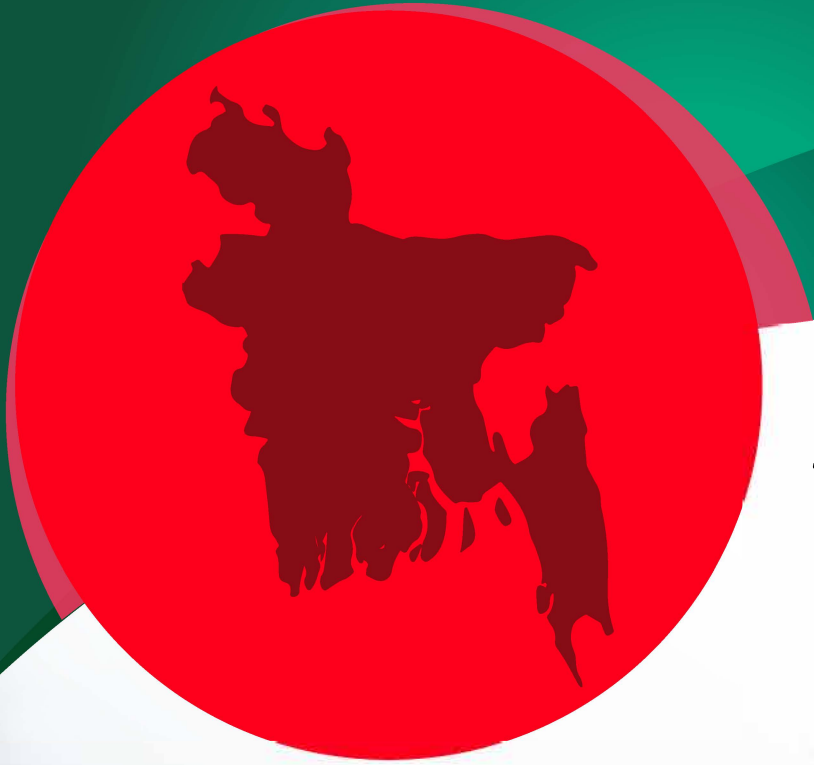


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# When Women and Men Legislators Talk About Women's Issues, Do They Talk About The Same Things? Evidence From The Bangladesh Parliament

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## Abstract

Previous research has largely focused on if and how women legislators bring more women's concerns to the floor of the parliament than their male counterparts. This article takes a different approach, arguing that even when men and women legislators are representing similar types of women's issues, they do not have the same understanding of these issues. This article uses an operational definition of women's concerns and issues by distinguishing between strategic and practical women's needs. For its empirical investigation, it examines five years of parliamentary proceedings of the Bangladesh Parliament (9<sup>th</sup>) and analyzes its four legislative interventions on women's issues. These findings have implications for an understanding of the substantive representation of women legislators in parliament.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh Parliament, legislators, parliamentary debate, substantive representation, women's issues.

## Introduction

The relationship between the sheer presence of women and their substantive representation of women (SRW) issues is inconclusive and contested. Studies in Western and Latin American contexts suggest that women legislators pay greater attention to women's interest than their male colleagues (Childs and Withey, 2004; Lovenduski and Norris, 2003; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). Other findings argue that, as they are not a homogenous entity, not all women represent women. On the other hand, some men might represent women's interests well (Dovi, 2007; Mansbridge, 1999). Having said that, no clear impact on the political agenda could be observed in the presence of women legislators (Grey, 2002; Tolbert and Steuernagel, 2001). Furthermore, little is known about whether women legislators in Asia are effective in addressing issues pertinent to women, and how the presence of women influences the conditions of SRW in parliament.<sup>1</sup> One of the major unresolved puzzles is to what extent issues of women's concerns are raised in the parliament, particularly by male legislators. Also, do women and men legislators represent similar types of women's concerns in the parliament?

This article investigates the question of substantive representation of women's issues on the floor of the parliament when there are women parliamentarians present. It focuses on Bangladesh and proceeds by examining legislators' participation with respect to these issues. While Bangladesh is typical of many developing countries in Asia, where gender norms are different from those of the developed countries, the country is also globally known as a progressive case on gender parity for legislators, senior officials, and managers, as well as professional and technical roles, as it consolidates its position as the region's top performer across all dimensions of the Economic Opportunity and Participation index (World Economic Forum, 2017). Also, due to the presence of 20 percent of the women legislators in parliament via direct election and reserved seats<sup>2</sup> (selected by the political party and then indirectly elected by the elected members of parliament), Bangladesh is an ideal case to understand the patterns of substantive representation of women. The literature on women in politics in Bangladesh largely looks at reserved seats as a tool for inclusion of women in politics, the challenges women face in politics, the effectiveness of women's representation in promoting women's concerns (Chowdhury, 1994; Chowdhury, 2002; Chowdhury, 2013; Frankle, 2004; Jahan,

2012; Panday, 2008). Much of these discussions have focused on whether women's presence in top leadership enables opportunities for promoting female leadership in Bangladesh (Akter and Nazneen, 2013). Little efforts were taken to investigate the role of women legislators in representing women's issues, and so far, no efforts were made to explore to what extent men (80 percent) can represent women on the floor of the parliament.

