

Pranab Kumar Panday

Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh

Institutional Reforms, Actors and
Outcomes

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Pranab Kumar Panday
Department of Public Administration
University of Rajshahi
Rajshahi
Bangladesh

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Foreword

How does one begin to contextualize women's participation in political life and the kinds of institutional reforms that make this possible? What is the relationship between institutional reform and the presumption of the emancipatory possibilities that are opened up by such reform? In what ways do institutional reforms that address women's interests reverberate in the body politic? In particular, how might one think creatively about the role of electoral reform movements, struggles for gender equality, and women's empowerment in Bangladesh?

Interestingly, Bangladesh continues to play a critical role as a "test case for development," in ways that showcase the variety of innovations that alter business as usual in development practice. Beginning with the birth of the country in 1971, and the programs and activities that emerged soon thereafter, an innovative cadre of civil society institutions and non-government organizations (NGOs) engaged Paolo Freire's ideas about conscientization that included a focus on the needs and interests of women. These efforts helped to organize rural dwellers and provided several strategies to address women's diverse needs and secure their rights. Many of the projects that emerged during this time were critical in creating awareness among rural women and incorporating them among those targeted to participate in NGO activities including, at the time, informal education and training. Some of these initiatives were also critical in highlighting sources of gender inequality and women's lack of access to productive resources, as well as in linking projects to action in ways that sought to establish the conditions necessary to empower women.

To be sure, these efforts were part of a larger, global engagement of the place of NGOs in generating opportunities for social change, where Bangladesh, even under military rule, recognized United Nations initiatives that proclaimed the period 1975–1985 as the decade for women. While a host of reasons explains the rationale behind this early support, its significance in signaling the importance of women's participation in realizing social change cannot be underestimated. Moreover, through the policies and processes begun in the early 1980s that attended to the promotion of industrialization via export promotion, women's labor has been recognized as the backbone of its success, as their cheap labor has been critical to debt servicing and to the recognition that Bangladesh continues to receive as an emerging producer of garments for the world market. While the

garment sector has been applauded for employing women when no other sector had previously done so, it also has been challenged for taking advantage of women's need for employment and, despite struggles for improved working conditions and salary, they continue to receive extremely low wages.

There is an enormous body of research that has elaborated upon the successes and limitations of these initiatives, but what is evident in the period since, is that such programs have helped to alter the lives and livelihoods of rural women. Alongside changing economic demands on individuals, families, and communities, coupled with the availability of new resources—from credit and cell phone availability to enhanced education for girls—the lives of rural women have changed in ways that many thought unlikely in the early 1970s. One measure of these changes is the increasing number of women who, as recipients of rural credit, are sometimes able to initiate activities that provide income and employ their skills and resources in new ways. Together, these shifts unsettle women's relative exclusion from public space and from the constraints that have limited their participation as political leaders and active participants in their communities. And although women's position in processes of social, economic, and political change continues to be exclusionary and unequal, their demand for engagement in the political process continues to grow.

Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh: Institutional Reforms, Actors, and Outcomes, written by Pranab Panday, a committed scholar of public administration and a keen researcher, begins to address the question of gender inequality on the political stage by querying the effects of specific institutional reforms on the political participation of women in local governance. His book draws attention to the passage of the Local Government Ordinance, 1976 and the Local Government (Union Parishads) (Second Amendment) Act, 1997 to secure a growing number of seats at the Union Parishad level for women. This institutional reform is positioned against the backdrop of longer-term changes that have challenged the patriarchal hold of women's opportunities in the country and reveals the excitement among women as candidates and as members of local constituencies.

Crucially, Panday acknowledges the criticality of introducing reserved seats for women in local government bodies through direct election to public office, including highlighting the significance of such changes for bringing women into political conversation with local leaders at the Union Parishad level. He also highlights the important empowering effects that this reform has for rural women. Importantly, too, he is wise to be cautious about the broad changes that actually attend to this singular institutional reform thereby concluding that despite the electoral support that women members receive, local male political leaders continue to behave in discriminatory ways toward their female fellow leaders. With evidence drawn from an in-depth appreciation of a site in Rajshahi District, Panday documents, for instance, the unequal distribution of specific resource allocations that serve to differentiate among the opportunities enjoyed by female and male local leaders, and shows that despite the large size of some women's constituencies they still do not garner equitable access to institutional and community resources.

Despite these seemingly contradictory findings, Panday recognizes that challenges to gender inequality are now more public, and a growing number of women leaders and constituents are now more directly involved in building local level capacity. This evidence-based assessment of what has been altered with the passage of the 1997 Amendment—that the opportunity to elect a woman UP member has led to women’s increased involvement in local electoral politics and decision making—also reveals the enormous work that must follow in its wake, particularly if women are to become full members as political leaders in the country. Yet, what Panday has made evident from these experiences in Rajshahi is that the place of women in the political and economic life of Bangladesh has forever been altered.

