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WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN BANGLADESH AND INDIA: SYMBOLIC OR REAL?

Pranab Kumar Panday

Abstract

What is the present state of women's political participation at the local government level in Bangladesh and India? What factors led both governments to initiate several affirmative actions for the enhancement of women's participation? What factors impede their participation in the political arena? And what happens to women of both the countries once they participate in the local government bodies? This study seeks to answer these questions and is based mainly on secondary research. The available findings suggest that despite undertaking affirmative actions by both governments, women are still victimized by structural, religious and cultural impediments. The finding also suggests that once they make their way into the political process, they are not cordially accepted by their counterparts. Although few NGOs and women's organizations have been vocal in favor of women's equal rights, their initiatives remain inadequate. Another important finding is that women members cannot exert any influence in decision making at the local level. Once they ask for their legitimate rights, they are often victimized, assaulted, and harassed.

Introduction

Women's lives in South Asia are often affected by various socio-cultural and ethnic forces, a range of religious faiths, obscure legal frameworks, and complex economic and political forces. Despite diversities across countries, women of South Asia face similar conditions (Rustagi, 2004). Patriarchy characterizes South Asian countries (Caldwell, 1982) where women are dominated by a kin-ordered social structure (Mathema, 1998). They have low status, little or no access to property and land (Bardhan, 1986) and get little recognition for their largely unpaid home-based labor (Rustagi, 2004).

Socio-cultural practices based on strong patriarchal traditions have served to curtail mobility of women in this region. Disproportionate involvement in the labor market and restrictive socio-cultural influences on education, nutrition, health and political participation are evident among women in most South Asian countries, although it is not always possible to measure gender discrimination in all spheres (Rustagi, 2004). The present study is one of the few studies that attempt to link the gender issue with that of local governance. It is also a comparative study of two neighboring countries that are similar and yet reflect significant differences. Since our main objective is to highlight the issue of political participation of women in Bangladesh and India, other aspects of gender inequalities will not be taken into consideration in this paper.

While attempting to explore the dimension of women's participation in the local governance in Bangladesh and India, special emphasis will be given to the following components: (a) women and local governance in South Asia (b) determinants of women's participation and their role in Bangladesh and India (c) challenges that women face in regards to their participation in local governance in both countries (d) women's ability to participate fully in the local government's decision making bodies and (e) ways to overcome persistent barriers to women's participation.

Gender and Democracy

'Democracy,' a much debated issue in modern times, has become an objective to which individuals and nations around the world aspire. Democracy generally falls within the traditional definition of politics which includes the domination of male members in the public sphere. Due to these traditional orientations, it is widely argued that democracy is not women friendly (Karim, 1998). Despite these limitations, there has been increasing popularity of the concept and its practice in recent times. In this context, an important question draws the attention of the academics and practitioners: Why should gender be interlinked with democracy? Some important arguments in this regard have been put forward by Karim (1998).

First, broadly defined, 'politics' includes every person's concerns. From this point of view, women's political right is an integral part of human rights which in turn is a fundamental aspect of the

democratic framework. The second argument is that while formulating any decision or carrying out any strategy in democracy, it is essential to take into account the views of all involved groups. In other words, it can be said that opinions and perceptions of both men and women must be included. This argument is also important to justify the usefulness of bringing minorities in the decision making processes. The final and strongest contributing factor is that half of the total population in today's world are women. That is why it is unreasonable to treat women as minority. So, while making any policy regarding citizens' lives, the policy makers should bear in mind that their policy will no longer be credible until and unless they ensure equal participation of both men and women in the policy processes.

Nowadays it is accepted among concerned parties that an effective strong local government system is one of the essential preconditions for ensuring good governance. And democracy is one of the important features of good governance. It is also generally agreed that democracy is a key foundation on which the edifice of developed local government has to be built. A sound local government system can initiate and strengthen the local democratic process by electing representatives to uphold democratic values and to practice democratic processes and procedures for development. (Shamim and Nasreen, 2002). So it can be said that equal participation of women and men in every aspect of life is required to have democracy and sustainable development.

Women and Local governance in South Asia

South Asian countries have become a part of the process of globalization that has led to a discourse on development, with different perspectives. This development discourse puts gender and governance as a critical area of concern at all decision-making levels. In this regard, most South Asian countries have enacted laws for better governance and fair representation of gender in the local government.

Certain common features like centralized government, socio-economic inequalities based on class, gender and caste, and nationalistic divisive claims on grounds of ethnicity have characterized South Asian Countries. For more than 50 years, India and Sri Lanka have been democratic countries, but Pakistan and Bangladesh have fluctuated between democracy, militarism and autocracy. Nepal is in turmoil; it has traversed from democracy to absolute monarchy and back to democracy and is now reverting to absolute monarchy. (Kabir, 2003).

Generally, in South Asia, the formal political system is dominated by males, but the degree of domination varies from country to country and region to region. Signs of domination are evident when women are assigned to soft portfolios 'appropriate' for women's concerns, even when they become a part of the formal political process as members of elite political groups. Usually, women in the entire Indian Subcontinent are viewed with distrust if they interact outside their designated areas. They are generally viewed as weak members who should be protected and are expected to remain outside politics, as it is a 'dirty game' (Kabir, 2003).

A significant characteristic of South Asian politics is that the highest position in the government of several South Asian Countries has been occupied by women; classic examples are Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi in India, Sheikh Hasina and Khakeda Zia in Bangladesh, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Chandrika Kumaratunga in Sri Lanka. Even though these women occupied the highest position in government, the condition of women at large is very different. The vast majority of South Asian women are illiterate, in poor health, invisible in the system of national accounts, and suffer from legal, political, economic and social discrimination in all walks of life. Another noticeable fact is that they have the lowest rates of participation in their governance structures as compared to many developed nations (Mahbub Ul Haq, Human Development Centre, 2000).

The Fourth World Conference on women, held in Beijing, advocated in favor of ensuring adequate representation of women in all decision-making bodies (Beijing Platform for Action, 1995). It was suggested that in order to voice the concerns of the society in equal terms, it was necessary to ensure a 'logical balance' of men and women in public life. Participation, accountability, predictability and transparency are the basic characteristics of good governance. In these contexts, good governance generally calls for gender balance in political decision making. Very often, it is argued that the overall decision making process can be enriched if women's insights and values of governance are reflected in these processes. It has been also established that women at the local level are more responsive to community issues (Shamim and Kumari, 2002).

Although there are rural, urban, and regional variations with regards to women's opportunities and access to resources in South Asia, they operate within fairly harsh manifestations of patriarchal structures and attitudes throughout the region that diminish women's compensated work and encourage her role as wife and mother. This attitude pervades policy making bodies. As a result, development policies, especially budgetary allocation for women's programs, remain insufficient, reflecting the priority that is given to economic development rather than the social sectors (Villareal, 1998).