Research on SRW first requires an elaboration of what is meant by women's interests. Researchers have considered women's issues differently and defined them in diverse ways in different countries. McBride (2001a), Outshoorn (2004), and Htun et al. (2013) focused on feminist demands, such as abortion rights, prostitution, and women's rights bill. Others focused on traditional aspects of women's issues such as education and welfare (Osborn and Mendez, 2010), women's health issues (Reingold and Haynie, 2014), and children/family bills (Escobar-Lemmon et al., 2014). How women's issues are defined derive from research processes and contextual aspects used in these studies.

Existing attempts to define women's issues demonstrated significant variation in women's interest across countries and societies. Research in the UK and the US frame women's interests as women's rights and include abortion policies as part of the relevant issues (McBride, 2001a; 2001b). Likewise, studies in the context of the Netherlands, Italy, and Finland identified prostitution as an issue of interest (Outshoorn, 2004). Latin American women were shown to be more active than their male colleagues when representing welfare policy as women's issues (Reingold and Haynie, 2014) or children/family bills (Escobar-Lemmon et al., 2015). Such examples suggest that the definition of women's issues has a significant connection with context; however, even these definitions can be rather narrow (Baldez, 2011). They fail to cover all women and miss opportunities to explore the implications of representing some interests at the expense of others. Weldon rightly defines "women as a social collectivity" due to entangled sets of global and local structures within which women operate (Weldon, 2011). It is, therefore, important to consider a wide range of issues and include them in the investigation of the substantive representation of women legislators in parliament. This article defines "women's issues" as issues of presumed importance, which have direct or immediate effects on women's lives in both public and private spheres, their autonomy, and their wellbeing. These issues have been further categorized as strategic or practical following Molyneux's (1985) distinction for empirical investigation. This distinction sheds light on gender differences in the articulation of women's issues on the floor of the parliament, assuming that the presence of women matters when the strategic issues regarding women's wellbeing are discussed, even when women have a token representation in the legislature.

The scope of the study is limited to the parliamentary proceedings of the 9<sup>th</sup> Bangladesh Parliament (2008-2013), and data have been selected across five years of the 9<sup>th</sup> parliament including records of legislators' contributions on the floor of parliament. This choice of 9<sup>th</sup> parliament was made on two grounds - first, it had the highest number of women Members of Parliament (MPs), elected and selected (reserved seats) from different political parties, making it relevant and rich in information. There was significant variation in the background of these women legislators and the means they used to enter into parliament (quota and non-quota), thus providing a more variety of perspectives to SRW. Second, it was able to adopt a milestone legal framework on violence against women, which had been in longstanding demand from various quarters of society. Using qualitative content analysis, this study compares the frequency of participation of men and women legislators with regard to women's issues with their participation on all other issues to examine whether meaningful differences can be found. The article then goes on to analyze the content of each of the women's issues, categorizing them into practical and strategic issues, thereby exploring whether they carry the same meaning for men as they do for women. The measurement of substantive representation in this article is not restricted by the effectiveness (or outcome) of policies, but in the observation of the process-oriented activities involved in substantive representation.

## **Women's Concerns and Issues**

The operational definition used in this article draws upon two general understandings: (a) first, it emphasizes issues of substantive value to women's lives and wellbeing inspired by both "rights" and "traditional" aspects of women's concerns; and (b) secondly, it acknowledges the context-specific structural inequalities and needs of women. Mentioned earlier, Molyneux's (1985) distinction of strategic and practical gender needs are adopted to categorize women's issues. Her framework aims to avoid discrimination against or misrepresentation of women, providing a useful framework with a broad set of measurable criteria of women's concerns used during the formulation of Third World gender planning policies. Molyneux's dichotomous understanding of women's issues allows us to consider concerns that leave little space for excluding any specific group of women. Critics have discouraged emphasizing

traditional concerns related to family and childcare as those only essentialize traditional norms about women (Weldon, 2011). However, traditional concerns of women are as important as feminist ones for those living in a country where women hardly enjoy any rights and are still fighting for fulfilling their basic needs. Focusing only on issues that all women have in common reduces the chance to include context-specific women's needs that are critical to achieve gender equality.

Influenced by Molyneux's conceptual distinction, strategic women's issues in this study refer to policies related to overcoming women's inequalities and subordination in all spheres of life by restructuring gender relations and eradicating obstacles to gender equality. The discussion of strategic women's issues is very pertinent in the context of Bangladesh, as the country is characterized as patriarchal, and household resources, women's labor, sexuality, and mobility outside the household are controlled by men and influenced by the religious norms and values (Jahan, 1995; Kabeer, 1994; Nazneen, 2016). The existing reservation to Articles 2 and 16(1) (c) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) deprives women of Bangladesh of their equal rights in marriage, its dissolution, and inheritance of property.<sup>3</sup>

Women's rights organizations and development agencies in Bangladesh were seen working together on issues of violence against women, dowries, and ratification of the CEDAW.<sup>4</sup> CEDAW is therefore used to develop the measurement criteria for strategic women's issues. Since the convention known as an international bill of rights that identifies a comprehensive list of women's interests across a wide range of areas, it offers an appropriate way to categorize women's strategic issues (Beckwith, 2011; 2014). The convention considered the eradication of violence against women to be central to the elimination of discrimination. Despite the enactment of various laws in Bangladesh, it is one of the countries with the highest incidents of violence against women (VAW). Rural communities in Bangladesh rely more on the alternative dispute resolution (ADR) system than general law for settling issues in the private sphere. Despite the state's proclamation that *fatwas* are illegal and that nobody is compelled to obey them, they are still issued by local religious leaders and are often discriminatory against women (Shehabuddin, 1999). The harmful practice of child marriage and dowry demands, both illegal, continue reinforcing the traditional norms and making women vulnerable to ill health, exploitation, discrimination, and violence. Considering the realities on the ground in Bangladesh, violence against women and girls (VAWG) is identified as one of the sub-categories of strategic women's issues.