Ithaca, NY, USA

Shelley Feldman
Cornell University

Preface

For the last couple of decades, women's involvement in politics and in leadership positions has been the subject of debate. Since the early 1970s, the United Nations has advocated for greater women's participation in the political decision-making process. As an outcome of different advocacy programs, the heads of government in the Beijing conference in 1995 signed the Platform for Action (PFA). Through its endorsement, the heads of the government represented their commitment to achieve 'gender equality and empowerment of women' by ensuring the integration of a gender perspective at all levels of its operation.

Like other countries of the world, the issue of women's participation in politics in Bangladesh is a significant one. Being a signatory of several UN conventions that were created to remove barriers that are faced by women, the Bangladesh government initiated a number of reforms aimed at ensuring greater women's participation in politics in local government bodies. One of the notable reform initiatives was the enactment of the Local Government (Union Parishads) (Second Amendment) Act, 1997.

This book focuses on this Act, which introduced quotas for women in local government bodies and direct election in their reserved seats. The book examines the state of women's political participation in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on the role of institutional reforms. In order to do this, the research identifies two perspectives in the process of women's political participation: the first is the identification of actors behind the reform; and the second is explaining the impact of this reform on women's political participation in the local government. While various scholars have addressed the issue of the empowerment of women in Bangladesh, most of this work has been presented in a dispersed manner. Hence, the book is an important contribution to fill the existing gap in the literature on women's political participation in Bangladesh through an analysis of the roles of the actors in the reform process and the impact of reform on women's political participation.

The book represents an extended and thoroughly revised version of the author's Ph.D. dissertation at City University of Hong Kong during 2006–2009. [Chapter 1](#) begins with a discussion of the issue formation, the importance of the research, and the research methodology and data collection. In [Chap. 2](#), various conceptual issues have been discussed along with the operationalization of key concepts and the identification of variables to explain the state of women's political participation.

The institutional approach, Kingdon's model of agenda setting, and Howlett and Ramesh's actors and institutions in the policy process have been used as the theoretical bases to explain the reform process as it relates to women's political participation. In [Chap. 3](#), the changing patterns of Bangladesh's local government from the perspective of women's political participation, is considered. Moreover, the structure and functions of local government bodies, including the Union Parishad (the lowest tier of local government), is outlined. In [Chaps. 4 and 5](#), the roles of different actors, including the government, political parties, women's organizations, NGOs, and donors and international conventions in the reform process are explained. [Chapter 6](#) concentrates on assessing the changes that are observed in the state of women's political participation at the local level as a result of the Act of 1997. In [Chap. 7](#), I conclude and highlight the major contributions of the research.

From this research I conclude that a patriarchal and male-dominated societal structure makes it difficult for women to enter the political process. Thus, bringing changes to formal institutions and the power structure are imperative when it concerns enhancing the participation of women in the political process. Institutional regulations determine the number of women that are to be, and others who will be, elected in the Union Parishad. The book also shows that the reform decreed in 1997 is not actually due to the influence of a particular actor, but rather is a combination of the actions of different state and societal actors. Basically, the government had a dominant role, since it possesses the legitimate authority to enact reforms. However, societal actors comprising political parties, women's organizations, NGOs, donors, and several international conventions also influenced the reform process, either directly or indirectly.

In this book I also substantiate that the Act of 1997 has failed to ensure women's economic as well as social and personal freedom, to the extent that women still do not have control over the expenditure of their earnings or even their personal mobility. As a matter of fact, elected women members still suffer from a lack of acceptance as political leaders, since there is a strong conservatism among the majority of the population. Despite an increase in their personal mobility, where they might have formerly not been allowed to leave the house at all, women still are required to be accompanied by male family members when they leave the house to do their work as Council members. I also argue that women members have not yet achieved equal status with their male colleagues in the Union Parishad meetings and work as they are not allocated equal shares in project distribution or committee memberships, and their opinions in Union Parishad decision-making are generally ignored. Overall, elected women legislators work in adversarial circumstances, in which the majority of the people, including their peers, families, and constituents, appear to be their opponents. All in all, I conclude that, despite the existence of different barriers impeding women's participation in politics, there are still reasons to be optimistic as the imposition of quotas has helped to change the popular political culture and to gradually become more conducive to women's political participation.

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About the Author

Pranab Kumar Panday is Professor at the Department of Public Administration, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh. He was a Senior Fulbright Fellow at the Department of Development Sociology, Cornell University, USA till September 2012. He has an M.Phil. from the University of Bergen, Norway and Ph.D. from the City University of Hong Kong. Panday's main areas of research include public policy, governance, and gender studies. In addition to books published from India and Germany, his academic articles have appeared in journals like *Asian Survey*, the *International Journal of Public Administration*, *International Political Science Review*, *Local Government Studies*, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, *Public Organization Review*, the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*, and the *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*.

Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADBDB	Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh
AL	Awami League
ASA	Association for Social Advancement
ASK	Ain-O-Shalish Kendra
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BJI	Bangladesh Jammata-E-Islami
BJMS	Bangladesh Jatiya Mahila Sangstha
BJP	Bangladesh Jatiya Party
BLAST	Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust
BMP	Bangladesh Mahila Parishad
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BNPS	Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangstha
BPATC	Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
BUPF	Bangladesh Union Parishad Forum
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CHT	Chittagong Hills Tract
COS	Communist Party of Sri Lanka
CPI	Communist Party of India
CSW	Commission on Status of Women
DEES	Development Extension Education Services
DLG	Democratic Local Government
DLGP	Democratic Local Government Program
ERD	Economic Relations Division
FSSSP	The Female Secondary School Stipend Program
GDP	Gender and Development Program
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOB	Government of Bangladesh
GS	Gram Sarker
GSS	Gono Shahajjo Sangstha

ICDP	Integrated Community Development Programs
IMP	International Monetary Fund
JP	Jatiya Party
LCG	Local Consultative Groups
LGD	Local Government Division
LGRD&C	Local Government, Rural Development, & Cooperatives
LSSP	Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Lanka Equal Society Party)
MAB	Municipal Association of Bangladesh
MP	Member of Parliament
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NUS	Nari Unnayan Samity
PCJSS	The Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti
PFA	Platform for Action
PIWH	The Pacific Institute for Women's Health
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers
RMC	Rajshahi Medical College
RU	Rajshahi University
RUET	Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology
SLFA	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLGDP	Sirajganj Local Governance Development Fund Project
SSC	Secondary School Certificate
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNO	Upazila Nirbahi Officer
UP	Union Parishad
UZP	Upazila Parishad
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development
WNC	Women's National Coalition
ZP	Zila Parishad

Chapter 1

Setting the Scene

1.1 Introduction

For the last couple of decades, the issue of women's involvement in politics and in leadership positions has been the subject of debate. From the early 1970s, the United Nations has been advocating greater women's participation in the political decision-making process. While highlighting the issue of women's participation in politics, it is reasonable to ask whether lack of women's involvement makes any difference to the outcome of decision making. Here, the commonsense answer is "yes", since the decision-making process would suffer from a legitimacy crisis if half of the total population is kept out of it. Rule and Zimmerman (1994, cited in Reynolds 1999) have rightly argued that, if there is less representation of women in the national Parliament, issues relating to women in society would not be comprehended with sufficient 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, Lister (1997) has pointed out that, since women's interests differ from men's, they should be represented in policy institutions and policy processes as equal to men, in order to ensure establishment of good governance and the rule of law in any country. When it concerns women's participation in local governance, it is taken for granted that women have always been an integral part of their communities, through playing active roles in village life, community organizations, towns, and cities. Since local government bodies are situated very close to community people, it is often considered as a first step toward entering into a political decision-making arena. Recognizing the importance of inclusion of more women in the decision-making process, the European Network of Experts (1997, p. 8) has asserted that

... a balanced representation of women and men at all levels of decision making guarantees better government. Because of their history as a group, women have their own and unique perspective. They have different values and ideas and behave differently. Increased participation of women in decision making will create a new culture and shed new light on how power should be exercised. Women attach great importance to the quality of contact between people [and] are less individualistic than men.

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; UNDP 1995). During this millennium, the societal rights and status of women have gained paramount concern worldwide. The gradual incorporation of women into the mainstream development process during the last century has steadily increased their role outside the private sphere. Now, an important question is whether this process has effectively reduced repression against women or has merely opened up new avenues for further exploitation. While domestic violence against women can be found in both rich and poor nations, some people argue that their increased participation outside family activities has further endangered their external security and even extended the range of arenas where abuses can take place. Currently, incidents of rape, gang rape, acid throwing, sexual harassment and violence at the work place, and others have not only increased but have become much more ominous. It is already known that gender-based violence is deeply associated with the existing patriarchal social structure. Unfortunately, this is often manifested and reproduced to either a greater or lesser extent because of legal systems (Tambiah 2002).

The eradication of discrimination against women has for long been hailed as one of the indicators of good governance and social development internationally (United Nations 1995). Despite much effort, discrimination is still pervasive in most developing countries. In particular, the process of involving women in public life has started slowly, often after persistent demands from domestic and external players. Even when there are changes, they are either uneven or difficult to sustain (UNIFEM 2006). Given these difficulties, a major interest in the literature on women's political participation has been on understanding the processes of change and, specifically, on the actors driving the change and its impact on the state of women's participation. What characterizes the more effective strategies and how have they evolved?

Like other countries of the world, the issue of women's participation in politics in Bangladesh is a significant one. In a male dominated and patriarchal society, Bangladeshi women find it difficult to get involved in politics (Halder 2004; Chowdhury 2009). Thus, in order to ensure greater representation of women in politics, it was considered urgent to have some special provisions in the form of quota reservation of seats or affirmative action. Keeping these in mind, the United Nations inspired several initiatives to remove barriers that women were facing and to ensure women's equal political participation.¹ Being a signatory of several UN conventions, the Bangladesh government initiated a number of reforms aimed at

¹ Beginning from its inception in 1945, the UN has concentrated its efforts in securing, promoting, and protecting women's rights. Apart from setting up the Commission on Status of Women (CSW) in 1946, it declared 1975 as "International Women's Year" in order to facilitate women's social, political, and economic development. Moreover, the UN has organized a good number of conferences and declared conventions to advocate women's rights and to convince countries attending to implement the decisions reached in their respective countries. For further discussions on this issue, please refer to [Chap. 2](#).

