Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh: The Role of Political Parties

Pranab Kumar Panday

Introduction

What have political parties done in the enactment of *the Local Government* (*Union Parishads*) (*Second Amendment*) *Act, 1997* (hereinafter the Act of 1997) that seems to have a greater impact on creating space for women's participation in politics in Bangladesh by introducing direct election for women in three reserved seats at the local government (Union Parishad)[1] level? Was their role a central and critical one or relatively peripheral? Taking into consideration the importance of political parties that form the government in a democratic state, this paper intends to explore answers to these questions. One may wonder why an effort has been made to explore the role of political parties in enhancing women's participation in politics. As a matter of fact, an avenue for women's participation in greater numbers in the local government politics was created through the enactment of the Act of 1997. Since political parties form the government in a democratic country like Bangladesh, an explanation about the role of political parties in the process of reforms relating to women deserves special attention.

The issue of women's involvement in politics and in leadership positions has been a subject of debate in the last couple of decades. Since the early 1970s, the United Nations has been advocating for greater women's participation in the political decision-making process. While highlighting the issue of women's

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[1] Union Parishad (Union Council) is the third tier of the existing local government system in Bangladesh. The other two tiers are Upazila Parishad at Upazila (Sub-district) level and Zila Parishad at Zila (District) level. As regards the structure of the UP, it is composed of an elected Chairman, nine members directly elected from nine wards, and three women members. For the election of women members, nine wards are grouped into three wards, which are generally called reserved seats for women.

P. K. Panday (✉)
University of Rajshahi, Rajshahi, Bangladesh
e-mail: pranabpanday@yahoo.com

participation in politics, it is reasonable to ask whether the lack of women's involvement makes any difference to the outcome of decision making. Of course, the reasonable answer is "yes" since the legitimacy of the decision-making process cannot be ensured while keeping half of the total population away from it. Realizing the essence of women's participation in the decision-making process, Rule and Zimmerman (1994 cited in Reynolds 1999, pp. 547–548) have rightly argued that if there is less representation of women in the national parliament, issues related to women in society would not be afforded greater importance in that parliament. In that case, decisions taken in these parliaments would certainly suffer from broader questions of answerability, openness, and isolation. On the other hand, the process of establishment of good governance and rule of law will be hampered if policy institutions and policy processes are not equally represented by men and women since women's interests differ from men (Lister 1997, p. 154).

In most Third World countries, there has been great disparity between males and females with respect to their representation in politics, public service, and in almost every sector of public life (United Nations 1989, p. 13; UNDP 1995, p. 40). Thus, women's entry into the political process is really difficult. Most importantly, women find difficulty in gaining support from men in the electoral process in a male dominated and patriarchic society. Under such circumstances, special provisions in the form of quota reservation or affirmative action are required in order to ensure greater representation of women in politics. In the case of making reservations or initiating affirmative action for women, support from the political parties is indispensable, since they usually form a government that enjoys ultimate power to enact any law. Moreover, political parties usually determine candidature in elections. Thus, it is expected that they may play an important role in shaping women's representation in politics. Strong party affiliation is one of the basic requirements for gaining selection as a candidate and eventually a position in national or local level politics.

In light of the circumstances described above, this paper intends to add knowledge to the understanding of the role of political parties in the enactment of the Act of 1997 in Bangladesh, which was intended to enhance greater participation of women in politics. Through the enactment of this act, one-third of seats is now reserved for women in the Union Parishads (hereinafter UP), the third and the lowest tier of government in the local government structure. Provision has also been made to fill these seats through direct election, which has conferred a higher degree of legitimacy to the women members. It is important to mention here that the reservation of seats for women in the UP was also in operation before 1997. However, they were either nominated by government officials or selected by the votes of the chair and members of the UPs.