Being one of the signatories to the convention, policymakers in Bangladesh also indicate women's rights in civic, social, political, and economic spheres as significant areas where intervention needs to occur through different programmatic policies. Bangladeshi women, regardless of their class, location, and educational qualification, live in a societal system that directly or indirectly overlooks that women are accorded an inferior status in all spheres of life (Chowdhury, 2013). Two major engines of national economic growth - exports and remittances, are largely contributed by women. However, limitations are found in women's poor working environment, exposure to violence in the workplace, and low investment in appropriate skill enhancement. Having less control over their own income and earnings is another dimension of women's economic disempowerment. The absence of women-friendly laws for women's ownership, control, and usage of land and other assets makes ensuring women's economic rights unattainable in Bangladesh. All of these have substantive value for women to be free from discrimination and able to pursue their interest and activities (Malhotra et al., 2002; Dahelrup, 2014). The strategic concerns are further categorized into three subsections, i.e., violence against women and girls (VAWG), civil and political rights (CPR), and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR).

The definition of practical women's issues is also adapted from Molyneux's distinction of practical gender needs, which is based on the contextual and concrete conditions that women's experiences are based on their survival rather than "questioning the structure of their subordination" (Moser, 1989, p. 1803). Practical women's issues often constitute policy responses to immediate perceived necessities, identified by women within their specific contexts. It includes concerns such as shelter, childcare, education, health care, and poverty. Gender discrimination is commonly evident even when it comes to attaining these fundamental needs for women in developing countries, which is why they are considered to be practical women's issues. For example, Bangladesh has achieved tremendous success in attaining gender parity in primary and secondary education. Nevertheless, around 1.5 million girls of primary school age are out of school (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF, 2003). The rates of child marriage and adolescent motherhood are among the highest in the world (UNICEF, 2010). The rate of maternal mortality is also very high, i.e., 176 deaths per 100,000 births (UNICEF, 2014). Nearly 33 percent of women get married before the age of 15 (National Institute of Population and Research Training et al., 2009). These

are only a few examples of women's issues in Bangladesh that require immediate attention. These practical issues have further been categorized into financial support, technical support, education and training, health care, housing facilities, social support, all of which emerged from an analysis of immediate needs of women within a specific context of Bangladesh.

The categorization of strategic women's issues includes policy issues that are dedicated to questioning fundamental reasons for women's subordination and asking for improvements in gender equality and eradication of discrimination. On the other hand, practical women's issues do not refer to an existential threat to women but are rather derived from immediate needs, emphasizing short-term effects. Because the definition of strategic women's issues and its subcategorizations is based on a structural understanding of the causes of the subjugation of women, addressing these can allow societies to realize intergenerational long-term benefits in the process of gender equality.

Following Dahelrup's (2014) claim that substantive representation of women (SRW) only makes sense when embedded in a call to change the status quo of male domination, this article highlights the importance of strategic women's issues for the evaluation of SRW. This does not mean a downplaying of practical women's issues, but distinguishes different degrees of SRW, depending on which specific issues are addressed. In addition, there are some practical women's issues which have substantive value and also have long-term empowerment and human development effects. Therefore, we place importance on strategic women's issues and some practical women's issues, which have substantive value, both of which are fundamental to enhance gender equality, eradicate all kinds of discrimination, and support development of human dignity. Further, the distinction between practical and strategic issues enables us to assess gender variation when both men and women legislators are talking about women's issues.

Such conceptual distinctions and categorization are used to develop the coding frame to classify the parliamentary proceedings used in this study. The analysis in this study uses a coding frame with indicators of strategic and practical women's issues, developed deductively (drawn from existing attempts), and inductively (derived from the empirical documents). The analysis is based on these two categories captured whether legislators express general concerns or comments in support of women's issues of everyday life, whether they are willing to discuss policy matters as part of legislators' activities. In this study, nearly 21,000 pages of parliamentary debates and standing committee meeting reports are analyzed manually. Content analysis is deemed an appropriate method to analyze such large documents as it has allowed limiting the analysis to those aspects that are relevant to the research questions, efficiently reducing the material to be analyzed (Schreier, 2013).

## **Priorities of Women's Concerns and Issues in the Legislative Activities**

This article looks at four legislative activities of the 9<sup>th</sup> parliament for its analysis. They are a) question-answer (QA) sessions to the executives, including the Prime Minister and ministers from concerned ministries; b) short statements on public interest (Rule 71 A); c) calling for attention on public interest (Rule 70); and d) resolution motions (Rule 130). Overall, a total of 24,442 parliamentary questions (including verbal with supplementary questions), 1979 short discussion of public interest issues (Rule 71), 488 calling for attention-seeking on public interest (Rule 71 A), and 119 resolution motion (Rule 138) were analyzed.

