movement, social prejudice against women playing roles in public life was strong here. Not surprisingly, Bengali elites and nationalists at first opposed the legislation (sanctioned by the British government) which extended the franchise to women.¹² Very few of the reformers thought of gender equality or in terms of

¹⁰ Information obtained from Bangladesh Election Commission. Also see, T. Maniruzzaman, "The Fall of the Military Dictator: 1991 Elections and the Prospects of Civilian Rule in Bangladesh", *Pacific Affairs*, (Summer 1992): 211-212.

¹¹ The reform act of 1921 extended the franchise only to them who had property and education. For detailed discussion of women's franchise in India, see, Geraldine H. Forbes, "The Demand for Women's Franchise in India - 1917-1937" in *Symbols of Power*, ed. Vina Mazumdar, (Bombay: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1979), pp.5-23; Jana Matson Everett, *Women and Social Change in India*, (New Delhi: Heritage, 1985), pp.100-140; Vijay Agnew, *Elite Women in Indian Politics*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1979), pp.104-131.

¹² For details, see Agnew, *Ibid*, pp.110-115.

women's rights to participate in social functions outside the family framework.¹³ Women themselves also accepted the dominant position of men in politics as a natural occurrence. "The Banga Mahila" (Women of Bengal), a new journal for women started in 1875, stated that,

"In this journal we will not discuss political events and controversies because politics would not be interesting or intelligible to women in this country at present."¹⁴

Even "Bamabodhini Patrika" (Journal for Women) which substantially contributed to the upliftment of women, did not publish any article on political subjects for a long time as it was thought that "In Bengal the time to teach women about politics has not yet come."¹⁵ Thus, the combined factors of social customs, moral codes of society as well as the lack of information on political developments contributed to the minimal participation of women in the political arena.

However, since the late 1880s, the growth of nationalist sentiments among the Bengali elites had slowly and gradually influenced their wives, daughters and sisters to pay interests on political matters. Subsequently the spirit of nationalism politicised a large number of Indian women.¹⁶

In terms of the mobilisation of the Bengali women the most important political event was the partition of the Bengal Presidency into the provinces of East and West in October 1905. It became one of the causes of political agitation and violent activities against colonial rule in Bengal. The people of Bengal launched the Swadeshi¹⁷

¹³ Urmila Phadnis and Indira Malani (eds.), *Women in the World - Illusion and Reality*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), p.20. Also see, Forbes, *op.cit.*, p.4.

¹⁴ Cited in Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal: 1849-1905*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.337.

¹⁵ Cited in Borthwick, *Ibid.*, p.337.

¹⁶ See, Borthwick, *Ibid.*, p.347.

¹⁷ "Swadeshi" means indigenous or native.

movement to boycott foreign (especially British) goods and to popularise indigenous products. Though there was no mass awakening amongst the women at this time¹⁸ the emphasis on using swadeshi (indigenous) goods had helped make politics directly meaningful to women as consumers.¹⁹ Many women who later became active in nationalist politics, gained their initial political awareness and experience during the Swadeshi period.

During the nationalist movement, the initiative to include Indian women as active participants came about, particularly from Mahatma Gandhi. His leadership, programmes and encouragement prompted the tradition-bound and conservative women to make a break through²⁰ and led them to join the nationalist movement in large numbers. The non-violent Satyagraha and the Civil Disobedience movements initiated by Gandhi provided women with an easy access to political activity.

The women, however, who participated actively in the violent and non-violent anti-British movements in Bengal were predominantly Hindu and from West Bengal. As such, the All India Congress was committed to include women in their political activities. But the Indian National Congress was dominated by Hindu politicians and furthermore, Gandhi's leadership and propaganda had religious (Hinduism) overtones.²¹ Therefore, both the Congress and Gandhi's leadership could not attract a substantial number of the Bengali Muslim Women from East Bengal in the nationalist movements. Moreover, the lives of the Bengali Muslim women were still very restricted and confined to the four walls of the house. Most of them were only mute spectators of the changes taking place around them.²² Thus, only a handful of women

¹⁸ Manmohan Kaur, Women in India's Freedom Struggle, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., 1985), p.91.

¹⁹ Borthwick, op.cit., p.384.

²⁰ See, Agnew, op.cit., pp.34, 61.

²¹ Agnew, op.cit., p.11.