Gender is a major factor defining social roles, family responsibilities, and power relationships within the family. In South Asian Societies, men are the principal wage earners and the main decision makers in the family. A careful analysis of social norms and behavior related to gender, power relationships and sexuality reveals that they are embedded in the dominant social constructs of masculinity and the social control of women's sexuality (Villareal 1998, UNFPA 2000). Patriarchal nature of the society and state permeates into the policies for women's integration in various aspects of the socio-political institutions. And this has adversely affected women's participation in the political system and hindered their incorporation into mainstream politics and the economy of the country (Shame and Noreen, 2002). Women are also disadvantaged with regard to health and health care facilities (Fikree and Pasha, 2006) and their sexual roles are meant to be private and controlled, rather than public and expressive (Khan, 2002).

Many South Asian governments have amended their laws for fair representation of gender in the local government institutions because organizations at the grassroots level allow people to contribute significantly to the governance of their communities. For women, successful grassroots experience has meant an opportunity to form a coherent voice, to be heard and to make a difference in their communities. Across South Asia, the experience of women in local governance has been varied, with some being more successful than others in attaining greater women's participation.

Current State of Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh and India

Women's representation in the South Asian region is at two levels: in national and provincial/state legislatures and in local governments. In the former they can play a role as law- and policy-makers and in the latter in development-related implementation. The experience in different countries in the region reveals that, collectively, the number of women in legislatures has been lower than 9 percent over the last five years. This was despite the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action's goal of adequate representation of women in all decision making bodies and the recommendation of creating a "critical mass" and "gender balance" in political decision making. In this paper our main concern is to highlight the state of women's participation in local governance in Bangladesh and India.[1] We restrict our discussion of this matter to two countries only.

India

The scope for women's participation in politics in India is wider due to its federal nature.[2] Women have also become increasingly active in informal politics also. The historic opening for women in India came in 1993 with the enactment of the 73rd amendment (*Panchayati Raj*) and 74th amendment (the Municipalities Act for urban local government) to the Constitution of India. These amendments came against the backdrop of the campaigns of the women's movement in India that gained momentum in the eighties--defining the movement's identity, finding a base in "issues being articulated by poor women at the grassroots" and their absorption into the "movement's range of concerns" (Mazumder and Agnihorti,1999). Earlier in 1975 the Committee on the Status of Women had recommended the establishment of statutory women's *panchayats* at the local level but the recommendations had been shelved (Mumtaz, 2005).

The amendments provided for not less than one third membership (33 percent) to women in the three tier system of Panchayati Raj[5] in rural areas. One-third of the prescribed women's seats are for women of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. At least one-third of the office bearers are also reserved for women. The term of the *panchayats*, their re-election and the conditions for their suspension were also laid out in the amendments. These were followed by states enacting conformity legislations by 1996, with some variations in details (Gala, 1996). For instance, the Orissa government made it mandatory for the vice-chairperson to be a woman if the chairperson is a man. Rajasthan, Haryana and Orissa debarred candidates with two children to contest elections and some have special provisions for conflict resolution at all levels (Mumtaz, 2005).

The *Panchayati Raj* brought more than one million women as members and chairpersons of local bodies. However the performance and election of women in different states varies: Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh elected 38 percent women in the elections of 1996, Punjab 29.6 percent and Karnataka a little over 43 percent (Mohanty, 1999).

While the Acts *per se* do not provide for all-women *panchayats*, their subsequent emergence has been an interesting development. It needs to be pointed out that as early as 1989 nine villages in the western state of Maharashtra had elected all-women *gram panchayats*, reportedly an outcome of the campaign of an independent farmers' organization, Shetkari Sanghatana. West Bengal got its all women *gram panchayat* in May 1993 under the Left Front Government (Gala, 1996). Earlier, an all woman *panchayat* was elected in Andhra Pradesh in the seventies and another in the eighties (Kaushik, 2000). One other reason for all women *panchayats* was that higher caste men did not want to work under a lower caste woman (Mumtaz, 2005).

Bangladesh

The scope for women's participation in politics in Bangladesh is not as wide as in India due to its unitary nature.[4] Since independence in 1971, the local government system[5] has been central to policy makers' concerns. With a view to securing a minimum representation of women at local level government bodies, in 1976, the government promulgated the Local Government Ordinance and introduced a three-tier local government system. In this Ordinance the structure of the local government system underwent changes and the provision was made to select two women members in the union council (Ahmed, 2001). For the first time women were considered to be included in the local government. With the passage of time, every government tried to incorporate more women in local government bodies. In 1983, changes were brought in the structure of the union parishad, promulgating the local government (Union Parishad) ordinance. The earlier system (1976) remain unchanged; one chairman and 9 members were to be elected directly, 3 female members, 1 from each ward had been added in the new ordinance. In 1993, Local Government (Union Parishad) Act (Amendment) was passed in the Parliament to secure the minimum representation of women in local government. According to this act, provision was made that each union parishad would be divided into nine wards. Moreover, three seats were reserved for women; accordingly, they were elected by the chairman and members of the Union Parishad rather than directly elected by the voters (Ahmed, 2001).

The Local Government (Union Parishad) Second amendment Act, 1997 is a milestone in the history of women's participation in Bangladesh. In this act, provision was made for three reserved seats for women in each Union Parishad. In addition, they would be elected by direct election based on universal adult franchise. This was a major initiative taken by the government of Bangladesh for ensuring women's participation in political decision making (Sultana, 2000).

The union council is made up of thirteen members including the Chairman and three women. Each woman however represents three wards and is elected by the combined voters of these wards, thus serving three times the number of constituents than her male counterparts. The Chairman is elected by the entire union council. Various functions of the union council are executed through 13 standing committees and women are to head one third of them, with the mandate to head the committees on women's and children's welfare, culture and sports; however, in reality women are often excluded from the committees (Cited in Mumtaz, 2005).

Getting the right to participate in governance through reserved seats was the proverbial first step for women in Bangladesh. In the Union Parishad election of 2003, 39,419 female candidates contested 12,669 reserved women's seats. On an average, 3.1 women contested one seat. Although the rate of participation of women candidates in the reserve seats is quite satisfactory, the participation rate of women in general seats and for the post of chairmanship is quite low. Of the 21,376 candidates who contested the chairman's posts, 21,144 were male and 617 female. On the other hand, 137,909 candidates competed for general member posts; among them 137,292 were male and 617 were female (Bangladesh Election Commission, visit: www.bd-ec.org/election.php3).

Determinants of Women's Political Participation In Both Countries

In the preceding section, an effort was made to highlight the current state of women's participation in the local governance in Bangladesh and India. Due to initiation of several amendments in the Constitution by both governments to increase women's

participation in the political process, the presence of women in local governments has increased considerably. Now the important question that needs to be answered is this: What are the determinants of women's participation in both the countries? In the following section an effort is made to identify those determinants and analyze their role in explaining women's participation in both countries.

Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Both governments have been influenced to a large extent by the ever-growing contribution of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in furthering the cause of equal rights of women in every sphere in life. Over the last few decades in India and last few years in Bangladesh, along with advocating for women's equal rights, NGOs are conducting several training programs for women.

In India, NGOs have been actively involved in training over a half million Panchayat members in the state, a majority of whom are poor, uneducated and helpless. It is a complex task. NGOs have played a key role in generating consciousness and mobilizing the people (Sharan, 1998). While there are a large number of NGOs in India, working to help women win confidence and gain more knowledge about their role as Panchayat members, their capacity via training varies greatly (Matland, 1998(b)). One successful example is that of the Confederation of Voluntary Organizations (COVA), a network of 750 organizations in Hyderabad, India. COVA works for communal harmony through community empowerment. It began its intervention with the objective of establishing the legitimacy of women political representatives to address the concern that women's reserved seats had been captured by male politicians, who in fact performed the duties of elected women (Mukhopadhyay, 2005).

The case of Bangladesh is slightly different from India. Along with advocating equal rights for women, sometimes these NGOs play a direct role in politics. Some NGOs through their umbrella organization, Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh (ADAB),[6] indeed played a proactive role in national politics during the mass movement[7] which emerged against the Khaleda Zia regime in the mid 1990s. In the election of 1996, ADAB coordinated a Democracy Awareness Education Program through which 15,000 trainers ran awareness raising workshop across the country, contributing to an impressive voter turnout of 74% (Ashman, 1997). These activities inspired both men and women to involve themselves in electoral politics, especially women members who gained immense knowledge from these programs. Another example is the efforts of Gono Shahajjo Sangstha (GSS).[8] While encouraging its landless group members as candidates in local union parishad election in Nilphamari[9] it was brutally confronted by local landlords, who burnt the NGO's schools, attacked staff and members and conducted a house to house search to seize books and publications (Hashemi, 1995). All these activities of NGOs build awareness among its women members in regards to their involvement in the political process. They also create immense pressure on the government to make necessary changes in their policies regarding women's participation.

International Politics

Recent shifts in international politics in favor of equality of women in all spheres of human life also partially account for the changes made by the two governments in the national, as well as local levels. The government of Bangladesh approved both the Programme of Action of the international conference on Population and Development (1994) and the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) without any reservation (Karim, 2000). Apart from these conferences, various donor agencies like World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and others have taken the issue of gender governance as their priority objectives. For instance, although the World Bank is mainly an economic institution that has to maintain political impartiality, the issue that 'good governance is essential for development' is gaining importance within it. Studies by World Bank have confirmed that 1) worldwide women are under-represented in parliaments: the best performing region has less than 20% while the worst performing region has less than 5% representatives in their parliaments; 2) governments are less corrupt where women and men have more equal rights and more equal participation. Although this finding is very controversial as regards causality, it is nevertheless a positive finding (Mukhopadhyay, 2003). Based on these findings, World Bank ensures women's equal participation in the political process within its aid recipient's countries. This might have had an effect on the government of Bangladesh in regards to bringing necessary changes in their policies towards women.

This factor may not have any direct effect on the Government of India as the economic base of India is

much stronger; thus, they are not dependent on several donor agencies. To some extent, however, the government of India responds firmly with the slogans of the international communities.

Women's Organizations

Women's own agencies which are fighting to ensure equal social and political rights for women, have been important factors that led both the governments of India and Bangladesh to bring about changes in policies regarding women's participation in politics. The experience in India and Bangladesh demonstrates that women's activism gained them the space that they now have and which they also have to defend and protect. In India, the debates around women's seats were carried forward into the post independence period. Women members of the 1949 Constituent Assembly opposed special concessions for women and hence reserved seats were not considered in the Constitution. Similarly, the Committee on the Status of Women in India rejected the idea of women's reserved seats in 1975 (there was a dissenting note on the issue by two members, activist/academics Vina Mazumder and Lotika Sarker who saw reservations as a necessary affirmative action for women). However, the Committee did make a strong recommendation for institutionalization of women's participation in local government through special quotas (Mumtaz, 2005). If we look at the role of women's agencies, there would be thousands of examples. The emergence of a countrywide women's movement on a mass scale in 1979-80 was sparked by a case of police rape--a common but by no means unique form of police brutality. The massive demonstrations and agitations by women, which followed the Supreme Court acquittal of a policeman who had raped a young woman, can be seen as a crucial element in the human and civil rights movement to protect citizens from arbitrary violence of state functionaries. Many of the women's organizations formed in the course of that campaign survived and grew subsequently, extending their concerns to various other forms of violence against women as well as more general social control over and discrimination against women (Hensman, 1996).

In Bangladesh, towards the end of 2001, when the provision of reservation of 30 seats in the National Parliaments lapsed, the movement by several women organizations mounted a concerted effort to mobilize opinion and create the necessary political will to provide for a quota system that reflected their stand. Before the impending dissolution of Parliament in 2001, some 20 women's groups mobilized by Mohila Parishad (Women's Council--the largest movement oriented women's organization) lobbied the government, political parties and parliamentarians. Women activists carried on street activities, formed human chains, and staged rallies and symbolic protests advocating increasing the number of reserved seats in the Parliament, as well as introducing the system of direct election for women in those seats. However, this heightened level of advocacy failed to have enough impact on the Government of Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2002). Although the government increased the number of reserved seats from 30 to 45, the system of election remained the same. When the government passed the bill for reservation of 45 seats for women in the parliament, the women's agencies went to court challenging the acts of the government, especially the provision of indirect election, although the Court had rejected their challenge. Along with advocating women's equal rights, these women's organizations always remained active to organize various training programs through which they can train women in leadership. For instance, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), a mass-based organization was established in 1970. Committed to a society based on gender equality, democracy and peace, it has played a key role in promoting women's formal participation and has worked on training programs for women political representatives. Identifying the latter's main problem as isolation and hostility and disregard from male colleagues, BMP decided to intervene in three constituencies to address these problems. The BMP's strategy was to develop support groups for three women representatives--one from an urban council and two from the union parishad. Each support group was made up of 15 women from the representatives' constituency and included BMP members. The members were trained by BMP to enable them to provide support to the elected representative. They organized constituency meetings, built alliances with influential political leaders and linked the representatives with government officials. They also built the capacity of elected women and organized joint training for women and male elected members of the councils. The result was that elected women attended council meetings and questioned procedures, thus developing transparency; became more active and succeeded in getting development projects for their areas; took up gender specific issue; and set up an autonomous women's cell (Mukhopadyay and Meer, 2004). Thus, women's organizations not only created pressure on the

government to initiate policy in favor of ensuring equal participation, but also organized several training programs for women members to help them realize what is good for them, what their rights are and what they should do.