We investigate the types of women's issues (practical vs. strategic) which had received priority treatment by legislators, and whether or not variation exists in such treatment. Frequency analysis reveals that women legislators pay greater attention to women's strategic over practical concerns by raising questions, moving discussions, or placing motions in the parliament. Women raised more strategic women's issues (260) than they were expected (187)<sup>5</sup> to raise in relation to the total number of women's issues and total number of strategic issues raised by all legislators (both men and women) (see Table 1). On the other hand, women raised fewer practical women's issues (168) than they were expected (240) to raise. Men legislators, on the other hand, brought up more issues addressing women's practical needs than strategic needs when they were representing women's issues (see Table 1). Overall, men legislators mentioned fewer strategic women's issues (51) than expected (123) and more practical women's issues (230) than expected (157) in relation to the total number of women's issues raised by both legislators (see Table 1). In other words, it seems that men legislators preferred to respond to an immediate perceived necessity of women within a specific context (practical women's issues) rather than questioning women's subordination in general (referring to strategic women's issues). The Chi-square statistics result (see Table 1) is significant (less than .01), which suggests that legislative interventions on women's strategic and practical issues significantly depends on gender of the legislator, where women emphasized more strategic issues and men more practical issues (see Table 1).

In summary, data analysis has revealed that both men and women legislators discussed women's strategic and practical issues on the floor. However, frequency analysis and inferential statistics (Chi-square) have demonstrated that women paid more attention to issues relevant for ensuring women's autonomy and empowerment by addressing women's subordination in society. On the other hand, men paid more attention to solving more immediate practical women's needs. Such findings demand further investigation into specific contents under each category of women's issues to shed light on the qualitative difference in the understanding of the construction of women's strategic and practical issues among men and women legislators.

### ***Content of the Women's Issues: A Qualitative Investigation***

This section aims to explore whether strategic and practical women's issues contain similar aspects (meaning) for men and women legislators. Analyzing the content of women's issues helps in understanding whether women and men legislators have shown distinct attitudes and preferences while representing strategic and practical women's issues and if so, how distinct they are. Data-driven qualitative investigation has been applied by using different subcategories of strategic and practical women's issues. For analysis, this section only focuses on the frequencies and contents of three legislative activities i.e. Rule 71, Rule 71 A, and Rule 138.

#### ***Strategic Women's Issues***

The data suggest that the most recurrent strategic women's issues that legislators addressed pertained to violence against women and girls (VAWG) and the policy interventions eliminating such violence (see Table 2). The second-highest number of issues (31), under the theme of civil and political rights (CPR), was linked to ensure women's physical and mental integrity. Finally, women's economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) – meaning their rights to economic independence, an adequate standard of living, cultural rights, and human dignity, was the least addressed of the three issues (see Table 2).

For interventions referring to VAWG, women legislators addressed different aspects ranging from violence in public places to violence at home. In total, interventions on VAWG referred to 11 different themes (see Table 3), of which women legislators raised more than 90 percent. Among those interventions, the most recurrent concerns pertained to punishments for child marriage, punishment for *Fatwas*, acid-based violence, and protection of migrants.

Women legislators' intervention under the theme of VAWG was holistic in the sense that they did not only bring diversified strategic women's issues to the table but also suggested dynamic policy options for overcoming challenges. For instance, they presented claims such as establishing special tribunals for offenders of violence against women cases, laws increasing the age limit in relation to child marriages, safe homes for newly born children inside women's prisons, or ensuring women's participation in politics. Women legislators highlighted several concerns that made connections to women's lives and their wider encounters with violence. Women were also disproportionately dealing with issues that particularly question the involvement of men in the violation of women's rights. Concerns included ensuring of punishment for those who commit *fatwa*-based violence and prevention of acid-based crime against women. It was only women who were seen raising issues of a lack of a comprehensive approach to stop *Fatwa*-based gender violence, which did not only question the patriarchal structure but also pointed out involvement of men in women's subordination. These concerns directly address women's subordination as well as the contentious patriarchal nature of Bangladeshi society. Conversely, men legislators raised only three women's issues and limited themselves to themes of domestic violence, reporting of violence, and public awareness against VAWG, during the entire 9<sup>th</sup> Parliament (see table 3). None of the men legislators were seen emphasizing legal aspects of protection and prevention of any kind of violence (which ranges from the domestic to the public spheres).

Interventions regarding CPR were predominantly raised by women legislators, who addressed a variety of rights issues. Table 3 lists legislators' interventions with regards to CPR, classifying them into 11 themes. Of those interventions, the most recurrent women's CPR issues pertained to the enactment of women's development policy, rights of migrant workers, and rights of equal pay, which were raised only by women legislators. Women were mostly advocating for the rights of women workers and policy options that address inequality, i.e., the enactment of women's development policy and establishment of women's development bank. Women legislators raised issues such as the safety and security of children of women prisoners and sex workers, and the rights of women working in vulnerable situations (tea gardens, rice mills, and the *Sundarban* forests). These groups of women are not only overlooked by

policy-makers but are considered too controversial to discuss in a male-dominated country such as Bangladesh, where sex workers are still fighting for their legal status. Similarly, concerns about women's lack of access to justice, public office, and participation in politics, which are at the center of the patriarchal nature of the society, were only raised by women legislators. While talking about those issues, women legislators justified their claims by giving examples of male domination in Bangladeshi society and questioning its patriarchal nature. On the other hand, men legislators' interventions were limited to two themes — rights of women workers (two times) and maternal leave (one time) (see Table 3).