²² Parveen Shaikat Ali, Status of Women in the Muslim World (Lahore, 1975), pp.65-66.

actively worked in the Sawadeshi Movement and in the Satyagraha as members of the Congress in East Bengal. Few women also actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement in Dhaka in 1930 - 32.²³

It is noteworthy that the Muslim League - the main political party of the Indian Muslims during the British rule - had taken very little efforts to mobilise women in politics. Unlike the Congress there were no women in the Muslim League's top hierarchy.²⁴ The enrolment of women in the League, however, slowly increased when it formed an All Indian Muslim Women's Sub-committee in December 1938. Some younger Muslim women became active in politics and "symbolized the new generation of female leadership".²⁵ In the 1940s, the Muslim League had made a direct attempt to mobilise women politically. Its principal aim was to obtain the women's support for the Pakistan movement. At last, a large number of Muslim women were actively associated with the creation of the new state of Pakistan,²⁶ but in East Bengal, women's active involvement in the Pakistan movement was marginal as they were less advanced than the women of other parts of India.

Throughout the period of Pakistan (1947-1971), however, the disruption of the democratic political process and the failure to institutionalise a parliamentary political system contributed to very narrow avenues for political participation of women. Moreover, the West Pakistani dominated political system had continuously denied East Pakistan's demand for parity in the political representation. Due to all these reasons,

²³ Maieka Begum, Banglar Nari Andolon (Women's Movement in Bengal) (in Bengali), (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1989), p.106.

²⁴ For instance, Sarojini Naidu - prominent Indian Nationalist Leader - became the president of the Indian National Congress in 1925. See for role of the Congress to enhance women's political participation in India, Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, "Towards Equality? Cause and Consequence of the Political Prominence of Women in India", Asian Survey, 18 (May 1978): 473-486.

²⁵ Charis Waddy, Women in Muslim History, (London: Longman, 1980), p.162.

²⁶ Ibid.

women remained far from assuming any meaningful political role in decision-making organizations. Even during the brief period of the parliamentary system (1947 - 1957) and especially after 1958, the power centre was predominantly occupied by a small coterie of bureaucratic and military elites which allowed no women. During the Ayub decade no attempt was made to bring women anywhere near the decision - making process.²⁷

It has been stated earlier that the then East Pakistan went through a number of mass-movements towards its goal of attaining independence. Women responded to them and participated in varying degrees. The organisers and participants of the cultural and autonomy movements of the 1950's were mainly students and educated people. The language movement in 1952 was launched by the university students. The number of women participants in the language movement was not substantial since they constituted only a small proportion of the total number of university students at that time. In 1951-52, the year of the major language movement, there were 2306 male students and 85 female students in the Dhaka University.²⁸ Not only were they small in number, most of them also kept a distance from the general life of the university. They did not take an interest in general political issues that concerned most of the male students²⁹. Thus, only a handful of women actively participated in the processions and worked for the language movement.³⁰

27 Audrey C. Smock, "Bangladesh: A Struggle with Tradition and Poverty" in Women: Roles and Status in Eight Countries, eds. Janet Z. Giele and Audrey C. Smock, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1977), p.118. Also see, Khwar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back? (Lahore: Vanguard, 1987), p.60.

28 Rounaq Jahan, "Women in Politics: A Case Study of Bangladesh", in Asian Women in Transition, eds. S.A. Chipp and J.J. Green, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), p.243.

29 Ibid, p.244.

30 Amongst the small number of women who actively participated in the language movement of 1952, some remarkable names were Joharat Ara, Nadira Begum, Hajera Mahmud, Ila Mitra, Laila Arjumand Banu, Begum Sufia Kamal, Noorjhan Murshid, Momtaz Begum, etc. Among them, Nadira Begum, Momtaz Begum and Ila Mitra came into the limelight for their more active role in the movement. See, Begum, op.cit., p.153.

However, the first provincial elections held in East Pakistan in 1954, was marked by the election of women representatives by female voters.³¹ Eleven women were elected for the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly. This victory largely mobilised women and encouraged them to take interest in politics. The political movements of the early 1960s, especially the student movement against Ayub Khan's education reform policy,³² drew a large number of female students.³³ One of the important reasons for this was a rapid rise in the enrolment of female students in educational institutions.

However, the political movements of the late and mid 1960s particularly the Six-Point movement³⁴ of 1966 and the anti-Ayub movement of 1968-69 spirited a large number of women and induced them to join these movements. The main contingent of these women was recruited from the universities and colleges.³⁵ As a consequence, as one observer noted, while mixed processions were quite rare in the 1950s, the presence of a sizable number of women in public meetings or in a procession were quite common in the 1960s.³⁶ Some female students and women

³¹ In the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly elections of 1954, 11 seats reserved for women in the provincial assembly, were directly elected by the female voters living in the municipality areas. In this elections, each female voter in the municipality areas had two votes, one for the general seat and another for the reserved seat for women. Notable names among those women who were directly elected in the 1954 elections by female voters were Noorjahan Murshid, Doulutunnesa Khatun; Badrunnesa Ahmed, Amina Begum, Selina Banu, Razia Banu, Tafatunnesa, Mehrunnesa Khatun, etc. In November 1955, Noorjahan Murshid, Razia Banu and Doulutunnesa were appointed as the parliamentary secretaries of the provincial government. See, Begum, op.cit., p.162.