ensuring greater women's participation in politics in local government bodies. The first and latest reform initiatives were the enactment of the Local Government Ordinance, 1976 and the Local Government (Union Parishads)² (Second Amendment) Act, 1997 (hereinafter, the Act of 1997) respectively.³ The Act of 1997, which is the focus of the book, provides for the reservation of quotas for women in local government bodies and introduces direct election in the reserved seats. These provisions have since allowed women to take part in local government decision making in larger numbers than ever before. Under such circumstances, the overall objective of this book is to understand and assess the state of women's political participation in Bangladesh, with particular focus on the role of institutional reforms. To be more specific, emphasis has been put on identifying actors behind the reform and the impact of reform on women's political participation in the local government. The "impact" here refers to an assessment of the changes that are observed as a result of the reform.

Now, the reader may wonder why I chose such a challenging task of combining policy and gender studies in a single project. As a matter of fact, a number of factors have prompted me to accept the challenge of carrying out this research on the reform process and the role of actors in it. Since reforms are expected to bring changes in the institutional design, it is imperative to know more about this topic, including its processes and the actors behind it. Most importantly, to facilitate successful future reforms, the shortcomings of previous reforms must be determined first. Moreover, basic arguments of studies on "path dependency" and the model of "lesson drawing" in public policy have been considered to enhance the strength of the rationale of choosing this project. One of the basic arguments of the "path dependency" model is "history matters". This is based on the insight that social processes do not evolve in an unconditioned way, but are recursive (self-referential) in the sense that former decisions have an impact upon those that follow (Teece et al. 1997). Moreover, decisions that have been taken in the past may have been used as the course of action for the future decisions (Antonelli 1999).

On the other hand, the concept "lesson drawing" refers that consciously or unconsciously, we are always drawing lessons from our own past or from the experience of predecessors in a job. Given an authoritative policy goal, lesson drawing seeks to use knowledge from other times and places to improve current programs (Rose 1991). Using these perspectives, it is also imperative to know more about the reform initiatives of 1997 and role of the actors in it in order to successfully carry out future reforms for Bangladeshi women. Furthermore, Krook (2003, p. 10) pointed out that "reforms typically reproduce or redefine existing rules, practices and ideas." Thus, it is also important to explore what type of changes has been made by the reform of 1997, pertaining to the issue of women's political participation. Under this circumstance, the main objective of this book is

² The Union Parishad is the lowest tier of the existing local government structure in Bangladesh.

³ The Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance of 1983 was amended in 1997 to introduce the provision of a 33 % quota reservation for directly elected women. For more details about different Acts, please read through [Chap. 3](#).

to explore the context of the enactment of the Act of 1997 and its implications for the state of women's political participation in Bangladesh.

Therefore, an attempt has been made to explore why the previous government took such an initiative for opening up avenues for women in Bangladesh, despite the fact that the male dominated societal structure and patriarchy do not permit women to take part in public arenas. This has also been taken into account to determine whether the Government initiated those reforms by its own will or whether other actors created pressure on them. The final attempt is oriented toward the exploration of the impact of the Act of 1997 on women's political participation in local government in Bangladesh. To be more specific, can elected women actively participate in local government decision making, or is their presence is more or less just symbolic? A modest attempt is made in this book to explore these questions.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The legitimacy of democratic governance depends on the equality of gender representation in the political decision-making process and public bureaucracy (Sun 2004). In support of gender equality, the Fourth UN Conference for Women, held in 1995 in Beijing, China, adopted an overall strategy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in development (Mukhopadhyaya 2003). It has been argued that women can play their role effectively within the national development process. Women's contribution to the development of the society and nation-building depends significantly on their participation in both family and national decision-making processes (Nelson and Chowdhury 1994). On the other hand, Husain and Siddiqi (2002) asserted that the sustainability of economic and social empowerment of women depends on the extent of their participation in political decision making. In effect, political participation is considered an indicator that measures the extent of women's enjoyment of political rights. Moreover, ability to use their political rights is an important condition for the improvement of women's lives in the society.

Now one may wonder: what is the significance of women's participation in politics? As a matter of fact, there are some underlying bases for women's representation and participation in the political process. These include: (i) the need for democracy and equality as well as civil rights, which makes the demand for proportional representation of women in politics unavoidable; (ii) women's insignificant presence in politics raises questions about the legitimacy of the democratic process and of decision-making authorities; (iii) women are well informed and experienced about their basic problems and needs, but they will be deprived of an equal share of the output if they are not properly represented in the political process; (iv) women's increased participation in politics and decision-making bodies will facilitate the process of development and good governance; (v) finally, for efficient and maximum utilization of human resources, an increased number of women should be allowed to participate in politics (Chowdhury 1994a).