With regard to the sub-category CSRS, legislators' interventions listed in Table 3 can be classified into six themes. Of those interventions the most recurrent women's issues were women's property rights<sup>6</sup>, acknowledgment of unpaid household work and adoption of women's development policy, all of which were raised only by women. Women legislators questioned the traditional notion of womanhood which became evident in such motions as: "recognition of women's household unpaid work and their incorporation in the national GDP to ensure that their economic empowerment can be assured" (12<sup>th</sup> session, November 2011).<sup>7</sup> Both the concerns about women's property rights and recognition of unpaid care work are very pertinent for women in Bangladesh, as well as contentious in the sense that they question the heart of the patriarchal nature of society. By bringing up such concerns, women legislators questioned existing patriarchal practices of the Bangladeshi society which create sharp discrimination against women. They called for the adoption of a women's development policy with advocates for equal economic rights for women, echoing the policy aspirations that are part of global women's movements today. Women's rights groups in Bangladesh have long raised their voice against unequal provisions in Personal Laws which have contributed to women's subordination in social, economic, political, and legal terms (Nazneen, 2017). None of the men legislators were seen addressing these concerns in their legislative interventions.

Analyzing men legislators' total interventions on strategic issues (only six types) under three sub-categories, it becomes evident that they only conveyed concerns related to awareness against dowry-based violence, the security of women students in college (under category VAWG), ensuring the salaries of garment and tea garden workers (under category CPR), prolonging maternity leave, and permitting the usage of the mother's name in official documents (under category CSRS) (see Table 3). It is worth noting these concerns matched some already existing governments' initiatives to assimilate women's issues into the government's policy-making process during their first year. Policy changes, such as the Domestic Violence Act (2010) and increase of maternity leave from three to six months, and the recognition of the mother's name in official documents, were adopted/enacted during the tenure of the 9<sup>th</sup> parliament. Another issue—increasing the salary of garment and tea garden workers—was already a matter of considerable political attention. This was due to the Rana Plaza incident in the garments industry, which caused a large public outcry in 2013. Such interventions referring to the garment sector also mirror the government's aspiration to uphold and repair the national image which was damaged following the Rana Plaza incident. Both men and women legislators were seen raising issues on behalf of the government's existing initiatives, however, men legislators' representation on strategic women's issues never went beyond the government's approach to women's issues in the entire parliament. In addition, interventions by male legislators shifted the focus from addressing the involvement of men perpetrators behind acts of violence against women to framing these concerns as "building public awareness against dowry-related grievances." For example, male legislators said: "Incidence of violence against women especially dowry related violence has increased significantly... We, therefore, need to build public awareness across the country and are requesting the government to take necessary steps in this regard" (3<sup>rd</sup> Parliamentary Session, September 2019).<sup>8</sup>

Women legislators, in contrast, often went beyond mirroring the government's approach to improving women's condition and their discourse was more in line with the agenda of contemporary women's movement organizations, particularly those working for gender equity in Bangladesh. In their interventions referring to the protection of victims, for example, women legislators spoke about implementing fast track tribunals to solve reported cases of violence and operationalizing a one-stop crisis center<sup>9</sup> in every district of Bangladesh. These are among the most discussed ongoing demands coming from women's rights organizations. Women legislators not only urged for a reinforcement of the subsequent policies to address VAWG, but also pointed to the intensity of vulnerability of women in Bangladesh, a matter that is worth political attention. Some of the interventions included:

Victims of domestic violence in our country [are] scared of talking or reporting to police. We need to break the silence... We have some crisis centers in different places. They are providing treatment, legal and mental support to victims successfully. They are also able to protect victims from further torture by the husband. I would like to know from Hon'ble Minister whether the government has



any plan to start more crisis centers. There is an urgent need to spread such centers all over Bangladesh (Parliamentary questions, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, June 2009).<sup>10</sup>

[W]omen in rural Bangladesh are still suffering from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment by the local religious leaders. Even though it is illegal, we often see news of such inhuman act in newspaper... government must take strong actions against perpetrators to stop Fatwa based violence.<sup>11</sup> (5<sup>th</sup> Session, July 2010).

Apart from highlighting the subject of violence or protection from violence, women legislators were also seen exploring the connection between women's subordination and its wider implication for their lives. Examples of some explicit demands included: (a) safe homes or arrangement of safe home for the children born inside women prisons (7<sup>th</sup> Session, Dec 2010); (b) increasing the minimum age limit of marriage for girls in order to reduce child marriages (12<sup>th</sup> Session, January 2012); (c) free education for all married women, especially those given away into marriage at an early age (15<sup>th</sup> Session, November 2012; 4<sup>th</sup> Session, January 2010); (d) equal employment opportunities (5<sup>th</sup> Session, July 2010); (e) constituency for women legislators coming from reserved seats (10<sup>th</sup> Session, August 2011). These issues were brought to the floor for discussion exclusively by women legislators and were never introduced by their male colleagues. The issues are from a wide variety of areas affecting women on a daily basis, and are relevant for ensuring women's autonomy in social, economic, and political domains.

Another important, widely discussed issue was the recognition of women's contribution to politics, such as women's participation in the language movement of 1952 and women's contribution in 1971 during the War of Liberation in Bangladesh. These issues are also widely discussed nationally, specifically during the celebrations of UNESCO's International Mother Language Day<sup>12</sup> and Independence Day (Babul, 2014). To provide greater attention to women's contribution and to give a due share of credit to women's sacrifices, women legislators asked for appreciation and acknowledgment of women's involvement during the language movement against the Pakistani military regime (8<sup>th</sup> Session, March 2011), and for the national recognition of *Birangona*<sup>13</sup> and their sacrifices for the national cause (19<sup>th</sup> Session, November 2013).