State

The different courses and political development processes that took root in both the countries have determined the nature of state policies. India has institutionalized a democratic system, although with aberrations of emergency rule in the country. Bangladesh has moved from Parliamentary to military rule to the presidential system, and sought integration into the regional and global economy. The state is however similarly seen in both countries as the agent for socio-political transformation. Given the privileged classes and groups' inherited political power, any opportunity that women obtained were through the benevolence of the state (Mumtaz, 2005). The turmoil that accompanied independence, in case of India, opened spaces for women and legitimized their participation at the public level (Mumtaz, 2005). It took final shape when the Government of India passed the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Constitution, ensuring 33% reservation of seats for women in the local level.

The emerging democracy of Bangladesh began its drive in the end of 1990 with the overthrow of autocratic rule by a mass movement. Since then democratization of local government units has become a priority for the government. That is why in 1993 the Local Government Ordinance, 1983 was amended to recognize the UP wards from existing three to nine new wards. Moreover, by getting rid of the nomination system of women members, the amendment provided for indirect election of three women members- by the chairman and members of the respective UPs. Again, in 1997, by the amendment of the ordinance, direct election for women members was introduced. Therefore, the changes in UP structure have been partially accounted for by the democratic transition in the country.

Constitution

The Constitution plays a vital role for ensuring women's political participation in both countries. The Indian Constitution has been committed to introducing socio-economic and political transformation. The initiatives to empower women and the marginalized sections are reflections of the democratic spirit of the Indian Constitution and can be gleaned from a number of amendments in these fields, especially, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts that provide for women's entry into the political sphere (Shamim and Kumari, 2002).

Like the Indian Constitution, the Constitution of Bangladesh also provides for equality of men and women. There is no legal barrier to women contesting or voting for any elective office, including that of the head of the state. Article 9 of the Constitution promotes the special representation of women in local government (Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1972; Shamim and Kumar, 2002).

Political Parities

In recent times, opposition political parties have been a powerful engine for influencing the government to initiate changes for increasing women's participation. The party in power all too often has strong incentives to evade accountability, but opposition parties have their own incentives to uncover wrongdoings of the government and publicly hound incumbents of their misdeeds. In the case of India, over the decades, political parties played a crucial role in furthering the issue of women's equal participation. If we look at the formation of political parties in India, we will find a number of women political leaders[10] in every political party. Most of the political parties in India are committed towards the betterment of women. Another important factor is that in India, local government election is conducted on party basis. In this regard, political parties play an important role from candidate selection to election.

But, the case of Bangladesh is quite different: due to political instability, opposition parties always remain busy criticizing the government. They have hardly any time to raise their voices or create pressure on the government to initiate affirmative changes in regards to women. But, there are some leftist political parties who are more vocal on these issues, but they have no representation in parliament. As a result, their voices are not taken into consideration by the government. Another factor is that local government election in Bangladesh is not conducted on a party basis. That is why political parties show little or no interest in the process of women's participation at the local level. Moreover, both the leading political parties in Bangladesh are headed by women chairperson, but it is a matter of regret that the position of women in

general remains discouraging[11]

Civil Society

Civil society is usually defined as organizational activity between the individual (or the family) and the state. Its democratic roles are to advocate for constituents, to act as watchdog over the state, and to support political competition generally (Hansen, 1996, cited in Blair, 2000). According to USAID and several donor agencies, civil society is essential for democratic local government (Blair, 2000). To ensure democratic local government (DLG), it is essential to to ensure equal participation of women in the decision making process. In this context, civil society plays a strong role to ensure women's participation as well as ensure DLG.. India is the most startling case because DLG has been in place there the longest. One would assume that civil society has at least gotten off to a good start at the national and state (and to some extent the district) levels, where organizations of women, environmentalists, professionals, farmers, and others have occupied a prominent role in the political landscape for some time.

However, Civil Society Organizations (CSO) in Bangladesh are different from those of India. Before 1990, there were hardly any CSOs in Bangladesh. After the restoration of Democracy in 1991, several of them have been in operation. But, these organizations have not been successful in furthering women's issue because of two reasons: An inadequate number of civil society organizations that deals with women's issue and the partisan characteristics of these organizations

The CSOs are clearly divided in two political streams. One allied to Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and other to Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). That is why these organizations failed to capture the confidence of the general public, as well as government.

Media

Media plays an important role in bringing about changes in the society. The messages that are played and replayed through media go a long way in influencing the mindsets of the reader, audience and the viewer. This has resulted in the implementation of gender-sensitizing projects in various sectors within South Asia. In recent times, the media has played a crucial role for furthering women's issues. Actually, the media's role is twofold. It brings women's issue to the government's arena on the one hand. On the other, it informs the general mass about the government's decision on a particular issue. The media highlights the issues of women's equal rights and demands government decisions in this regard. But, the media in Bangladesh until 1990 was totally controlled by the government. After, 1991, several private TV and radio channels emerged. The emerging electronic media in the country has brought about a striking change: A dynamic presence of female faces on the screen competing with their male colleagues. News channels now have more, female reporters, if not an equal number of male and female reporters. The electronic media, therefore, reflects a new scenario: a phenomenon of gender empowerment reflected in the presence of women journalists who occupy important roles. These channels are highlighting gender issues to a great extent. They broadcast different programs on women and present women leaders in front of the audiences with an intention of increasing the level of awareness of the general women. Along with the broadcast media, there are more that 170 daily newspapers published from various corners of Bangladesh. The situation in India is much better than Bangladesh as both print and broadcast media are free from government control. These newspapers and broadcast media, build public opinion which compels the government to accept changes.

Various international events like Women's Day, etc., are also highlighted in the media. The entire perspective could have been different if more women were involved in the decision-making panels, drawing attention of the policymakers to the praxis that women's empowerment is strongly connected with development issues.

Challenges to Women's Participation

In the above section, an effort was made to analyze several determinants of women's participation in Bangladesh and India and to indicate that women's participation in local governance in both countries is much lower than their male counterparts. The question may be raised: why is this so? Despite several efforts by the governments to increase participation of women in the process of local governance there are several challenges that women face while participating in political process. This section explores these challenges women face in both countries.