Research Methodology

This chapter is based on a case-oriented, qualitative research strategy where both primary and secondary data have been used. Primary data was collected through extensive fieldwork carried out in 2007 in the Rajshahi District in the northern part of the country. Interviews were conducted through an open-ended, structured questionnaire with 33 leaders from four major political parties.[2] A majority of the respondents were former members of the Parliament or were district-level party portfolio holders. Among the Awami League (AL) leaders who were interviewed, six were former Parliament members (including the former Prime Minister and the Chairman of the Local Government Reform Commission 1997) when the Act was endorsed, while the rest were high-profile District and Upazila-level AL leaders.[3] Among the nine Bangladesh Nationalists Party (BNP) leaders, two were ex-MPs and seven were District- and Upazila-level leaders. Among the five Jatiya Party (JP) leaders, one was an ex-MP and four were District-level leaders. Lastly, the seven Bangladesh Jammet-E-Islami (BJI) leaders belonged to party leadership in different levels. Secondary data was collected from different published sources in the form of books, book chapters, journal articles, and the Internet.

Policy, Policy Process, and Actors: A Theoretical Note

A policy that can be divided into several programs or projects is a broad guideline of actions designed to achieve certain objective(s) or goal(s). A policy that is designed and formulated by legal government machineries for achieving goals relating to public interests is called "public policy" (Panday and Jamil 2010). There are diverse opinions among scholars regarding the definition of public policy. For instance, Jenkins (1978) defines 'public policy' as:

> … a set of interrelated decisions taken by a political actor or group of actors concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specified situation where those decisions should, in principle, be within the power of those to achieve (p. 15).

From that perspective, policy is a process. Eyestone (1971) defined public policy as "the relationship of a government unit to its environment" (p. 18). The scope of this definition is so wide that it leaves us uncertain about its meaning. On the other hand, Friedrich (1963) defined public policy as "a proposed course of action of a person, or government within a given environment providing obstacles

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[2] These parties included the Bangladesh Awami League (AL), Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Jammat-E-Islami Bangladesh (JIB), and Jatiya Party (JP). These parties were selected because they had the majority of representations in the National Parliament for the past 15 years.

[3] It is worth noting here that when the political party leaders were interviewed, the Parliament was dissolved. Hence, all MPs were ex-MPs.

and opportunities which the policy was proposed to utilize an objective or a purpose" (p. 79). These definitions lead us to an operational definition of public policy as a result of decisions made by governments to do something or refrain from doing something. There is a scope for involvement of actors (both institutions and individuals) in the policy process that use formal mechanisms or informal networks to coordinate actions. Since this chapter deals with explaining the role of a policy actor (political parties) in the process of enactment of a particular policy (the Act of 1997) in Bangladesh, it is relevant to find answers to a couple of questions: when is a particular issue put on government agenda and who are the actors in the policymaking process? In response, the first question of Kingdon's (1984) proposition of agenda setting can be used. He argued that when three events including "problem stream," "policy stream," and "political stream" interact among themselves, a new window is opened that allows the proposal to be put on the political agenda. In the context of this study, it is found that different international organizations and donors were highlighting issues relating to gender for a long time. Later, the Platform for Action was accepted as a policy in the Fourth World Conference on women in Beijing China in 1995 for mainstreaming gender issues in social development. Finally, the issue of women's political participation received a big boost in Bangladesh through a change in the government ideology when the more progressive AL government came into power in 1996, replacing the government of BNP. As an outcome of the interactions of these three streams, the issue of enhanced participation of women in politics was accepted by the government, which moved the policy agenda forward.