³² Students prevented the implementation of the Report of the Commission on National Education (1959), which recommended among other things, greater governmental control over universities and colleges, restriction of entry into higher-level educational institutions, postponement of the introduction of free primary education for 15 years, and development of Roman scripts for both Bengali and Urdu etc. For details see Maniruzzaman, 1988, op.cit., pp.61-62.

³³ Jahan, 1980, op.cit., p.244.

³⁴ Sheikh Mujib announced Six-Point Programme for full regional autonomy in February 1966 and launched a movement. The thrusts of Six-Points were, parliamentary form of government, a federal form of government with only two departments - defense and foreign affairs - to be lodged with the central government and all residual powers to reside in the two states; separate currencies for two states, all heads of taxation under the states, the independence of the two states in international trade; and the development of a paramilitary force in East Pakistan. See for details, Rashiduzzaman, op.cit., pp.581-584. Six-Points evoked tremendous enthusiasm and support among the people of East Pakistan.

³⁵ Shamsul H. Harun, *Bangladesh Voting Behaviour: A Psychological Study*, (Dhaka: University of Dhaka, 1986), p.114.

³⁶ Ibid, p.115.

members of AL and left parties came in the forefront of the movement. The name of Motia Chowdhury is worth mentioning among them. She was known as Agni Kanya (fire-brand woman) for her vigorous role during the anti-Ayub movement in 1968-69. In 1966, when Sheikh Mujib and his main lieutenants were arrested for the Six-Point movement, among his remaining lieutenants who sustained the movement, Amena Begum was one who played a vital role. Besides the student contingent, AL had also penetrated through its women's wing into the district and sub-division level and organised a large number of active women workers.³⁷ Left-leaning party National Awami party (NAP,M) also had a large body of women who actively worked for the student organisation - the Chatra (student) Union.³⁸

4.3 Women in Bangladesh Politics: Constitutional and Legal Provisions

The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh enumerates equal rights for all citizens, irrespective of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.³⁹ Thus, women are entitled to the fundamental rights of freedom of speech and expression, association and assembly, just as men are. Women have the right to vote and contest in all political and public representative institutions, such as the Parliament and the local government bodies. Moreover, in order to ensure a minimum representation of women in these institutions, the Constitution provides the provision for reservation of seats. According to article 65 of the Constitution, the national Parliament - "Jatiya Sangsad" (House of the Nation, JS) - consists of 300 members elected from single member territorial constituencies by direct election. In addition to the 300 general seats, 30 seats are reserved for women, to be elected by the directly elected members of the Parliament.

³⁷ Ibid, p.114.

³⁸ Ibid, p.117.

³⁹ See, Articles, 36-39, 50, 60, 122, Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (as modified up 30th June, 1988), Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

The provision of reservation, however, does not preclude women from contesting for any of the general seats.⁴⁰

At first the Constitution of Bangladesh provided fifteen reserved seats (RS) for women in the JS for ten years. In 1978, through the Presidential Proclamation, the number of RS was increased to 30 and the period was extended by five years.⁴¹ The JS of 1979 and the JS of 1986 had thus thirty seats reserved for women, while the first JS (1973) had fifteen RS for women (see Table 4.1). The reservation provision ceased to be operative in December 1987, when the sanctioned time for the constitutional provision for the reservation of seats expired. It was therefore not operative in the fourth JS elected in 1988. However, the reservation provision was re-enacted into the Constitution in June 1990 by the Tenth Amendment⁴² and thus the fifth JS elected in 1991 had 30 reserved seats for women.

The Constitution under article 9 enunciates special representation of women in local government institutions. Women also enjoy the right to vote and the right to stand for election to the representative offices of the local government.

4.3.1 Women in Parliament and Electoral Politics

(a) Women's Participation in Voting

Voting seems to be the only aspect of political participation where the participation of women is fairly substantial in Bangladesh. Although gender segregated data of votes cast in the elections are not officially available, from observations made

⁴⁰ Article 65(2) and (3). Ibid.

⁴¹ Second Proclamation (Fifteenth Amendment Order) 1978, *Bangladesh Gazette Extraordinary* (18th February 1978). The country was under martial law at the time. Cited in Najma Chowdhury, "Women in Politics in Bangladesh" in *Situation of Women in Bangladesh* (Ministry of Social Welfare and Women's Affairs, Government of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh, May 1985^a), p.275, footnote 6.

⁴² For details, *The Bangladesh Gazette Extraordinary* (June 23, 1990).

by eye witness and media reports, it is generally agreed that women went in large numbers to the polling stations in the previous elections. A remarkable feature in the voting of the parliamentary elections in 1991 was the massive turnout of women voters.⁴³ The reasons that women participate more in voting rather than in other forms of political participation may be, firstly, they are mobilised as voters through various electioneering techniques and through manipulation of the social control system.⁴⁴ Secondly, voting seems to be the only political activity which is not affected by the domestic role of women. Finally, voting requires the least initiative and internal motivation.