Moreover, ensuring women's equal participation in the political process can be considered as an essential requirement of modern government. It has been realized that real development will not be possible if women are kept away from the policy-making process, particularly as they comprise half of the total population. Moreover, participation and accountability are two important features of democratic local government (DLG). On its participation side, DLG requires meaningful inclusion of women and minorities into local politics (Blair 2000). However, the concern is to find ways for their political integration since the age-old institutional design acts as an impediment to women's participation. In such cases, reform becomes inevitable, to bring changes in the institutional design, in order to create positive discrimination in favor of women. Under the situation of male domination and patriarchy, it is unlikely that women candidates would win elections when contesting against male counterparts. This does not necessarily mean that women would never win elections contesting with males. However, the number is too few to be considered exemplary.

The above discussion leads us to raise a pertinent question: who should shoulder the responsibility for initiation of action to bring about gender equality? A probable answer to this is, *the State*. Hale and Kelly (1989) states that the State may act to protect and promote better female representation in three ways. *First*, the legislature may amend existing constitutional articles or legal rules, or make new laws or regulations to incorporate women in public office. *Second*, the executive branch may guarantee equal opportunity principles and even take affirmative action for hiring, training, and promoting women. *Finally*, the judiciary can also end gender imbalance in the public sphere by interpreting laws in new ways (e.g., justifying actions as necessary for attaining equality).

When enhancing women's political participation comes into the government's consideration, several alternatives can be applied through which participation can be increased. These are provision of direct elections, proportional representation, reservation of seats by quotas, and the like. In implementing these mechanisms, bringing changes in the institutional design are necessary, since all pose a threat to preexisting power relationships and traditional practice (Greig 2005).⁴ According to the Asian Development Bank, legal and institutional reforms are one of the most important means to overcome the individual and common predicaments faced by women (ADB 2004). Moreover, several scholars have observed that an "electoral system" is the most powerful determinant of female representation in democratic politics among alternative institutional settings. In particular, three types of electoral system contribute to achieving a higher female representation: (a) proportional representation (PR) system, (b) large, multimember districts, and (c) quota systems

⁴ Roa and Kelleher defined institutional change as 'changing the rules of the game'. Informal and formal laws, policies and cultural norms, and decision-making processes have been included in their definition in order to refer the rules. They have further clustered the areas requiring change into four groups that include: (i) women's and men's individual conscious (knowledge, skills, political conscious and commitment), (ii) women's objective conditions (rights and resources, access to health services and safety, opportunities for a voice), (iii) informal norms such as inequitable ideologies, and cultural and religious practices, and (iv) formal institutions such as laws and policies (Rao and Kelleher 2005, p. 59).

that ensure a minimum level of representation for women (Rule 1987; Norris 1988; Lee 2000; Dahlerup 2006; Matland 2002; Htun 2004).

Ensuring gender integration is always difficult. Thus, the situation in Bangladesh is even more unfavorable to women, since opportunities in positions of authority are very limited. In the Civil Service, only 10 % of higher managerial rank seats (Class I and II officers) are reserved for women while the ratio is 15 % for Class III and IV employees.⁵ However, the quota system is not applicable to technical posts, posts in the Defense Services and to such other posts as may be considered unsuitable for women by the concerned ministry (Government of Bangladesh 1998; Khan and Ahmed 2008). Among the country's total civilian labor force, estimated at 49.5 million in 2005–2006, women constituted only 12.1 million, while the male population has a share of 37.4 million (BBS 2006).

Meanwhile, women's participation in politics and in public sector decision making has been hampered by the public–private divide “theory.” In simpler terms, this theory tends to limit women's role to the private domain only. At this juncture, it is quite important to mention that, from the early days of Western political theory, society has been conceived to consist of two domains. These are a “public” domain, which is the domain of political authority and contestation, and a “private” realm which is associated with family and home (Nussbaum 2003). Unfortunately, these assumptions have negative effects on women's entry into the public domain, as they are often either criticized for their inadequacies or patronized by men, as they are perceived as not qualified to participate in this domain? The other question is on what kind of autonomy do women and men have in the different domains? Often, women do not have an upper hand, even in matters pertaining to the private domain and the family. In most cases, it is believed that a masculine head has to assume responsibility for the welfare and safety of all family members. In contrast, women's bargaining power in the household is restricted by their lack of access to and control over resources outside their respective homes, low self-esteem, skills, and education, restricted physical mobility, and their diminutive power in society compared with men. Such imbalanced gender relations at the household level only mirrors situations outside the home, which extend to the local community, market, and even the state. Hence, gender inequality, as well as patriarchal structures and attitudes, prevail in both domains. The other intersecting hierarchies, such as class, caste, ethnicity, religion, and rural/urban locations further reinforce gender inequality in governance (Panda n.d.).