AS regards actors' involvement in the policy process, Howlett and Ramesh (1995 and 2003) discuss the inclusion of both state and societal actors in the policy process. Among different actors, some have close involvement in the policy process while others have marginal involvement. Policy sub-systems are used as forums by policy actors for persuading and bargaining for their interests by discussing policy issues. Recognizing the existence of individual and group actors in the policy process, Howlett and Ramesh (1995 and 2003) divide them into three broad categories, i.e., organization of the society, organization of the state, and organization of the international system. Being guided by the above theoretical proposition and sensing realities of the Bangladeshi policymaking environment in general, and women-related policymaking in particular, a set of actors have been identified that are thought to be influential in the process of the enactment of the 1997 Act. Among the different actors, the role of government or elected officials has been selected from the category of the state actor while political parties, women's organizations (WOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been selected as units of societal actors. Finally, donors and different international conventions are chosen as the units of organization of international actors.

Explicating the roles of different actors in a single paper is difficult. Thus, a modest attempt is made in this paper to elucidate the role of political parties in the process of enactment of the Act of 1997, considering the importance of political

parties in a democracy. From a theoretical point of view, political parties guide the government to perform their responsibilities since they form the government. Thus, what political parties in Bangladesh have done for women's political empowerment is a critical issue that demands exploration.

Political Parties and Women in Politics: Conceptual Discourse

Scholars studying democratic politics agree that public policy is strongly influenced by political parties, interests groups, and social movements. As a matter of fact, policy problems are defined, solutions are proposed, citizens' policy preferences are aggregated, voters are mobilized, demands of elected officials are made, information about the government action to their supporters and the larger public is communicated, and possible legislative actions are made by these organizations. Thus, the existence of these organizations is indispensable for democratic policymaking since no one can even think of a democratic polity without them (Aldrich 1995; Burstein and Linton 2002; Hansen 1991; Tilly 1984). The role of political parties in this section will be discussed from two perspectives. The first perspective deals with a more general discussion on the role of political parties in the policy process. The second perspective is concerned more with the role of political parties in enhancing women's participation in politics. To be more specific, how do party structures influence the process of nomination of women within an existing system?

While discussing the role of political parties in policymaking, scholars (Arnold 1990; Dahl 1989; Mayhew 1974) have argued that elected officials are forced to enact policies that are consistent with public opinion, due to the existence of electoral competition. Since there is a strong urgency among all the officeholders to get re-elected, theoretically, they do not want to admit failure to do what the public wants. Their failure would certainly bring their defeat in the election. This is the major issue where the political parties have direct impact since the government is formed from the parties. Considering commitments made in the election manifestos and sensing the expectation of the voters, political parties try their best to mobilize the government to enact policies in line with the hopes and aspirations of the public. This happens when the public is found intensely concerned about an issue. This situation assures the elected officials that the citizen's party choice will be influenced by their actions. However, political parties may need to ensure balance when the public is found relatively indifferent about a particular issue (Arnold 1990; Jones 1994). Thus, it can be said that the structure and organization of political parties and party systems in a country exercise an important degree of influence on the policymaking process.

Irrespective of the electoral system pattern, the form of ballot used, or the rate of legislature turnover, it is the "will of political parities" that finally decides the selection of female candidates (Beckwith 1992; Pitre 2003, p. 5). Hence, parties

are the real gatekeepers to elected office (Norris and Lovenuski 1995; Norris 1996) since they are responsible for recruitment, selection, and election of candidates (Pitre 2003, pp. 5–6). While some parties are well aware of women's political under-representation and adopt initiatives to ensure greater female participation, other parties seem to be less enthusiastic.[4] Moreover, these initiatives can be taken in the form of quotas, target numbers, or affirmative action measures (Pitre 2003, p. 6).

According to Caul (1999, p. 80), *centralization* is one of the three party organizational structural aspects that may influence women's representation. Meanwhile, the other two aspects are *institutionalization* and *the location of candidate nomination*. Centralization depicts how control over decision making within party hierarchy is distributed. The leader can create opportunities for women when a party is highly centralized. Thus, it is considered as a matter of having the will to promote female candidates. Moreover, it is easier to hold centralized parties accountable for women's political integration (Caul 1999). On the other hand, Norris (1993) expressed that women are offered increased access to participation in electoral politics due to the emergence of new parties and a fragmented multi-party system.