However, women's larger participation in voting is not necessarily an outcome of their political consciousness. Available studies made on women in politics in Bangladesh suggest that the huge majority of women are politically inarticulate and less aware.⁴⁵ Most of them do not exercise their right to vote independently. They simply obey the instructions of their male relatives in choosing among the candidates. Illiteracy, lack of mobility and economic dependence keep them subservient to male views and values.

(b) Women's Participation in Parliament

Women's participation in national representative bodies is an important indicator to ascertain their general position in formal politics and their role at the decision-making level. In Bangladesh, women's presence in centres of political power in no way reflects their proportion in the population. Like women in most of the countries of the

⁴³ Observation Report, Parliamentary Elections 1991 (Dhaka: Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh, April 1991).

⁴⁴ Najma Chowdhury, "Women's Participation in Political Process in Bangladesh: Nature and Limitations" in Women and Politics in Bangladesh, Lecture Series-2, (Dhaka: Center for Women and Development, 1985), p.4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.4, Chowdhury, 1985^a, op.cit., pp.253-277; Jahan, 1980, op.cit., pp.236-240.

world, they are underrepresented in the elective public offices. In each of the previous Parliaments, only a few women Parliament members were directly elected. Under the constitutional provision, 30 seats are occupied by women in the Jatiya Sangsad, which makes up an impressive figure for women's representation in Parliament by comparison to many other countries. Over the past three decades, 9 to slightly more than 10 percent of the total members of the JS have been women (see Table 4.1). These figures are comparable to the proportion of women found in national legislative bodies in some countries. For example, women constituted 10.9 percent of Members of Parliament in Austria, 9.4 percent in the Philippines, 11.4 percent in Indonesia, 12.9 percent in Italy and 10.0 percent in Pakistan.⁴⁶ Moreover, the Bangladesh figure appears fairly impressive if one looks at figures of some other countries. The corresponding figures are only 1.3 percent in Bhutan, 5.3 percent in Brazil, 5.1 percent in Malaysia, 4.9 percent in Sri Lanka, 7.9 percent in India, 4.3 percent in Greece, 1.4 percent in Japan and 5.7 percent in the United States.⁴⁷ Thus, the country's Constitution has ensured visibility for women in the house, while the number of female contestants in the parliamentary elections and the rate of their success are infinitely small.

Table 4.1 shows women's overall representation through general and reserved seats in the previous Parliaments of Bangladesh. It can be observed that no woman held a general seat (GS) in the first JS elected in March 1973. However, out of the 300 general seats in each Parliament, the number of women holding general seats was two in 1979, five in 1986, and four in 1988.

As shown in Table 4.1, in the fifth Parliament elected in 1991, women represented only five seats out of 300 members directly elected from single member

⁴⁶ See, *Women in Parliament, Inter-Parliamentary Union*, Geneva, 1989. Also see, *Women - Challenges to the Year 2000*, 1991, United Nations, New York, p.54.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

territorial constituencies. Out of five women members, one was the chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and four represented the Awami League (AL) including the president of the party. In 1991, four women won eight seats (as indicates 2a) among which five seats were won by Khaleda Zia. She resigned from four seats, as under the Constitution a Member of Parliament can represent only one constituency. After her resignation the number of women members remained five (1.7 percent) as one woman was added later through by-election (See 2b). Similarly, women won five seats in the 1986 elections as shown by the corresponding figure for 1a. Sheikh Hasina - the president of AL - won three of these, of which she resigned from two. Later, two women were elected through by-elections (as 1b indicates). It is clear from the above that the number of women holding general seats by direct election in each of the successive Parliaments was abysmally small.

TABLE 4.1
NUMBER OF GENERAL SEATS WON BY AND RESERVED
SEATS FOR WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT, 1973-1991

Election Year	No. of Woman Members in the General Seat	Percentage of General Seats (300)	Reserved Seats for Women	Overall Percentage
1	2	3	4	5
1973	0	0	15	4.8
1979	0 + 2 ^d	0.7	30	9.7
(1a)1986	5	1.7	30	10.6
(1b)1986	3 + 2 ^d	1.7	30	10.6
1988 ^c	4	1.3	-	-
(2a)1991	8	2.7	30	11.5
(2b)1991	4 + 1 ^d	1.7	30	10.6

Note: c The reservation provision was not operative in 1988. Hence the respective spaces under columns 4 and 5 are blank.

d The number of women added subsequently through by-elections.

Source: Najma Chowdhury, 'Women in Politics' paper presented at the Seminar and Workshop on Women in Politics organized by the Dhaka Business and Professional Women's Club, Dhaka, January 28-29, 1994.