Male legislators rarely acknowledged women's contribution to the family (being a housewife or mother) or paid tribute to women who have sacrificed their lives for the country, and the establishment of its native language. While this analysis does not deny the essential role of male legislators in promoting the cause of women, the evidence presented here indicates that men care differently and to a somewhat limited extent about what is affecting women, and express concerns across a limited range of issues in comparison to the variety of concerns demonstrated by women legislators on the floor of parliament. Hence, it could be argued that representation of the above-mentioned strategic concerns may not arrive at the platform in the absence of women legislators.

### ***Practical Women's Issues***

Practical issues raised were divided into six themes for our analysis. These included financial support, technical support, education and training, health sector, shelter/housing facilities, and social support. Table 4 shows that issues regarding women's health, housing facilities, social support and education and training were the more recurrent practical issues raised by both men and women legislators. Themes regarding financial support were raised almost exclusively by male legislators. They also raised issues of women's health, almost on par with women legislators.

The data shows that male legislators prioritized providing financial support to women from their constituencies. The most recurrent concerns under this theme included calls for the provision of financial assistance/loans to ultra-poor women such as widows and disabled women, and supporting the distribution of sewing machines to poor women. Some sample intervention included:

Government needs to ensure housing facilities for the poor, and helpless people in our country. I would request Prime Minister to take immediate action to establish an old people's home in my constituency (1<sup>st</sup> Parliamentary Session, February 2009).<sup>14</sup>

I am requesting Government to donate free sewing machines for poor and distressed people (2<sup>nd</sup> Parliamentary Session, 2009).<sup>15</sup>

To reduce women's unemployment rate, we need to bring more women under training scheme and distribute free sewing machines among them. Is there any related plan from the Government's side? (12<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary Session, 2012)<sup>16</sup>

Women legislators expressed the need to concentrate on income generating activities (issues under theme "technical support") for improving women's financial situations rather than providing them loans. Female legislators identified financial support to rural women for "initiating small scale business" as "an effective solution to tackle women's subordination in economic decision-making" (1<sup>st</sup> Session, January 2009). They also focused on the need to construct housing for extremely poor women and greater investment in skill development (technical) of such women. Such policy proposals were aimed at bringing long-term benefit to poor women rather than only solving their immediate financial needs.

Content referring to the government's existing family planning programs is also presented differently by men and women legislators (under the theme of health). While men legislators pointed out difficulties inherent in the implementation of the family planning programs, women legislators intervened with a strategy for the successful implementation of the program "by ensuring supply of qualified human resources for the successful implementation of the project" (discussed in 6<sup>th</sup> parliamentary session, July 2010). They showed greater sensitivity when bringing practical issues to the floor – for example, they called for free birthing and delivery services for poor pregnant women, the reduction of mortality rates of pregnant women, free treatment for victims of acid burns, establishment of burn units in local hospitals, and ensuring the presence of female doctors for examining rape victims, all brought up under the theme of health. These were raised only by women legislators and are recurrent issues women in Bangladesh face on daily basis as per the gender gaps report (World Economic Forum, 2017). Bangladesh has a very high maternal mortality ratio, where 12,000 women die each year due to pregnancy issues or in childbirth (UNICEF, 2010). Around 3,582 people were victims of acid attacks in Bangladesh during 1999-2014 (Acid Survivors Foundations, 2015). It was women legislators who brought these burning issues to the floor and discussed the urgency for immediate intervention by the government, whereas men legislators rarely referred to these problems on the parliament floor. A sample question from women legislators raised on the floor during the proceedings was as follows: "Does the health ministry consider recruiting female doctors in every medical hospital where victims of rape first go for the check-up to enable them to file their case?" (Bangladesh Parliament, 2009a).

### **Summary**

The analysis in the above sections draws attention to the distinctive contributions that women and men legislators bring to the political process. It is worth clarifying that the qualitative investigation of the content of both categories of women's issues (strategic and practical) allowed us to see gender differences in legislators' issue representation, reinforcing women legislators' commitment to voicing the existence of gender inequalities in all spheres. We found that female legislators were more inclined than the male legislators to refer to a variety of themes under each category of women's issues, whereas men legislators focused on a small subset of issues. Second, whilst addressing a wide range of strategic and practical women's issues, women raised issues that are contentious in nature. They paid more attention to the patriarchal nature of society and women's resulting subordination in all spheres of life. Third, only women legislators were seen to bring up those women's issues of critical importance in the Bangladesh society, such as support to rape and acid victims, and condemnation of *Fatwa*-based violence. In contrast, men legislators restricted their interventions to some practical women's issues, mostly under the themes of health and financial support to poor women. Even when talking about women's issues under the same theme, men mainly chose to talk about the concerns derived from existing government programs and left out contentious issues that pointed to the patriarchal nature of the society. On the other hand, women placed the removal of women's political, social, economic, cultural inequalities at the center of their policy interventions. Thus, the degrees to which men and women legislators enacted the SRW varied to a great extent.