On the other hand, the process of recruitment of women is determined by the degree of institutionalization with political parties. Where the degree of institutionalization is high, it denotes the existence of a more rule-oriented process that provides all potential MPs, especially those without ties to the power center, with a set of understandable rules (Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Caul 1999). Moreover, the highly institutionalized selection process allows outsiders to understand the working of the selection process well (Czudnowski 1975). Thus, it is easier for the aspiring officeholders to anticipate the criteria for judging the candidature. In this situation, there is a possibility that women would have a better chance of getting the nomination if they are not overtly discriminated by the rules. On the other hand, in a situation where the level of institutionalization is weak, there is a possibility that the process of a candidate's nomination may be biased by party leaders in favor of those having accumulated 'personal political capital,' resources based upon personal status or external group support (Guadagnini 1993). In this situation, women, who are newcomers to parties, may find it difficult to compete with the more established men.

The location of candidate nomination is another important element that influences women's entry into politics. Lovenduski and Norris (1993) assumed that women are often in a more friendly situation in a localized nomination process since they are likely to work in community politics and may work their way up to the national level. On the contrary, a more structured internal party career ladder

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[4] One may wonder why other parties seem to be less enthusiastic about women's political representation. As a matter of fact, this group of political parties seems to be conservative in their outlook toward women. In the context of developing countries like Bangladesh, a fundamentalist Islamic political party like BJI belongs to this group since they do not believe in women's free mobility outside home and their involvement in the public arena.

may be provided by the centralized nomination pattern where women working in the party bureaucracy are repaid with a party office (Czudnowski 1975).

Now one may wonder: how can one assess the position of political parties in Bangladesh when centralized political parties and a fragmented multi-party system promote greater women's representation at the national and local level? First, there seems to be a centralized and multi-party political culture in the country. Although there may be more than 170 political parties, power has always been concentrated between the AL and the BNP. These parties are highly centralized with respect to their decision making. Since the government is run on a party basis, political parties have a leading role in enhancing the political participation of women. With regard to the issue of women's participation, the party in power has a larger role than the opposing one. While opposition parties can only press their demand, it is still the government that actually decides. In fact, the ideology of political parties determines the limit by which parties could be in favor of greater women's participation. The underlying questions are as follows: what is the limit of political parties' intent when empowering women, particularly when they are in government? Do they really intend to bring changes in the institutional design in order to create an environment in which women would feel enthusiastic to participate in politics? If they do, can they facilitate it easily given the fact that political leadership is entrusted with the responsibility of administering state power? In doing so, the willingness of political leaders bearing state power is essential. The main concern is to explore the extent of political parties' willingness to ensure greater Bangladeshi women's participation and to elucidate the degree to which they have influenced the government to initiate reforms at the local government level.

The Act of 1997: Distinguishing Features and Significance

Several changes in the composition of the UPs were introduced through the Act of 1997 in terms of ensuring greater political participation of women. The reservation of three seats for women remained the same. However, the provision of direct election for the selection of women members was introduced. Another important change that was made through the Act was the territorial demarcation of wards for women members. Although the UP is divided into nine wards for general members, for the sake of electing three women members, these wards are grouped into three wards. This has entrusted many responsibilities upon the women members, as her constituency is three times bigger than a general member's constituency. In this regard, however, the Act has remained silent on the specific duties and responsibilities of a woman member in the UP. Later when implementing the Act, the government realized this omission as it made the Act difficult to implement. In response, a number of circulars were issued to clarify the position of women members and their responsibilities (Panday 2009).