In several countries of the Asia-Pacific region, politics is mostly characterized by money and muscle power, and Bangladesh is not an exception. Thus, entering into the political process proves to be more difficult for women. Here, women who are surrounded by male counterparts find themselves in a noncooperative atmosphere: even when they take public office. Moreover, societal and cultural impediments work against

⁵ Article 29(3) of Bangladesh constitution allows the government to set quota in the service of the republic for any disadvantage section of citizens. Although there has not been any constitutional differentiation between classes of government employees, however, two types of quotas have been framed by the government—one for Class I and II officers and the other for Class III and IV employees (Khan and Ahmed 2008).

the women's equal access to power. Social institutions, such as the family, school, church, mosque, government, and media continue to promote stereotyped roles of men and women alike. Such impositions eventually make women think that their role is subordinate to men's. This, in turn, causes low self-esteem and lack of awareness, which dishearten them in gaining control over their lives including meaningful participation in the society. Under these circumstances, their political participation in larger numbers is required, since the sustainability of their economic and social empowerment highly depends on their involvement in political decision making (Husain and Siddiqi 2002).

Despite having legal rights to participate in politics, in almost every country all over the world, women's representation in national and local politics remains very marginal. Taking into consideration the state of women's representation in politics, affirmative action policies in the form of reservation of quotas have been introduced in more than hundred countries (Dahlerup 2006). Of course, one may wonder why governments of different countries introduced the system of reservation of seats for women. One possible explanation is that voters are forced to observe the presence of women in political leadership positions through quota reservation. It is predicted that voters would be more willing to cast their votes in favor of women if they observed women candidates performing better than their anticipation. If this is the case, voters would elect women candidates even in non-reserved seats. Another explanation which has been advocated by social psychologists (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Eagly and Karau 2002) is that women find it difficult to enter into politics due to domination of pre-existing social norms and association of leadership with men. Since female leaders lack exposure, voters have biased perceptions about their effectiveness as leaders. In such a situation, the probability of women candidates' participation in politics is very low, since they are believed to be the voters to be ineffective.

Given the existence of patriarchy and male dominated societal structures, women's participation in politics, in equal competition with their male counterparts, becomes difficult in Bangladesh. Taking this into consideration, successive Governments of Bangladesh have initiated several reforms, through which seats were reserved for women in the local government bodies, in order to enhance their participation in the decision-making process. The latest initiative in this regard was the enactment of the Act of 1997.

Now one may wonder: what is the significance of the Act of 1997 as compared to earlier reform initiatives? A possible explanation is that the said Act introduced the system of direct election for women at the local government level for the first time. As a result, direct election has generated considerable enthusiasm among the women in Bangladesh.

Prior to the introduction of this Act in 1997, the number of women contesting in local government elections was too small to be viewed as significant. For instance, the total number of women contesting in elective positions of general members (which were open to all) was merely 863 out of 114,699 (constituting 0.7 %) and 1135 out of 169,643 (comprising again some 0.7 %) in the local government election of 1988 and 1992, respectively (Islam 2000; Panday 2008).

After the direct election allowed "reserved seats" for women members, the number of women who competed in the 1997 and 2003 elections saw a big surge.

In the election of 1997, 44,134 women contested the reserved seats with 14,029 winning the seats (of them, 592 were elected unopposed) (Islam 2000; Panday 2008). As for the 2003 election, 39,419 women candidates joined the race for 12,669 reserved seats (Steps Toward Development 2003).

Noticeably, there is a clear sign of decline in the number of women who contested in quota seats in the elections of 2003 from 1997. In fact, this can be readily seen if the statistical data of the last two UPs elections (1997 and 2003), regarding the number of women candidates, are compared. A possible explanation for this might be that the elected women candidates during the 1997 election gathered an unpleasant experience while fulfilling their duties, which eventually discouraged them from participating in the 2003 election. Furthermore, the followers and associates of these women might have been influenced by their elected members' experience. Despite the fact that there has been a steady decrease in the number of women contesting for reserved seats since the initial surge, available data confirm that the great wave of enthusiasm among the women of Bangladesh created by the Act of 1997 is still an important and permanent change.

As the direct election system came into operation, the people of Bangladesh increasingly accepted that women would take part in local government elections. However, the process came under serious threat from religious fundamentalists, in some places, who gave a fatwa⁶ saying that Islamic law does not permit leadership of the community by women. These fatwa therefore concluded that casting of votes in favor of women is illegal in Islamic law. Notwithstanding this, women have participated in local elections in an increasing number. For instance, 90 % of women voters in the Bogra⁷ district exercised their rights to cast their votes during the 1997 local government election (Shamim and Nasreen 2002). In fact, the number of women contesting in local government elections (as mentioned above) has increased quite substantially since 1997.

Without doubt, one may ask the definition of "participation" (whether running the administration or simply exercising voting power) in the context of the present study, since Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of participation"⁸ specifies various participation levels, ranging from extremely passive to most active. Arnstein also pointed

⁶ The term fatwa in Islamic legal parlance refers to the clarification of an ambiguous judicial point or an opinion by a jurist trained in Islamic law (Shehabuddin 1999).

⁷ Bogra is one of Bangladesh's 64 districts.