TABLE 4.2
WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN FIVE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, 1973-1991
(excluding by-elections)

Year of General Elections	Total Candidates	Number of Women Contestants	Female Contestants as Percentage of Total	No. of Women Winners	No. of Contesting Parties	No. of Parties Which Put Up Female Candidates
1991	2787	46	1.6	4	75	17
1988	978	7	0.7	4	8	2
1986	1529	17	1.1	3	28	5
1979	2125	17	0.8	0	29	9
1973	1089	2	0.2	0	14	-

Source: Calculated by the researcher on the basis of Reports on Parliamentary Elections of 1979 and 1986 and information (data sheets) obtained from the Bangladesh Election Commission.

The disproportionate number of women in general seats accounts for the fact that the number of women contestants in the direct elections of the Parliament was always very small. Table 4.2 incorporates data on the total number of women contestants in the successive elections to the Parliament in independent Bangladesh. The figures are strikingly small in view of the fact that women constitute nearly half of the total electorate. In 1988, the women contenders were seven (0.7 percent) out of a total of 978 contesting candidates. In the 1986 and 1979 elections, 17 women ran for the second and third JS, and constituted only 1.1 percent of total 1529 and 0.8 percent of 2125 contestants respectively. In 1973, women were only two out of 1089 contestants and made up only 0.2 percent of the total candidacy. The 1991 parliamentary elections had the highest number of women candidates ever since 1973, viz, 46 (including multiple candidacy). Still, they constituted only 1.6 percent of the total number of candidates (2,787). Thus, women's candidature for elections to the Parliament was always nominal in terms of total candidacy.

Further, it appears from Table 4.2 that the number of parties which put up female candidates was always small compared to the total number of contesting parties

in the past general elections. In 1991, only 17 political parties put up female candidates out of 75. In 1988, two political parties out of eight; in 1986, five out of 28 political parties and in 1979, nine out of 29 political parties offered women candidates. In 1973, none of the 14 political parties contesting the general elections put up female candidates.

TABLE 4.3
NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN CANDIDATES PUT UP BY
THE MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE PARLIAMENTARY
ELECTIONS OF 1991

Name of the Party	No. of Total Candidates	No. of Women Candidates	Percentage of Women Candidates
AL	264	7	2.6
BNP	300	4	1.3
JP	272	5	1.8
Others	1951	23	1.2
Total	2787	39	1.4

Note: a Excluding Multiple Seats
AL Bangladesh Awami League
BNP Bangladesh Nationalist Party
JP Jatiya Party

Source: Calculated by the researcher on the basis of data obtained from the Bangladesh Election Commission.

Table 4.3 presents figures of female candidacy in the 1991 elections. The BNP gave tickets to four women for eight seats⁴⁸, AL to seven for 10 seats⁴⁹ and Jatiya Party (JP) to five for five seats. However, 23 women stood from the other political parties. It is evident from Table 4.3 that only the AL gave more than 2 percent of the candidacy to women, while the other parties gave slightly more than 1 percent of their total respective candidacy.

⁴⁸ Party chairperson Khalida Zia contested in five seats.

⁴⁹ AL president Sheikh Hasina contested in three and Shajeda Chowdhury - a member of Presidium - contested in two seats.

However, although a slight increase is evident in the number of women candidates over the previous parliamentary elections, the number of victorious women candidates in past elections does not show such a trend (see Table 4.2). In the 1991 elections, the number of women candidates was bigger, but the number of winners fell to only four (which was raised to five in a by-election later). Excluding by-elections, 82 women have been candidates for seats in the Parliament over the five general elections but only 11 of whom have been elected. Subsequent by-elections have increased the number of successful candidates to 16. However, the percentage of winners has only risen from 0.7 percent in 1979 to 1.7 percent in 1991, (See Table 4.1). In fact, statistically, it was only an increase of one percent over the years.

It could also be observed from past elections that the women candidates who stood for the party in power at the time of the elections or for the former ruling parties showed higher success rates than those from the other parties. In 1991, 39 women (excluding multiple candidacy) stood for 17 parties but only three for the AL and one for the BNP were elected. Of the total seven women candidates for parliamentary seats in 1988, five stood for the then ruling JP and four of them won.⁵⁰ However, it appears from the past elections that, not only has the number of women contesting for other parties been significantly low in the past years, their rate of success has also always been slender.

4.4 Political Parties in Bangladesh

A few facts about the main political parties and their organisational setup should be made clear before proceeding to a discussion of women's participation in the political parties of Bangladesh. It has been mentioned earlier that the political field of Bangladesh is crowded by a large number of political parties but there are only four

⁵⁰ Information obtained from Bangladesh Election Commission.

major or prominent parties in terms of their size, support base, and organisational strength. They are the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Bangladesh Awami League (AL), the Jatiya Party (JP) and the Jamaat-i-Islami (Jamaat). There are four main left leaning parties, i.e., the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), the Jatiya Somajtantrik Dal (JSD,I), the National Awami Party (NAP,M) and the Workers' Party (WP) which are active in Bangladesh politics with relatively weaker political strength.