Now one may wonder: what is the significance of the Act of 1997? As a matter of fact, the Act has opened a new avenue for women to feel encouraged to take part in the political process. If we try to analyze the situation in terms of a numerical figure, it would also be evident that a remarkable change has taken place. For instance, in the UP election of 1988, 1992, 1993, and 1997, the percentage of women contesting for general seats was 0.75 % (863 out of 114,699), 0.67 % (1135 out of 169,683), and 0.45 % (617 out of 137,909) respectively (Sultana 2000, p. 15; www.ecs.gov.bd). When it comes to the posting of chairpersons, available data suggests that only one woman was elected as chair out of 4,350 UPs in the election of 1973, while four and six women candidates were elected as chairs in the elections of 1977 and 1984, respectively (Sultana 2000, p. 14). In the UP election of 1988, 79 women among 18,566 candidates contested for the post of chair for 4401 UPs, women constituting only 0.43 % of candidates (Ahmed and Nabi 2001, p. 3). Again in 1992, available data indicates that for the position of chair of 4,450 UPs, women constituted only 0.66 % of the contesting candidates, that is, 115 out of a total 17,444. Among them 24 women were elected as chair. In the election of 1997, 102 women directly contested for the post of chair, and of these, 23 were elected (Islam 2000, pp. 112–113).

Again, in the election of 1997, 44,134 women contested in quota seats reserved for them, and of them, 13,437 women were elected (among the 13,437, 592 were elected unopposed) (Islam 2000, pp. 112–113). In the election of 2003, the total number of women contesting 12,669 quota seats in 4,223 UPs was 39,419 (Steps Towards Development 2003, p 7). Thus, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of women contesting and being elected.

The Act of 1997 has proven to be a revolution in terms of women's political participation in Bangladesh since it has provided elected women members with a special entity. At present, some of them, at least, claim they have equal rights with those of other elected members of the UP. They can even go one step forward and consolidate their positions by claiming that the size of their constituency is three times larger than a general member's constituency. However, one may wonder why fewer numbers of women contested general seats in the 2003 elections than in the 1988 and 1992/1993 elections despite the enactment of the Act of 1997. As a matter of fact, in reserved seats, women are required to contest elections with their fellow women only. On the other hand, in general seats, they are required to contest with the males. Thus, more women might have decided to contest elections in reserved seats instead of general seats.

The Act of 1997 has created an environment where women have also begun to exercise their voting rights. Prior to 1997, women could hardly cast their votes due to various social constraints, even though their names were enlisted as voters. Now one may wonder: what factors prohibited them to exercise their voting rights prior to 1997? Among a number of factors, some are: First, patriarchy and Islamic values do not allow women's free movement in public arenas. Thus, they were not willing to go and exercise their voting rights. Second, lack of education and interest in politics made women reluctant to cast votes during elections. In most cases, male heads of the family influenced women to determine for whom to cast

their votes. Thus, they were reluctant to go to voting centers with a realization that their vote would not make any difference to the outcome of the result. Third, since there was no quota reserved for women in the local government bodies, women contestants were low. If there were a good number of women candidates in the election, women might have felt an urge to cast their vote in favor of their fellow women candidates. All these factors either compelled them or made them apathetic about exercising their voting rights during election.

Political Parties and Women in Politics: Means and Extent of Influence

Before any discussion on the means and extent of influence of political parties on augmenting the process of women's participation in politics, it is important to explore how the leaders perceive the issue of women's participation in politics. It is surprising to note that none of the leaders interviewed (for this study) considered women to have equal rights and the same status as men. Almost 70 % of the respondents expressed this opinion. The majority of leaders of political parties perceived women as incapable of carrying out political responsibilities due to low levels of education and lack of leadership quality. Such observations in the study corroborated with the finding of Farouk's (2005) study which also found that the status of women, as considered by men, is much lower than that of men despite the fact that they constitute half of the total population.