⁸ Arnstein (1969) proposed eight levels of participation in a ladder parent, which includes (1) manipulation, (2) therapy, (3) informing, (4) consultation, (5) placation, (6) partnership, (7) delegated power, and (8) citizen control. She divided eight levels of the ladder into three rungs. The bottom rungs of the ladder (1 and 2) described nonparticipation levels which serve as the substitute for genuine participation. This rung does not intend to enable people to participate in planning, or conducting programs, but instead enables power holders to "educate" the participants. The middle rungs (3, 4, and 5) subsequently develop into levels of "tokenism" which permit the have-nots to hear and to have a voice. However, these do not assure that the powerful will take a note of their views. It is important to note that the position of 5 (placation) is the higher level of tokenism from which the have-nots can offer advice. However, the power holders still reserve the right to decide. Finally, the upper rungs (6, 7, and 8) allow citizens to exercise power with increasing degrees of influence on the decision-making process. In the last rung (8), majority of the decision-making seats are occupied by the have-not citizens (Arnstein 1969).

out that participation would be meaningless and frustrating if power is not evenly distributed among the participants. In the present study's context, the political "participation" of women refers only to the participation of elected women members in the Union Parishad's (hereinafter, UP) decision-making process.

The abovementioned discussions suggest that the Act of 1997 has opened up new windows of opportunity through which women can take part in politics in larger numbers. The data mentioned in the preceding paragraphs substantiate that a great wave of enthusiasm has been created among the women community with regard to their taking part in the UP elections. Otherwise, the 44,134-strong women candidates would have not joined the local government election of 1997. Given the Act's apparent success in opening up a new avenue for women's political participation, a few questions need to be answered: (i) In what context did the government of Bangladesh enact the Act of 1997?; (ii) Why was such an initiative not taken earlier?; (iii) Who were the actors behind the reform and their role in the reform process?; (iv) What is the impact of the reform on the state of women's participation at the local level? (The "impact" here refers to an assessment of the changes that are observed as a result of the reform.)

1.3 Importance of the Book

The issue of women's political participation merits discussion if only from the perspective of Women in Development (WID). In 1970, Boserup (1970) critically discussed the position of women in developmental efforts. She was the first to argue that the modern sector is mostly dominated by men, while women remained in the "traditional" or "subsistence" sector. She thought that the lower participation of women in the "modern" economic sectors is "bad," for both development and for the women themselves. This is the rationale for more women being integrated into the decision-making process to bring improvements to their status and for them to receive the fruits of development initiatives. This is also one of the reasons that motivate me to conduct a study on the issue of women's political participation.

Of course, one may wonder about the significance of conducting research on the issue of reforms aiming at enhancing women's political participation in Bangladesh. As a matter of fact, it is one of the least researched areas. In a true sense, women do not aspire to take part in a society's political process when it is male dominated and where patriarchy determines societal values. The advent of the Act of 1997 and the introduction of direct election for reserved seats have offered women opportunities to participate in local government elections that were previously confined within the upper strata of the society. Before 1997, when the system of nomination was conducted to select women members for reserved seats in the UP, the procedure of nomination was dominated by the societal elite as well as by the civil administration (Thörlind 2003). Thörlind asserted that

... during my field observations in 1996 [before the new quota system was adopted] these nominated women members were never present, nor were they mentioned at all by the

male members when accounting for the Union Parishad's members. They obviously did not have the same weight and social status as the male members did as they were not directly elected (*ibid.*, p. 137).

On the other hand, Quadir and Islam (1987) pointed out that nominated women members belong to the rural elite who were inactive in their role as UP members. In fact, the nomination process was dominated by kinship or societal status. As such, the majority of the women did not have access to the local government decision-making process. Since the Act of 1997 opened up avenues for greater political participation of women, the female community accepted the new environment bearing in mind that the Government had done a remarkable job for them. Thus, the focus of a majority of such studies after 1997 was concentrated on measuring the status of women once they were elected. Thus, most scholars did not find it feasible to step back in order to study the reform process and the role of actors behind it. This has created a gap in the literature. In order to fill gaps in the existing literature, an effort has been made to conduct a study on the reform process, role of actors, and impact of the reform on the state of women's political participation in Bangladesh. In addition to above, the book deserves importance for following reasons:

First, the gender issue is already a matter of great concern worldwide. In fact, even donor agencies are now incorporating gendered governance into their development objectives. Moreover, they are stressing the inclusion of women in the process of governance.

Second, although there have been different studies conducted on gender issues in Bangladesh, most of these only had a single focus. More specifically, these studies either focused on exploring the role of microcredit in empowering women, the state of women in political decision making, or the role of women in other aspects of Bangladeshi society. Scholars like Newaz (2003), Goetz and Gupta (1996), Hashemi et al. (1996), Schuler et al. (1996), Hossen (2004), Hossain and Tisdell's (2005), Wright (2000), Begum (1994), Parveen and Leonhauser (2004), Siddiqui (1998), Halder (2004), Salahuddin (1995), Qadir (1995), Alam (1984, 1987) and Chowdhury (1985, 1994a, b, 2002), Guhathakurata et al. (1995); Sultana (2000); Firoz (2007) and Husain (2000) have done their research on specific issues of women's empowerment in Bangladesh. Typically, studies on women's political participation remain restricted to explaining the present state of women working in local government bodies and in identifying the factors hindering their participation.