Educational Backwardness and Lack of Economic Resources

Education is perhaps the strongest factor that enables women to control their own future. Education helps women to be knowledgeable, skilled and self-confident to participate effectively in the ongoing developmental process of the country. (Villaluz, 2000). It creates awareness among women. However, it is unfortunate that the world's largest numbers of illiterate women are in India. According to the 2001 census, there is rampant illiteracy among women--around 46 percent as against 24 percent among men. Among scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, women's illiteracy is as high as 76 per cent and 81 percent (Mohon et.al, 2003). The case of Bangladesh is similar. According to Human Development in South Asia, 2003, the illiteracy rate is about 38 percent. But even beyond basic illiteracy, information about political process--for example, information about policies and voting system--is often difficult for women to obtain (Kabir, 2003). Women of both countries are not conscious about their rights. Unequal access to information limits women from recognizing and enjoying their rights to participate in political and social networks. That is why they are not interested in participating in political activities (Vijaylakshmi 2002, cited in Mukhopdhyay, 2005). Moreover, women in both countries are mostly concentrated in the informal economy, the subsistence sector, where many are engaged in low wage or unpaid, low skilled or unskilled labor. Much of their work remains invisible, unrecognized and devaluated and is therefore unprotected by laws and legislation. The incomes they earn, however meager, are still seen by them and their families as a contribution. Therefore the expenses for political participation such as election campaigns, and expenditures required to attend meetings and visit and interact with government officials, become an additional burden that women cannot afford, thus impeding their full participation. The following example will substantiate to what extent literacy has a strong impact on women's capacity to perform in political institutions:

> "Manavva from Beldadi village, Gadag Taluk, Karnataka State of India, was elected to the position of Gram Panchayati (GP) president, which was reserved for Scheduled Tribe women. Because she was aware and articulate, her family encouraged her to stand for elections. The secretary of GP appointed by the Government was an upper caste urban woman, who gave Mannave papers and ledgers to sign without explaining to her its content. Manavva was unaware that the secretary was appropriating funds. In time, Manavva became suspicious and reported the secretary's actions, which were investigated and resulted in the secretary's replacement. If Manavva were literate she would probably have been able to stop the secretary at an early stage" (Narasimhan, 1998; cited in Mohan 2003).

Mobility

Cultural norms operate both as a restriction on a woman's mobility as well as an impediment for women's participation in the public sphere in both Bangladesh and India. These cultural norms are perpetuated and sustained by powerful institutions of family, caste and religion. The location of polling booths and their relative distances from their homes and workplace often deter women from exercising their right as voters. The demands of contestants' right from filling nominations to canvassing for elections, requires them to be mobile. The inconvenient timings, distance and the lack of escort impede female representatives' full participation. Along with these problems, the family circumstances of women members is also an impediment to their mobility. Mokhopadhyay (2003) pointed out in his studies that, "in Bangladesh, as one husband said, this is a Muslim country; she (a woman member) is a woman, so she cannot go out in the evening. He (the husband) saw his wife's responsibility as caring for the children." Thus, it becomes very difficult for a woman to involve herself in non-household activities.

In the case of local government in India, the situation is more severe than Bangladesh. Along with several social, religious and economic constraints, women face violence, which has increased after the introduction of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in India. Violence in the form of beating up those women and their family members who contest elections and sexual harassment in public are more frequent during elections. In protest of this violence, women remain silent (Shamim and Kumari, 2002). One may ask as to why the extent of violence to women and their family members has increased in India after the introduction of the 73rd Amendment. One possible explanation may be that groups of

people with vested interest use violence as a means to discourage those women who wish to take part in the local government elections.

Structural Deficiencies

In Bangladesh, women representatives are disadvantaged by structural constraints arising from the way in which quotas for women are incorporated within the electoral system. For instance, the union parishad (the local government institution in Bangladesh) is made up of nine wards and the electorate in each of these wards elects a general member--usually a man, although women are not barred as candidates to general seats. The quotas for women were instituted by providing three additional seats within each union parishad, and potential women representatives to these seats are elected by and are responsible for three wards. This means that women candidates have to canvass across and be responsible for an area three times the size of the area covered by a general (male) member. Women are further disadvantaged by resource constraints because they receive the same budgetary and other resources received by a general member, even though they must cover a wider area. There is also role confusion, as the role of the one woman representative who operates in a constituency, which also has three general members, is not clear (Mukhopadhyay & Meer, 2004, cited Mukhopadhyay, 2005).

In Bangladesh, even though the female chairpersons and members have gained confidence in their ability to undertake administrative jobs, the discriminatory attitude of their male counterparts has been the main "stumbling block". Women Union Parishad members have no fixed work or duties and they are allocated fewer resources and given less formal legal powers than male colleagues. According to the Local Government Ordinance 1997, elected women Union Parishad members will act as chairperson in at least three of 12 standing committees of the union parishad. But in reality, it is found that in many of the Union Parishads the standing committees have not yet been formed. Moreover, where they are formed, the women members have no responsibilities despite their inclusion in the committees (Shamim 1999). Women members are not even empowered to hand out birth certificates which is a basic function of commissioners. Later on, with the assistance from Mahila Parishad and Ain O Salish Kendra, these women went to the court and won their right. Despite rhetoric and some formal measures, the state de-legitimizes women's authority at the outset, thereby handicapping their ability to perform in their political role.

In India where there is 33% reservation for women at all levels of the local government institutions (three-tier system), the seats reserved for women rotate in every election. Thus a ward reserved for all-female competition becomes a general ward (in which women and men compete) in the next election. As a result political parties simply do not take women's candidacy seriously, nor do they invest in the elected woman candidate knowing very well that in the next round of elections these women would be of no use to their electoral prospects. The selection of female candidates by parties for reserved seats is, thus, to a large extent determined by the calculation as to which women are the most 'useful' either because they are related to powerful men or because they can be easily bypassed in everyday political decision making (Mukhopadhyay, 2005). Goetz (2004) and Beall (2004) noted that in many countries where affirmative action for women exist in local government elections, these measures were introduced as an afterthought thus detracting (pessimistic) from the credibility(reliability) and legitimacy of women as political actors (Mukhopadhyay, 2005).

Women of both the countries also suffer from their gender identity. In a highly stratified and gender-based society, women members are not viewed separately from their identity as 'women.' It is evident that women local representatives do not have specific responsibilities and their opinions are not heard given the negative attitudes of male colleagues (Shamim and Nasreen, 2002). These factors give rise to insecurity among the women members. Another important factor that deserves special mention is the economic structure of the society. In both countries, the economic structure of the society is mostly dominated by male. If women earn any amount, they do not have the freedom to spend their money. Majority of the women in the local level in both the countries are engaged in household work rather than in income generating activities. Besides, the amount of wages that these women members are paid in Bangladesh is very low (only BDT 350 TK which is equivalent to US$5). These low earnings cannot bring any noticeable change in the lifestyles of women, which also discourages them from taking part in local level politics.