Under these circumstances, one may wonder: how did female leaders in Bangladesh become successful in ruling the country for almost two decades? As a matter of fact, both the women leaders (Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia) have inherited leadership from their family members. The present Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's father (Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) was the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh. The country gained its independence under his leadership. On the other hand, the leader of the opposition Begum Khaleda Zia's husband (General Ziaur Rahman) was a freedom fighter and the then president of the country. As a matter of fact, the majority of the population of Bangladesh is emotionally attached to the memories of these two leaders. Thus, even after the death of the former leaders, these two female leaders have a large support base from the majority of the population which helped them to exercise extreme control over party affairs. Also, their leadership is vital for keeping these two parties integrated. However, their position in the political system is not indicative of the overall situation of women's participation in politics in the country.

One important reality is that leaders of the JIB insisted women to stay at home on the grounds that Islam prohibits their access outside the home. It was expected that the leaders of JIB would express their opinion against women's participation in the public arena because of religious values. What was surprising was the negative responses from groups of political leaders who belonged to the Awami

League (AL), Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and Jatiya Party (JP) about this issue of women's political participation. This made us curious to know about the underlying causes. One possible explanation is that there are some leaders who still nurture the idea, in accordance with the dominant belief in Bangladesh, that the realm of politics is an arena mainly for men and women should refrain from entering this arena. Such explanation seems true when we found one high-profile leader from AL expressing that "I am an advocate of Bangladesh Supreme Court. When I got married, my wife was a school teacher. I compelled her to resign from her job and stay at home. I want my wife to take care of my family."[5] Such a frame of mind shows the conservative attitude of some political leaders about women's participation. Fortunately, their numbers in the AL, BNP, and JP are not large.

Another important issue that calls for explanation is how political leaders perceive institutional reforms as a mechanism for bringing changes in the structural design of an institution that may open up avenues for women to take part in larger numbers. It is observed that admitting the importance of institutional reforms, the majority of leaders of political parties expressed their views in favor of bringing changes in the design of the UPs to accelerate the process of women's participation since it is the nearest organization to which the majority of women have access.[6] On the necessity for institutional reforms, the majority of leaders of political parties believe that patriarchy and male domination would create a hindrance for women's participation in local government politics. Thus, institutions should have to be redesigned through affirmative action in such a way as to facilitate women's entry into the political process.[7] Despite their positive impressions about institutional reforms and changes in the structural design of institutions, the majority of the respondents expressed a lukewarm attitude regarding women's political participation, since a majority of them did not have full understanding about the Act of 1997 and the process of its enactment.[8] Respondents expressed that, "at least," more women were currently participating in the local government politics.

It is also observed from the responses of political leaders that governments sometimes initiate reforms to gain political advantages as well. For instance, the government enacts women-friendly laws to gain the support of the female community during elections. Sometimes, reforms are initiated as a result of influence from different actors like women's organizations (WO), civil society organizations (CSO), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations and donors. Also, the government enacts reforms of their own realization when they want to ensure the welfare of the people. Reforms aiming at bringing changes in the design of an institution are brought about when it is perceived that the existing design is no longer appropriate and capable of meeting the demands of

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[5] This is an opinion expressed by a top leader from Awami League.

[6] 22 out 33 respondents expressed such views.

[7] 23 out of 33 respondents expressed such views.

[8] 26 out of 33 respondents did not have a clear understanding about the Act.

modern times.[9] Despite the existence of different possibilities influencing the government to initiate reforms, the majority of political leaders were of the opinion that reforms are initiated by the government as a result of consistent demands and pressure from different actors.[10]

It is taken for granted that the government is constituted by various political parties within a democracy. Thus, it is expected that parties would play an important role in setting priority agendas depending on which ones the government would enact. From this perspective it can be argued that there are ample opportunities for parties to influence the government in its operation. However, when it concerns the role of political parties in augmenting the process of women's participation in politics, the study findings suggest that political parties did not have greater influence on the government.[11] This finding is in accordance with the argument by Howlett et al. (2009, p. 68) that "political parties tend to have only diffuse, indirect effect on policy making." However, one important issue is that the leaders of AL have been found expressing positive views regarding their influence on the government to initiate reforms. This is indicative of the fact that the ruling party enjoys more power and authority in Bangladesh, while the opposition is overruled or neglected.[12]