The AL (formerly known as the East Pakistan Awami League) was founded in 1949 by H.S. Suhrawardy, a prominent lawyer and politician in undivided Bengal before 1947 and by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani (Bhashani), a famous populist leader.⁵¹ Under their leadership, the AL became dominant in the politics of East Pakistan and later, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the party succeeded in establishing itself as the vanguard of the nationalist movement of the 1960s which culminated in a mass upsurge in 1969. The Liberation War of 1971 was fought under this party and after independence it formed the government and won a massive victory in the first parliamentary elections of 1973. The AL was overthrown from power by a military coup in August 1975. However, it was active as a dominant and major opposition party till June 1996 when it came into power. The party won 146 of the 300 elected seats in the Parliament.

The BNP was founded by Ziaur Rahman as an attempt to consolidate his power through a political platform. It has been mentioned earlier that the BNP consists of diverse political elements and drop-outs from established political parties.⁵² The BNP won an overwhelming victory in the 1979 JS elections and ruled the country until it was overthrown from power by the military coup spearheaded by H.M. Earshad in

⁵¹ For emergence and development of AL, M.B. Nair, Politics in Bangladesh, (New Delhi: Northern Book Center, 1990).

⁵² See, Hossain, op.cit.

1982. Nevertheless, the BNP figured as a strong opposition party in the following years and won a majority in the 1991 JS elections. It was in power from 1991 to March 1996. The BNP, however, emerged as the principal opposition party with 116 seats in the Parliament elected only in June 12, 1996. The JP was launched by the military regime of Ershad for the same purpose of civilianisation of the government. It was also composed of factions of various political parties. A faction of the BNP and the AL and leaders and followers of some minor parties joined it. Over the course of time, it could establish itself as one of the major parties in Bangladesh.

Among the religious parties, the Jamaat-i-Islami is the most organised and cadre-based party and has been active since the Pakistan period. After independence in 1971 the Jamaat was banned because of its active opposition to the war of independence. It revived under the Political Parties Regulations of 1979 and since then it has been active in Bangladesh politics.

The left leaning parties of Bangladesh, particularly the CPB and the NAP(M) have a long record of political activities. The CPB's historical links may be drawn to the original communist movement in the subcontinent. In 1947, the only left ideological platform in East Pakistan was the East Pakistan Communist Party (EPCP) composed of former members and sympathisers of the Communist Party of India.⁵³ However, after its ban in 1954, it largely infiltrated into the AL to consolidate the leftist position by working through the AL President, Bhashani. The leftists led by Bhashani left the AL in protest of its pro-western foreign policy and formed a new political party - the National Awami Party (NAP) - in July 1957. During the course of the next decade, the NAP became the exclusive popular front of the EPCP⁵⁴ and also became one of

⁵³ See, Maniruzzaman, 1980, op.cit., p.37. For details, pp.36-52.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

the dominant political parties in the then East Pakistan, particularly for its students' front.

In 1962 when the world socialist camp was divided on the question of the international communist movement between USSR and China, it split the EPCP and NAP into pro-Moscow and pro-Chinese groups. Over time the pro-Peking leftists became weak and lost influence due to "an almost interminable factionalism"⁵⁵ revolving around controversy on revolutionary tactics. The present CPB is the continuation of the pro-Moscow EPCP and the present NAP(M) is the continuation of the pro-Moscow NAP. The WP emerged from a faction of pro-Peking leftists. However, another left leaning party, the JSD(I), was established in 1972 by the more radical elements from the student and working class support base of the AL. All of the above mentioned left political parties are active in the political arena although with weak organisational strength, the CPB, the WP and the JSD(I) are distinguishable by their relatively important position and influence compared to the other minor political parties in Bangladesh. The NAP(M) has almost no role and influence in terms of organisational strength and activities in Bangladesh politics.

4.4.1 *Organisational Setup*

Although there exists some differences in the central organisational setup of the political parties in Bangladesh, the similarities are large enough to permit a general description about it.⁵⁶ In all the parties mentioned above, there is a top decision making body in the central organisation, usually consisting of a limited number of party leaders.⁵⁷ This body is generally empowered to make decisions on any aspect. Another

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ The description has been made on information obtained from the respective party offices.