Religion

Religion also plays a very crucial role in keeping

women at home rather than going outside and participating in political decision process in both the countries. The only point of difference is the type of religion that impedes women's participation. According to the 1991 census, Bangladesh is close to 90 percent Muslim and their religion is Islam.[12] Islam represents a strong apology for patriarchy and is explicit about the sexual division of labor and responsibility and in effect, sanctifies male dominance. Restriction has also been imposed by religion on the movement of women outside their house. Women are instructed to use 'purdha'[13] when they are outside their home. Once habituated to restricting themselves within 'purdha' they are likely to lose any interest in political activities.

The expansion of fundamentalism has introduced new forms of oppression and violence against women, in Bangladesh. Increasing cases of violence against women meted out via *fatwa*[14] and *mullahs*[15] in the countryside are being reported. Besides, there has been a rising trend in religious fundamentalism which has gradually pushed its presence into the mainstream political space. A number of actions on the part of successive governments have led to its growth (Shamim and Nasreen, 2002 and Shehabuddin, 1999).[16]

Unlike Bangladesh the majority of the Indian population is Hindu, although there is a considerable number of Muslims in India. The Hindus by religion suffer from class and caste system. Upper class Hindus always dominate the lower class Hindus and they generally do not allow lower caste people to come forward and go for elections in political institutions, although there are reservations for tribal people in different levels. But the problem lies in the fact that it has been rooted in the mentality of the millions, and it will need decades to change such a mental make-up.

Participation of Women in Political Decision Making: Symbolic or Real?

Now an important questions needs to be addressed: Does the reservation of seats for women in the local government institutions in both the countries ensure their active participation in the political decision making process? The situation is perhaps not satisfactory as male members are more dominant and use their patronage networks to function as elected representatives because their role in the public world of politics is taken for granted. However, this is not so for women and herein lies the gender dimension of political representation. There is no getting away from the fact that affirmative action taken by various government has given rise to what has been termed as de facto politics (Vijaylakshmi 2002, cited in Mukhopadhyay, 2005).

One may wonder how the researchers measure whether the participation of women member is symbolic or real? In reply, I would argue for chosen indicators and try to measure their status based on field data. As the study is basically based on secondary materials, I will try to measure the extent of their participation by analyzing their involvement in the decision making process and from the attitude of the male members. Affirmative action does ensure that more women will come into politics, but it does not ensure that elected women will be seen as legitimate political actors. This situation is obvious in case of women in the Union Parishad as well as women members in the Panchayati Raj. But, it does not mean that all women in all circumstances are subsumed in de facto politics[17]. There are few women in local government bodies in both countries who have been effective in discharging their duties and responsibilities. But their number is so few that it does not represent the women community. One may query whether women who enter politics through patronage can make a difference once they are in a position to do so? It is important to clarify that entry into the political process and performance are different things. In most cases, women use patronage to get into the political process, but it does not help them while discharging their duties and responsibilities. At the same time it is not fair to say that patronage does not help women. If we go into more detail, we can find some cases where women having strong linkage with political parties are dominating the process of decision making. But their number is also too few to set as an example as these women work under the patriarchal societal structure too.

Several studies were undertaken on women's participation in the political process in order to assess their role in decision making. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2004) more than 70% of women councilors interviewed in Bangladesh were not aware of their rights and responsibilities as representatives; an even higher percentage--more than 80%--expressed their lack of confidence in their ability to conduct meetings (Mukhopadhyay, 2005). Actually a patriarchal society offers little or no space for women's authority and agency. As a result women become handicapped and play a symbolic

role in decision making. Goetz (2004) offers the argument that decentralization tends to bolster and ingrain existing traditional institutions and local elites. These institutions tend to be deeply patriarchal, offering little or no space for women's authority and agency. In other words, society does not allow women to occupy leadership roles in the process of decision making, or play a positive role, or be vocal anywhere. We can quote a speech of an ex-parliament Member of Bangladesh, Tasnima Hossain, who is the wife of Anwar Hossain Munju[18]. In her address in a round table meeting in Dhaka on 'Role of Civil Society and New Media to Prevent Violence against Women' she said:

> 'I was not treated as a colleague by other Parliament members in the Parliament. Rather I was mostly treated as 'bhavi'[19] or the wife of Anowar Hossain Munju although I was an elected MP. While I was entering into the Parliament session I had to hear that why I was alone? Why I had not come with my Husband? The situation was like that I would have to come with my husband in the Parliament every time' *The Prothom Alo*, dated March 13, 2006.

Actually it is a question of identity. The male members of society do not accept women as equal to them. Women suffer not only because of their identity; sometimes they are treated unjustly if they speak for their rights. In local governance, women's marginalization is reinforced by paternalistic and discriminatory attitudes of male representatives and male chairmen and their beliefs that women should not get involved in local politics, and that while men get into office on merit, women get in through government favors in the form of quotas (Mukhopadhya, 2003). The following few cases will substantiate the above observation:

Hasnehena: A Case of Neglect

Hasnehena, Union Parishad Member said that "After my oath I went to the chairman and asked him to assign me some work. The chairman became annoyed and said that the government has brought out women from their homes to create unnecessary trouble in the Union Parishad. [He said] 'What will you do in the Union Parishad?' Go upstairs and sit with my wife and spend your time. I do not find any work for you. No specific work is mentioned in the manual for women' (Mukhopadhyay and Meer (2004) *Creating Voice and Carving Space*, cited in Mukhopadhyay, 2005).

Aparna Rani: Story of Misfortune

Aparna Rani was a Union Parishad member of Moulvibazar. Her husband, who was a Primary School Teacher, encouraged Aparna to compete in the Union Parishad election. She was elected from the reserved seat. During the early stages of her time in the Union Parishad, Aparna did not face any problem but the situation changed later when she started to be more vocal than other women members and often argued with the chairman, which took a serious turn. The chairman did not support her active participation in the meetings and tried to teach her a lesson. A friendly male colleague used to help Aparna in performing different Union Parishad activities. The chairman spread rumors using Aparna's friendly relationship with her male colleague. This affected Aparna's married life. Finally she had to leave the Union Parishad (Shamim and Kumari, 2002).

The above cases substantiate how women are treated by their male counterparts at all levels. They are not only neglected but also face serious challenges which can destroy their family life. Under these circumstances, women lose interest to take part in the political process.

The next question which needs further elaboration is the case for Indian women in the Panchayati Raj System? Sen (2000) in her studies pointed out that reservation of seats for women in local government bodies has definitely opened the scope for women representatives. She also notes that Indian women fall behind men in all social and economic indexes. But she emphasizes the fact that it is the women who promote the interest of women in the process of national growth and development. The inference is that men cannot (for social or political reasons) or do not (to protect patriarchal authority) represent women's true interest. The concern is, therefore, to analyze to what extent are these women in a position to contribute to the local government decision

making process? Are they properly accepted by their male counterparts in the local body? Do they face any problem while participating in the activities of the local government?