Under the circumstances presented above, it is reasonable to ask: how did the AL, as a political party, influence the government or policy? To be more specific: what were the mechanisms that AL used to exert influence on the government? Different mechanisms that were used by political parties include expression of opinion by the parliament members in the Parliament, speaking at respective party forums by district-level leaders and attending seminars, symposia, and public forums by leaders. Despite their positive opinions about influencing the government to initiate reforms, the leaders of AL failed to measure the intensity of their influence on the government. One respondent expressed that "it is unlikely that our opinions are taken into consideration by the government. In a true sense, the decision is taken in the top level where local-, mid-, and regional-level leadership have no access."[13] Such an expression also denotes the lack of democratic

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[9] 12 out 33 respondents expressed such views.

[10] 21 out of 33 respondents expressed this view.

[11] 18 out of 33 respondents expressed such views.

[12] This indicates the existence of a typical political culture in Bangladesh where the relationship between the ruling and opposing party is adversarial in nature. Usually, the government does not accept even worthy recommendations from the opposition. Equally, the opposition does not praise any of the worthy initiatives of the ruling party. The most important feature of Bangladeshi politics is that different political party leaders do not maintain a working relationship with their opposition. An example is the two women leaders (Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia), the leaders of two leading political parties having virtually no communication between them. As such, this kind of conflicting relationship always hinders the process of reaching unanimity on a particular issue.

[13] Interview with an ex-MP from AL.

practices within political parties, since decisions are made arbitrarily by upper level political leaders without even consulting the local-, mid-, and regional-level leaders. Also, the nature of policymaking has become so complex and technical involving multiple actors at multiple levels that it is not easy for a layman such as the political leader to delve into these complexities.

On the contrary, the BNP and JP did not have any sort of influence on the government when the Act was enacted. JIB on the other hand, neither tried to influence nor obstructed the process of ratifying the Act, since their representation in the Seventh Parliament (1996–2001) was negligible.[14] It is important to mention here that the lawmaking process in Bangladesh is highly centralized. The party in power, if it has majority in the Parliament, bothers little about comments and suggestions of oppositions in the making of laws. As a matter of fact, the process starts in the ministry and gets approval in the Parliament without allowing opportunities for deliberation. Thus, it can be asserted that the Act of 1997 was not an outcome of constant pressure from any of the political parties. It does not necessarily mean that the government enacted the Act of 1997 of their own accord. In fact, different actors like women's organizations, NGOs, donor agencies, and international agencies remained vocal about the issue of increasing women's participation in politics. Through different forums and activities these actors created pressure on the government and influenced it to enact such a law.

In the circumstances presented above, one may argue whether political parties carry out any sort of programs to accelerate the process of women's participation in politics. It is observed that the majority of the political leaders have been found expressing positive views about carrying out advocacy programs since such initiatives could make women knowledgeable about their political rights and inspire them to actively participate in the political process. Now the question is: what type of advocacy programs were carried out by different political parties? Three interesting observations have been drawn in this regard. *First*, in the absence of any formal programs run by any political party most political leaders inspire women to join party affairs informally.[15] Now, one may wonder: how do they persuade women to join politics? The answer to this question can be found through the statement of a political leader who said, "we encourage women to take part in politics in an informal way. When women come in contact with us in the locality, we inspire them to take part in party affairs."[16] Second, it is the party's apex leadership that actually decides what would be done for women where local- and mid-level politicians do not have any access. One respondent expressed:

> [S]ometimes, it is very difficult to express opinions in the party forum. If you express your opinion against top leaders, you will lose your position in the party. Sometimes, we have to face harassment even though we belong to the same political party. Such things happen

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[14] JIB had only three (3) Parliament members out of the total 330 (300 general seats and 30 seats reserved for women) seats in the Seventh Parliament (1996–2001).