### **Conclusions**

Research on gender and politics has demonstrated the importance of women's representation in the political process by studying how the presence of women in parliament has contributed to the cause of women. This article has systematically investigated whether women legislators are more likely to represent women's issues than their male colleagues in the Bangladesh Parliament. It is found that the gender of the legislators is statistically significant in that

women legislators have contributed substantively to discussing issues pertinent to improving women's conditions in Bangladesh. These findings appear to be consistent with previous research findings that claimed women have an intrinsic interest in women's well-being (Mansbridge, 1995; Philips, 1995; Schwindt and Mishler, 2005) and feel a responsibility to speak out for women (Burrell, 1994; Carroll, 2001; Dobson and Carroll, 1991; Saint-Germin, 1989; Wolbrecht, 2002).

This study has gone further by asking what types of women's issues men and women legislators have raised in the parliament. There is an expectation that women legislators put more emphasis on issues related to women's rights. To have a comprehensive understanding of women's issues, this study provided its own set of indicators to classify women's issues in Bangladesh. The analysis presented reveals that women and men legislators do not necessarily refer to similar issues (strategic or practical) when they talk about women. Inferential statistical analysis suggests that the gender of legislators strongly mattered when it came to representation, with women legislators being more inclined to advocate for strategic women's issues while men legislators were advocating practical women's issues. Such findings are supportive of the existing understanding that women do have distinct priorities, values, and attitudes compared to their male counterparts with regards to gender equality (Campbell et al., 2010; Cowell-Meyers and Langbein, 2009; Dahlerup, 1988; Tam, 2018; Tremblay, 1998).

Notwithstanding the evidence, this study did not overlook the contribution of men who speak up for women in parliament. It was found that a few men do represent women on both strategic and practical women's issues and is in line with previous research which has shown that some men do represent women's issues (Celis, 2006; Dobson, 2001; Klein, 1984). However, it is shown that men legislators' interventions were very low in numbers and did not address issues that have substantive values for women in Bangladesh.

Unlike previous empirical work, this article has moved beyond merely identifying gender differences. The data-driven qualitative analysis of the specific content showed that when men and women legislators talk about similar issues, they emphasize different aspects. Women were more concerned with the patriarchal structure, the involvement of men in violating women's rights, and strong rule of law for redressing such violence. Men, on the other hand, had a more traditional approach overlooking questions of male domination. They were not keen regarding interventions in the area of women's rights and autonomy.

Furthermore, women legislators brought to the floor a wide variety of key concerns for women in Bangladesh - safety, security, and rights in civil, political, economic, social and cultural spheres, consistent with issues generally supported by women's movements rights organizations. More importantly, women emphasized issues which highlight the image of the working or career women as opposed to the image of woman as a wife and mother in the traditional patriarchal society. They thereby challenged the existing portrayal of women exclusively as housewives without agency and having a high likelihood of subordination.

The findings are in contrast with previous research which has shown that gender differences are not obvious with regard to legislators' representation on traditional women's concerns (Tam, 2018). This study shows that it was only women legislators who demonstrated their greater commitment to social justice issues and demands derived from the realities of women in the society in Bangladesh. Even when men and women legislators talked about the same themes of practical women's issues, their focus varied substantially. Such gender variation in interventions can generally be explained by the fact that men and women legislators may perceive women's life or women's issues differently. Men legislator might be concerned about women constituents only as a possible vote bank for their future re-election. Women, on the other hand, appeared to be vocal on strategic women's issues simply because of their genuine feelings for women's causes and rights more broadly.

Following the appeal of Paxton, Jennifer, and Hughes (2008, p. 275) to concentrate on "making more effort to study women's representation in non-western regions like Asia", this article has offered the first empirical attempt to study Bangladeshi women parliamentarians and their substantive representation. Apart from taking an empirically insightful case, this paper defined women's issues beyond exclusively focusing on rights-based feminist concerns or women's traditional concerns. Considering women's issues which have "fundamental and substantive value" (as suggested by Beckwith, 2014, p. 31), this article aimed to take a context-specific and socially driven operational definition of women's issues for studying substantive representation of the women legislators in Bangladesh. Molyneux's (1985) classification of "strategic gender interests" and "practical gender interests" has provided a useful framework for this. This article not only aimed to provide first-hand empirical evidence of Bangladeshi women

legislators' representation on behalf of women in parliament, but also provided a useful operational definition of women's issues with a list of indicators for measuring SRW.

The scope and data used in this article do not provide likely explanations for men and women legislators' preferences in issue selection for their deliberation. Similarly, this study intends not to evaluate the quality of the conversations of women legislators, which require in-depth textual analysis or argumentative approach to investigate the quality of the deliberation (Eemeren et al., 2010). This article may not do full justice to it given the large volume of hard copies of the parliamentary proceeding analyzed for the analysis; however, this can be an interesting area for further investigation. Another potential avenue for future research is to investigate whether women legislators are better for long-term change in women's lives or whether women legislators in Bangladesh feel obliged to speak for women's issues simply because of their entry to parliament via reserved seats. Nonetheless, this study has offered various insights, offering an agenda for future inquiry in the field of women's presence in parliament and their substantive representation in the context of developing countries.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The complexities in Asian contexts such as the small number of women in parliament and substantial gender discrimination make it particularly difficult, if not impossible, to provide a comprehensive account of all the factors underlying women's substantive representation (Iwanaga, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> In the 9<sup>th</sup> parliament, with 20 general seats and 50 reserved seats for women, women's representation increased to 19.7 percent, the highest ever in the history of the Bangladesh Parliament. 19 women were elected to general seats. Due to the resignation of one male MP, a by-election was held in 2009 and a woman (the MP's sister) was elected to his seat, resulting in 20 women in general seats.