Shamim and Kumari (2002) explained that there are two kinds of women representatives in the Panchayats: those who face problems and those who have had a smooth entry. Women representatives faced problems when they did not have any political or organizational affiliation, did not have any family members in politics and fought independently without any party support for which she had to contest in the elections. On the other hand, women who were associated with political parties, accepted party ticket for election and were elected without contesting and did not even make any promises had hardly any problems. One important point here is that of party affiliation., which plays a vital role in assuring good treatment for women. The situation may be favorable for the upper class women, but the lower class women are still the victims of negligence by their male counterparts.

Another aspect that needs to be mentioned here is the trend of exclusion of lower class women (dalit[20]) from public office by council practice and procedures (Mukhopadhya, 2005). Several studies pointed to how dalit men and women are excluded from public office through the manipulation of official rules of procedure governing local government institutions. The case of Chaggibai studied by Goetz (2004) is an example:

> **Chaggibai: A Story of Victimization**
>
> 'Chaggibai was elected sarpanch of Rasulpura Panchayat, Rajasthan, India, in 1995, a chair reserved not just for a woman, but for a Dalit. A member of the tiny Bhil group, part of the Dalit community there, she was encouraged to run for the sarpanch position by members of the Rawat caste group, the elite class that made up over 60% of the residents of the area. As an independent-minded woman, she was not an obvious choice for an upper caste proxy candidate, as she was literate, known in the area as a woman's rights activist, a participant in the national level Mahila Samakhya program, and had worked as a school administrator. But she had long ago separated from her husband, and she was seen therefore as more easy to manipulate than a married woman would be. At the first village assembly after her election, the local Rawat strong man who had always rung the local council, Charan Singh, conducted the meeting and refused to allow Chaggibai to speak. She had assembled over 400 women and Dalits from the area to attend, but Charan Singh, who was accustomed to conducting all council meeting in secret and from his own house, order them all to go home. Chaggibai mobilized the local Dalit and female community in the subsequent month to support her efforts to change council practices. She held open meetings to discuss local development plans, initiated projects to cover local drains, repair the school building and some roads, and she completed the Panchayat buildings so as to accommodate open sessions. When she led local women in demonstrations against the illegal liquor store run by the deputy sarpanch, Charan Singh and the Rawat community counter attacked, locking the Panchayat doors against her, hiding files containing illicit transactions, and attempting to assault Chaggibai. Subsequently, nine of twelve panchayat members, including two women, convened a secret meeting and passed a vote of no-confidence against her. Chaggibai's case was taken up by the People's Union of Civil Liberties and by Rajasthan's vibrant women's movement, and a petition was filed against her removal in the Jaipur High Court. In the end she did not succeed in getting reinstated. As she commented to a journalist several years later: 'they simple couldn't tolerate a woman. And above and beyond that, the panchayat is dominated by non-Dalits, so they couldn't tolerate me doubly. If I had been their puppet, as they expected me to be, none of this would have happened' (Goetz, 2002, cited in Mukhopadhya, 2005).

If we analyze the case of Chaggibai, two characteristics of Indian society will be evident. One would be that the Indian society still suffers from

caste struggle. The other would be the neglect of women. But, on the other hand, a number of studies find that women councilors and residents manage to articulate priorities in local planning and decision making differently from men. Basu (Nussnaum et al. 2003, cited in Mukhopadhyay, 2005) reports evidence from villages in Maharashtra, that women-led Panchayats placed greater emphasis on construction of wells, playgrounds, roads, public toilets and non-polluting stoves. Topalova (2003) found that drinking water supply services tended to be better in Panchayats led by women rather than men and the local residents agreed that women were less likely to demand bribes. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) in their study on 165 village councils in West Bengal and Rajasthan found that women's leadership has indeed had positive impacts on policy decisions. On the other hand, Vijayalakshmi (2002) argues that a number of factors such as the way in which women are brought into the political process in local government institutions (as de jure and not de facto representatives), the fact that most women elected to reserved seats have no prior experience of politics or of contact with constituencies, that elected women have little communication with each other, that they belong to different social groups which divides them, limit the possibility of developing shared gender-specific agendas. The above discussion substantiates that the situation of women in India in comparison to Bangladesh is slightly better. Although they are the victims of several societal values, in some contexts they have been successful in playing a positive role.

Thus it is obvious that creating scope for participation of women through affirmative action by the government does not ensure their active participation in the decision making process; real participation of women in the local government decision making has not yet been ensured. The present level and style of women's participation can be referred to as merely symbolic. To ensure full women's participation it is necessary to overcome the rigid social and cultural barriers that they face and which limit their participation in the public sphere.

What should be done?

Despite having adopted new legal and institutional measures, in the form of reservation of seats in local government institutions by the government of Bangladesh and India to ensure greater participation of women in political process, the discussion of preceding section clearly demonstrates that such representation is minimal and has been restricted mostly for the reserved seats. The major causes of such lower representation of women have been socio-cultural, political, structural, educational and regional factors. In such a situation, it is necessary to intensify existing measures and initiate new ones so that greater female representation in governance may be ensured.

First: A major obstacle to women's participation in politics involves cultural norms and perceptions that has stereotyped women's role to the family domain only. To counteract this, it is essential to initiate appropriate cultural, educational and informational policies. Both men and women should be taught the lesson that there is no difference between men and women, and women should be treated fairly and equally to make sure that discrimination against women is not acceptable. In doing so, the first step should be to redesign the educational curricula in a way that highlights the significance of women's participation in national development at all levels (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 1993). Another mechanism would be to involve various media sources, like television, radio and newspapers, with a view to making policy-makers and administrators realize the problems of gender inequality and to stimulate women to reorganize their roles and affirm themselves as equal partners of men in every sphere (Center for Asia-Pacific Women in politics, 2000 and Haque, 2003).

Second: It is obligatory for the government to bring effective constitutional and legal provisions in regards to gender equality in every spheres of governance. Besides, it is always essential to pass few additional legal measures in order to render legislation effective. For instance, the Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act 1997 does not have any clause where the duties and responsibilities of the women members have been clearly spelt out. In India, the provision of raising no confidence motion against the Sarpanch (the president) sometimes offers opportunity to the upper class powerful Panchaayat member to remove the president who belongs to the schedule caste. This case of Chaggibai in Rajasthan, India is instructive. Taking these mistakes into consideration, specific laws in favor of enhancing women's representation in governing institutions needs to be passed in the parliament.