⁵⁷ The name of the highest party organ is different in some parties. For example, in the BNP, the name of this body is the National Standing Committee, in the JSD it is the Central Coordination Committee, and in the WP it is called the Standing Committee. In the AL, JP, NAP and CPB, the name of the top most body is the Presidium.

top body in the central party hierarchy is called either the Executive Committee, the Working Committee or the Central Committee. It is a large body in terms of the number of members which varies from 31 to 101 among the parties as shown in Table 4.4. Usually it controls and coordinates the functions and workings of the various committees of the party and supervises the execution of the party's programme. There is also a party secretariate in the central organisation and in each level of the party organisation comprises of different numbers of members responsible for assigned tasks. In almost all the parties (except the Jamaat) there is a post called the women's affairs secretary. All the members of the party's Central Secretariate belong to the Central Committee.

All political parties in Bangladesh have branches which are often organised throughout the country, from the lowest administrative level to the district level. Each branch has its organisational setup with an executive committee and a secretariate. The branches generally recruit and organise the members, produce party leaders and implement party programmes in their respective areas.

Moreover, parties in Bangladesh are equipped with affiliated bodies corresponding to the various social groupings, such as students, youths, women, labours, peasants, etc. However, membership in the women's wing automatically carries membership in the party. Women's wings of the major parties are usually organised at different levels throughout the country. They have an organisational apparatus and work outside the main party organisation of any level. Women's wings mainly mobilise and recruit women workers and are also entrusted to carry out party programmes. They are also considered as a recruitment and training ground for potential female leaders. It is noted that, women political leaders in Bangladesh are usually recruited from the women's wing to the higher party echelons. A brief account of women's participation in the higher echelons of the central organisations of different political parties is presented below.

4.4.2 *Women's Participation in Political Parties*

In Bangladesh, all available information clearly shows women's lack of participation in partisan politics in terms of running for office, although the two leading political parties of the country - the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP) - are headed by women. Their presence at the leadership has not necessarily translated into women's impressive participation in the other echelons of the party. It is noteworthy that both of the leaders initially achieved political prominence from their relationship with prominent male politicians. Khalida Zia is the chairperson of the BNP, the party that was founded and led by her late husband, Ziaur Rahman, the former president of Bangladesh (1975-82). Sheikh Hasina is the president of the AL, the party led by her late father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman - the leader of the nationalist movement of Bangladesh. In the absence of a male political heir they have been recruited for crisis management as the 'symbols' of departed leaders who had been the driving force and unifying factors of their respective parties.⁵⁸ These female 'symbols' were coopted into leadership roles to unify the party. However, each of the women eventually came to exercise political authority within their respective parties in their own ability and became their leaders in mainstream politics.

⁵⁸ Chowdhury, 1985^a, p.265.

TABLE 4.4
WOMEN IN TOP ECHELON OF POLITICAL PARTY, 1995

Name of the Party	Name of Party Organ	Total No. of Members	No. of Female Members	Percentage of Female Members
BNP	National Standing Committee	13	1	7.7
	National Executive Committee	77	11	14.3
AL	Presidium	15	3	20.0
	Secretariate and Working Committee	65	7	10.7
JP	Presidium	21	1	4.7
	Central Committee	101	4	3.9
JSD(I)	Central Coordination Committee	21	1	4.7
	Central Committee	31	1	3.2
NAP(M)	Presidium	13	1	7.7
WP	Standing Committee	15	0	0
	Central Committee	47	2	4.3
CPB	Presidium	9	0	0
	Central Committee	47	2	4.2

Note: BNP Bangladesh Nationalist Party
AL Bangladesh Awami League
JP Jatiya Party
JSD(I) Jatiya Somajtantrik Dal
NAP(M) National Awami Party
WP Workers' Party
CPB Bangladesh Communist Party

Source: Information obtained from party sources.

Table 4.4 presents data on the male-female composition of the higher bodies in the central organisations of the main political parties of Bangladesh. Although the percentage of women presents variations from party to party and from one organ to another within the party, the Executive or Central Committees of these parties now have at least one woman member. In the highest party organ, the presence of women is nominal in all parties. There is only one woman in the highest party organ in each of the BNP, JP, JSD(I) and NAP(M). There is no woman in the highest organ of either the WP or CPB. Only in the AL are there three women belonging to the Presidium,

including the party president, Sheikh Hasina, out of a total of 15. The AL's 65 member Working Committee has seven women members and thus makes up 10.7 percent of the total membership. Among the 14 secretaries of the party secretariate, women hold three positions including the women's affairs secretary.⁵⁹

In the 13 member National Standing Committee - the highest body of the BNP - the only woman is Begum Khaleda Zia, who is the party's chairperson. However, the BNP has the highest number of female members in the same level of the higher party organ compared to other parties. In its National Executive Committee, there are 11 women including the party chairperson out of a total of 77 and constituting 14.3 percent of the members. In the 101-member Central Committee of JP there are only four women. Only one woman belongs to the 21 member Presidium - the main decision - making body of the JP. The CPB has two female members out of 47 and the WP has two on their Central Committees. Women are totally excluded from the top organ of the Jamaat-i-Islam for their ideological reasons. However, of the country's numerous political parties, two have a female chairperson i.e., the BNP and the AL. Previously only the AL had woman in the post of general secretary for a long time.