<sup>3</sup> The government is still maintaining its reservation on the ground that those legal provisions are in direct contradiction with the personal Muslim laws. By specifying Islam as the state religion, article 2 (A) of the Constitution confirmed the use of *Shariah* laws in the personal life sphere. Thus, the legal status of Muslim women in Bangladesh is defined by Muslim personal laws, along with other general laws.

<sup>4</sup> CEDAW identifies all the ways in which women's identity can lead to discrimination and aims to guide countries in drafting and implementing policies to advance those interests. It enjoys the explicit approval of almost every nation in the world.

<sup>5</sup> The expected value is from Chi-Square calculations of legislators' intervention (see the Appendix).

<sup>6</sup> Within the context of Bangladesh, one of the factors which account for the backwardness of women's rights is their limited access to property such as land (Sourav, 2015). The existing laws are derived from Islamic *Sharia* law which is not conducive to ensure that women enjoy equal rights when it comes to ownership of inherited property (March, Smyth, and Mukhopadhyay, 1999). According to the law, women are entitled to only half of what men receive from the paternal property. However, in practice, women rarely get the part they are entitled to receive because of the patriarchal nature of the society. Furthermore, women from the Hindu community do not inherit any paternal property due to the absence of a Hindu family law or a common legal framework in this regard.

<sup>7</sup> A sample of intervention (translated) by women legislators on the floor.

<sup>8</sup> A sample of intervention (translated) by men legislators on the floor.

<sup>9</sup> One-stop crisis center is a model of hospital-based services for domestic violence, burn and sexual assault survivors in Bangladesh, which operates in collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organizations and with a working committee representing the various agencies. Multi-Sectoral Program on Violence Against Women under the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs with collaboration of BNWLA and *Naripokkho*, established six One-Stop Crisis Centres (OCC) for victims of violence that provide medical, legal, and social services to the victims in the six divisional government hospitals (Mia, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> A sample of intervention (translated) by women legislators on the floor.

<sup>11</sup> A sample of intervention (translated) by women legislators on the floor.

<sup>12</sup> International Mother Language Day has been observed on 21 February annually since 2000 to recognize the 1952 Bengali Language Movement in Bangladesh.

<sup>13</sup> A Bengali word used to recognize and show respect to victims of rape by the Pakistani military during the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

<sup>14</sup> A sample of intervention (translated) by men legislators on the floor.

<sup>15</sup> A sample of intervention (translated) by men legislators on the floor.

<sup>16</sup> A sample of intervention (translated) by men legislators on the floor.

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## Appendix

**Table 1: Gender difference on strategic and practical issues under parliamentary Q&A and national debate (during 2009-2013)**

Gender	Strategic Issues	Practical Issues	Totals
Female	260 (187*)	168 (240*)	428
Male	51 (123*)	230 (157*)	281
Totals	311	398	709 (Grand Total)

The Chi-square statistic is  $\chi^2 (1) ** = 125.01$  and is statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$

*Source:* Author's calculation from parliamentary proceedings (see primary documents in references)

\* Refers to expected value. \*\* degrees of freedom

**Table 2: Categories of strategic needs conveyed by men legislators vs. women legislators in three legislative issues (during 2009-2013)**

Strategic Needs & Issues	Frequencies by Women Legislators	Frequencies by Men Legislators
VAWG	33	2
CPR	28	3
ESCR	12	1
Total	73	6

*Source:* Author's calculation from parliamentary proceedings (see primary documents in references)

**Table 3: Intervention on VAWG, CPR and CSRS by legislators, classified by themes**

<b>Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)</b>		
Themes	No. of Interventions by Women Legislators	No. of Interventions by Men Legislators
Child marriage	5	
Acid based violence	4	
<i>Fatwa</i> based violence	4	
Women migrant workers	3	
Tribunal for VAW case	3	
Domestic violence	2	1
Trafficking	2	
Dowry based violence	2	
Political violence	2	
Reporting of violence incident		1
Public awareness against VAW	1	1
<b>Civil and Political Rights (CPR)</b>		
Rights of migrant workers (including work permit, salary and protection from violence)	6	
Women's development policies	5	
Rights of equal payment	5	
Rights of women workers (including tea garden, garments workers, rice mills)	4	2
Women in politics	3	
Safety of children of women prisoners and sex workers	3	
Rights of women's association	2	
Position in public office	2	
Access to justice	1	
Maternal leave	1	1
Women's development Bank	1	

(Table continued to next page)

<b>Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CSRS)</b>		
Themes	No. of Interventions by Women Legislators	No. of Interventions by Men Legislators
Women's property rights	4	
Acknowledgement of un-paid labor	3	
Social recognition of <i>Birangona</i>	2	
Respect to house help	1	
Women's role in language movement	1	
Use of mother's name	1	1
Women's property rights	4	

*Source:* Author's calculation from parliamentary proceedings (see primary documents in references)

<b>Table 4: Patterns of practical issues raised by men legislators vs. women legislators</b>		
Themes	No. of Interventions by Women Legislators	No. of Interventions by Men Legislators
Financial support	1	5
Technical support	3	1
Education and training	5	1
Health sector	6	4
Housing facilities	4	1
Social support	4	1

*Source:* Author's calculation from parliamentary proceedings (see primary documents in references)