[15] 26 out 33 respondents expressed such views.

[16] Opinion expressed by some leaders of the AL, BNP, and JP.

if the party remains in power. Therefore, it is very difficult to carry out any significant advocacy program for women.[17]

Moreover, none of the Bangladeshi political parties have implemented programs that train women and build awareness among them. This finding reflects the reluctance of political parties toward women's participation in the political system.

Despite half-hearted initiatives of major political parties, the majority of the respondents perceived that political parties could contribute to the benefit of the female community, if only they are genuinely interested.[18] In a democracy, it is the political parties that form the government and if a particular party is in power has more opportunities, than others, to influence public policies. Hence, the respondents emphasized that the ruling party should play the key role on the issue of women's political participation and not the opposition parties. However, a group of respondents (10 out of 33) perceived that political leaders are not accountable to the party members. In fact, both the major political parties (AL and BNP) are dominated by women leaders, who have obtained their leadership from inheritance. However, their power and influence in party matters are taken for granted and is not subject to be challenged by others.

Since the Act of 1997 was enacted during AL's rule (1996–2001), one may wonder why AL, as a political party, is more supportive of women's political participation. As a matter of fact, both ideological affiliation and the issue of electoral politics have influenced the AL to become more supportive of this issue. It has already been mentioned that ideologically, AL is oriented toward the "left-of-the-center," although they changed their orientation toward "centrist" by adopting a "free market" economic policy in 1992. Thus, they were in a better position to create pressure on the government to augment the process of a greater participation of women in the political process. Moreover, there was an AL government at the center. On the other hand, the issue of electoral politics has also played an important role in this regard. Since women comprise half of the total population, the AL as a political party wanted to do something encouraging for the female community with the expectation that they would gain their support during the national elections. Both these factors have influenced the AL to become supportive of the issue.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the paper, an attempt was made to review and assess the role of political parties in the enactment of a major legislation (the Act of 1997), which has substantially raised the level of women's participation in a society dominated by patriarchy and authoritarianism. Taking into consideration political parties'

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[17] Opinion expressed by an ex-member of the Parliament from Awami League.

[18] 23 out of 33 respondents expressed such views.

positions (especially the ruling party) in a democracy, it was expected that they would play a pivotal role in the process of change. However, this was not the case, as the findings suggest.

From the review of the literature, it can be argued that political parties can do a lot for the betterment of a country's women population. In reality, it is the two women who were in leadership who actually decided the destiny of women's political participation. When they were in power, these leaders could have initiated reforms through which women's participation was increased. They could have done this easily, given the fact that the possibility of their decision being challenged was very low, despite the society's patriarchic domination. However, none of them took any proactive action apart from the Act of 1997. A question may be raised: why did they not take many or at least several affirmative actions for facilitating women's participation at all levels despite having unfettered power and authority over the state? One possible explanation could be that none of them wanted to create any sort of annoyance among their male colleagues by initiating affirmative action. The second could be that both women leaders may have lacked the insight to make independent decisions; they were advised by a number of advisors on various issues. Thus, it is likely that they did what they were advised to do. Another reason could be risk aversion and maintaining the status quo, because any affirmative action in favor of women to change their status might raise criticism in Muslim majority Bangladesh. This is evident from violent protests, especially from male Muslims, when the government in 2011 granted equal rights to women.

Finally, it can be concluded that none of the political parties played a significant role in the enactment of the Act of 1997. Although the Act was passed in the Parliament during AL's rule, the latter's (as a political party) influence on the government on this issue was very negligible. Thus, it can be assumed that political parties have a marginal role, especially if the party is in the opposition, in the policymaking process of developing countries like Bangladesh. Such a claim is corroborated with the argument of Howlett et al. (2009), who noted that political parties are less powerful in the policymaking process. There are other actors such as women's organizations, NGOs, donors, and international conventions who play a crucial role in the policy process.

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