Third: Since women's representation in the legislative and executive bodies greatly depends on

their representation in political parties, there is need for the major political parties to take appropriate initiatives to expand such party representation. In this regard, they may, at least, practice the female quota in political parties. This system of female quota of political parties does exist in cases such as Denmark, Germany, Norway and Sweden (Women Around the World, 2000). In addition, it is the political will or commitment of top leaders that remains most critical to adopt and implement all the above measures suggested for ending gender-based discrimination and expanding female representation and participation in various domains of governance (Center for Asia-Pacific Women in politics, 2000). In the case of Bangladesh, it is easier to bring about such reforms in political parties as the two largest political parties are headed by women chairpersons

Finally: A government that does not consider women's empowerment a priority will more likely channel their budget to defense and trade promotion. Without an adequate budget, government initiated policy measures to empower women cannot possibly go beyond rhetoric. Political will must translate into both policies and resources if they are to be effective at all. At the same time, government policies must address the need to give women access to career patterns to develop and strengthen their capacity as political leaders, develop media relations, and generate their own resources (Villaluz, 2000).

Conclusion

The long history of struggles in South Asia--from women's suffrage to women's participation in electoral politics at national and provincial levels--is an ongoing process. The state's initiatives of granting quotas or reservation for women have proved to be a mixed bag. Still women of both Bangladesh and India have been facing numerous social, religious and political obstacles while participating in local level governance.

The essence of good governance lies in integrating local-level planning with national government policies and the success of local governments depend on peoples' participation. However, unequal participation of women and men in government affairs works as a barrier to ensure good governance in both Bangladesh and India (Shamim and Kumari, 2002). From the above analysis it is clear that there is a crucial need for a gender-specific development paradigm into all areas of policy making and planning, so that women's needs can be better met and their participation ensured.

ENDNOTES

1. One may ask a question why 'local government' of both India and Bangladesh has been selected as the unit of analysis, why not national level? The answer lies in the fact that local government organizations are the main means through which women enter into the arena of politics. A vast majority of local level women do not have access to national level politics. Besides, it would have been a very difficult task to shed light on the state of women's political participation at the local as well as national level in a comparative perspective in a single paper.

2. India's bi-cameral legislature consists of a 545 strong lower house (Lok Sabha) and a 250 member upper house (Rajya Sabha). Women in the two houses largely belong to the relatively privileged middle class, are educated and professional. Some women enter through the caste quotas. Despite the constant low number of women having returned as legislators (though they doubled in the first fifty years) some have reached positions of power in mainstream political parties and in governance like Sonia Gandhi, president of the ruling Congress party, Jayalalitha, Chief Minister (CM) of Tamil Nadu and Mayawati, the former CM of Uttar Pradesh who also happened to be a *dalit*. Religious extremist party, Vishya Hindu Parishad (VHP) too has a few militant and activist women among its leadership. Notwithstanding their position these women have failed to push for gender balance in the decision making bodies within their parties. Women's representation in State Assemblies, at an average of four percent, is even more dismal. Analysis and studies of women's effectiveness in legislatures reveal that their presence has hardly made any difference despite the fact that women moved private members bills and resolutions relevant to women and managed support from other women members regardless of party lines. Most of these it turns out did not come up for discussions and lapsed (Mumtaz, 2005).

3. The system of local self government in rural areas in India is called Panchayati Raj. The system consists of the village (gram), block (taluka) and district (zila) levels.

4. Bangladesh's unicameral legislature consists of a

parliament (*Jaityo Songhsod)* with 300 members. The constitution provided for 15 reserved seats for women (Clause 65), these were doubled to 30 in the second national assembly (1979-1982). The seats lapsed in 2001. In the year 2005, legislation was passed for restoration of reserved seats and increase in the quota to 45 seats. The women are indirectly elected by the members of the house. The quota does not prevent women from contesting on general seats. Currently there are 7 directly elected women in parliament. Unusual in the case of Bangladesh is that both the head of government and leader of opposition are women (Mumtaz, 2005).

5. A four-tier local government system is now in operation in Bangladesh. Among these four tiers, the top tier is the district council (*zilla parishad);* followed by the *upazilla parishad* which is the lowest level of operation for the bureaucracy and line ministries; the third tier is the union council (*union parishad);* and the fourth, village level *gram sarker*. Union parishad is the only local self government bodies in operation. So we would restrict our discussion of women's participation within the Union Parishad only.

6. ADAB was the leading umbrella organizations of NGOs in Bangladesh.

7. In 1996, a political turmoil took place in Bangladesh politics in regards to the controversial election of 15th February, 1996. All opposition political parties boycotted the election and was advocating for passing the bill of 'Non-partisan Care taker Government' to conduct a free and fair election in Bangladesh. Ignoring the opposition's demand, the then Government led by Prime Minster Begum Khaleda Zia went for contesting the election alone but the continuous mass movement compelled the Government to resign accepting the opposition demand for 'Non-partisan Care Taker Government'.

8. GSS is the name of a NGO in Bangladesh.

9. Nilphamari is the name of a district in Bangladesh.

10. The prominent women leaders include Sonia Gandhi, president of ruling Congress Party, Kumari Jayalalitha, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Mayawati, the former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and Rabri Devi, the former Chief Minister of Bihar.

11. One possible explanation might be that both leaders do not want to be gender biased by advocating for women or by initiating several affirmative actions designed for the improvement of women in Bangladesh.

12. The population of Bangladesh is approximately 129 million: Muslims 88.3 percent, Hindus 10.5 percent, Buddhists 0.6 percent, Christians 0.3 percent, and animists 0.1 percent (http://banbeis.org/bd_pro.htm, 1 July 2004).

13. 'Purdha' is a sort of veil used by the Muslim Women in Bangladesh for physical exclusion from the males.

14. The term *fatwa*, which in Islamic legal parlance refers to a clarification of an ambiguous judicial point or an opinion by a jurist trained in Islamic law. In September 1993, a small group by the name of "Soldiers of Islam" announced a prize of fifty thousands taka (1 US$ = 70 Taka) for the execution of writer Taslima Nasreen (who wrote several novels criticizing Islam) on the ground s that her works were insulting to Islam (Shehabuddin, 1999).

15. *Mullah* is a term of address for one known or believed to be learned in religious matter.

16. These factors are the constitutional adoption of Islam as the state religion, the growing aid dependency of the government on middle-eastern Islamic countries, the formation of successive governments with the supporting seats of the Jaamat-e-Islam party (Jaamat-e-Islam is the name of a political party whose main aim is to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh) and the increasing governmental allocations to religious educational institutions (Shamim and Nasreen, 2002).

17. 'De facto politics' refers to a political situation where despite being the elected representatives the person elected does not actively participate in the functions of governance. In case of women, the male family members and/or elites who were political actively managed the functions of the union parishad on behalf of women members (Vijaylakshmi 2002, cited in Mukhopadhyay, 2005).

18. Anwar Hossain Munju is the Chairman of Jatio Party (Munju group) and also the existing Member of Parliament of Bangladesh.

19. In Bangladesh culture, wife of brother is generally called as 'bhavi'.

20. Dalit is the name of a caste belongs to Schedule Tribes.

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