Party district committees are usually composed of district level leaders. Most of these committees hardly include any female members. At best they include one woman as secretary of women's affairs. Thus in all parties, the proportion of women in official positions is small.

Apart from women in the top party organs, their number as party members is also small in comparison with male members. In the absence of adequate party records, it is not possible to estimate the number of women members in any party. However, as a result of the deep-rooted traditional gender-segregation, all the main

⁵⁹ Information obtained from party sources.

political parties in Bangladesh have had women's wings for many years to mobilise women membership and support. Women tend to concentrate their participation in this affiliated body and carry out their activities outside the circumference of the party organisation. Women's wings usually never develop a programme of their own. They only perform their role as required by the party. The party appoints its leaders and provides the financing for activities. Its primary activities consists almost entirely of generating women's support for the party candidates and other programmes.

4.5 Women at the Decision-Making Level

In Bangladesh, few women are found in the top echelon of the executive branch. A recent study by Najma Chowdhury shows that the proportion of women in the cabinet ranged between 3 to 6 percent over the years.⁶⁰ Bangladesh has never had more than two female cabinet ministers at one time. The post-independence government of the AL (1971 -1975) first appointed two women in the cabinet as deputy ministers for the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Education. For the first time, one woman was appointed to the cabinet as a full minister for the Ministry of Women's Affairs in the Zia government (1975 - 82) in 1988. The above mentioned study by Chowdhury also suggests that under three regimes, i.e., Mujib, Zia and Ershad, five women attained full ministerial rank and seven became deputy ministers within a time span of 1972 to 1990.⁶¹ In 1991, prior to the parliamentary elections, there was no woman in the council of advisors to the president in the caretaker interim government (1990-1991), formed after the fall of the Ershad regime. In Khaleda Zia's cabinet (1991-1995), there were two women deputy ministers in addition to another woman in the position of the Prime Minister.

⁶⁰ Najma Chowdhury, "Women in Politics", paper presented at the seminar and workshop on Women in Politics organised by Dhaka Business and Professional Women's Club, Dhaka, January 28-29, 1994, p.11.

⁶¹ Ibid.

However, the number of women in the highest level of government does not reveal the full extent of their low visibility. The fact is they are usually chosen to participate in ministries dealing with areas traditionally of concern to women, such as women's affairs, culture, cooperatives, health and family planning and so on. Since independence, women ministers in the government have been placed in these ministries. With the exceptional case of Begum Khaleda Zia who was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh from 1991 to 1995, no woman has ever directed any of the ministries that were considered to have crucial responsibilities such as the finance, commerce, industry, agriculture, defence, foreign affairs, etc. The concentration of women in certain areas, however, has led to the "marginalisation" of female politicians. The striking disparity is also noticeable in elite services, especially in the Foreign Service. In 1978, only one woman was at the head of Bangladesh overseas missions, i.e., in Sri Lanka. Thus women have low visibility in terms of number and "marginalisation" in terms of power distribution at the decision-making level in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The Constitution of Bangladesh recognizes the equal status of women in the political sphere. In spite of that formal pronouncement, an enormous disparity exists between women's theoretical political equality and their meaningful exercise of political power. Although some improvements are observable over time, they are still far behind in achieving political equality.

Historically, the women of Bangladesh have a tradition of limited participation in politics. They largely remain outside the country's political movements. Their participation in formal politics is even more limited. Voting is the only dimension of political participation where they are visible in almost equal terms with men. However, in other spheres of political participation women are only modestly represented. At the

elite level they constitute a small number who represent public offices. Similarly all higher organs of party organisation are mainly male preserves. The same holds true for the decision-making bodies of government.

Moreover, information presented in this chapter show a paucity of women in electoral contests and their disappointing success rates over the elections. Thus, women constitute a small force with an overwhelming male parliamentary majority. The disproportionate number of women in the general seats of Parliament elected from single member territorial constituencies by direct election indicates their weaker but real position in the political arena. It provides the background for studying the problems of women's participation in electoral contests for parliamentary seats and the issue of women's representation in the Parliament in chapter 8.

It is, however, clearly indicated by the content of this chapter that a small number of women are active at national politics in Bangladesh in terms of running party and public offices. The present study delves into these women who are politically active in a society where traditions that encourage women in politics hardly exist. The following chapters look at these exceptional women to understand their distinctive characteristics, their development as political beings and their political careers, experience and perception of certain political issues. The subsequent chapters analyse these on the basis of data derived from a survey of female and male political elites of Bangladesh. Forty-three female respondents, who are the main focus of this study, will be referred to as "political women" from the next chapter onwards.