Thus, the preceding review has identified an important gap that needs to be filled. Unfortunately, very few works have been written about the reforms aimed at enhancing women's political participation. Worse, these have no discussions on the role of the actors in the reform process, and there are hardly any of the impacts of reform on women's political participation. Hence, this area of research merits attention and deserves further elaboration and this book does precisely that.

Third, for the first time, an effort has been made to combine both policy and gender studies in a single book within the Bangladesh context. The first half of the book deals with the policy network and the role of different actors, while the other

half deals with the policy's impact on women's political participation as part of gender studies. The book should unveil some hidden truths which have not been exposed by previous studies.

Fourth, this book will also provide new insights to academics and researchers who would like to continue research in the field of women's political participation in Bangladesh.

Lastly, this book aims to come up with some interesting policy recommendations that may help the Bangladeshi government in revamping their policy to ensure the greater political participation of women.

1.4 Methodological Issues

This book is based on empirical research where qualitative research strategy was employed supplemented by appropriate quantitative methods. The case study is an ideal methodology when a holistic and in-depth investigation is necessary (Feagin et al. 1991). In this project, an exploratory and descriptive case-study approach was used because how, what, and why questions were posed. The researcher has no control over events, while the focus was on contemporary phenomena (Yin 1994).

In this regard, women's political participation was selected as the main focus of the study. The reason for choosing the case-study method is related to the problems of this study, which altogether form a complex issue. As Creswell (1994) pointed out, there are six assumptions in qualitative designs based on Merriam's (1988) assumptions. Primarily, qualitative researchers are concerned with (i) process, (ii) interested in learning how people make sense of their lives and experiences, (iii) the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, (iv) it involves field work, (v) is descriptive in that the researcher is interested in the process, meaning, and understanding gained through words or pictures, and (vi) qualitative research is inductive (Creswell 1994). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) also expressed a similar view. According to them, the characteristics of qualitative research are induction, discovery, exploration, theory/hypothesis generation, and the researcher serving as the primary "instrument" of data collection and qualitative analysis. Thus, this strategy is most likely to be appropriate in dealing with the research questions and objectives of the current book.

1.4.1 Level of Analysis and Location of the Study

The units of analysis employed in this research are the individual elected women members of the UP. One may wonder why the individual elected women members were selected as units of analysis in examining the state of women's political participation in Bangladesh. The argument behind this is that the UP is actually the

only Local Government Institutions (LGI) in the country that is functioning uninterrupted since independence. Moreover, the provision of direct elections for women in reserved seats in larger number has been in operation in the UP. Moreover, Rajshahi⁹ district was selected as the location of the study. There are some prominent reasons for the selection of the study location, which include:

First, Rajshahi is one of the largest districts in Bangladesh with a reasonable growth rate and a semi-cosmopolitan nature. Thus, the district is purposefully selected as the location that may be representative of the whole country. Moreover, this district represents some common characteristics of Bangladesh's agrarian society. Bangladesh possesses an agricultural economy, so agriculture is the main source of its income for more than 80 % of its population. It is expected that people who have a strong agricultural background will remain relatively self-sufficient economically. In this regard, financially sufficient people are the ones most likely to take part in the political process. Besides, Rajshahi is called the "bread-basket" of Bangladesh. Recent agricultural modernization, through the much-lauded Barendra-Project,¹⁰ have increased crop-diversification, and have generally allowed farmers to grow as many as three crops annually instead of the usual one crop. Also, agro-processing is thought to have an extremely bright future in this region and may allow the district to fulfill its true potential as one of the most economically vibrant parts of Bangladesh. In addition, Rajshahi has some other characteristics with regard to income generation, industrialization, and rate of urbanization which are closer to those of other districts of Bangladesh. All these features promoted the selection of Rajshahi as the location of the study, with the expectation that the city would represent the common features of Bangladeshi society and would also be representative of other places in Bangladesh.

Second, the term "manageability", which is often used in conducting social science research, is another reason why Rajshahi district was chosen. It is also important to note that Rajshahi district comprise nine *upazilas*.¹¹ The distance of each *upazila* from the district head quarters is about 30–40 km. Thus, the journey to any of the nine *upazila* from the district headquarters generally takes about one to one and a half hour.

⁹ Rajshahi, one of the 64 districts, is located in the northwest of Bangladesh bordering India on the south. It covers an area of 2,407 sq. km, of which 62 sq. km is river. Rajshahi district comprises 9 *upazilas* (see n. 11 in this chapter), 70 unions, 1858 villages, and 7 *pourashavas* (municipalities) including Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) (BBS 1993, 2005).

¹⁰ The Barendra Project was implemented by the Local Government Division of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (LGRD&C) of the Government of Bangladesh. It is intended to ensure adequate water supply, which is necessary for irrigation through deep tube wells. The project is carried out all over Rajshahi district. The agricultural productivity of Rajshahi district has since increased substantially due to this project.

¹¹ *Upazila* is the lowest administrative level in Bangladesh in which the civil bureaucracy and line ministries operate. Generally, the *upazila* represents the police and all ministerial offices, including tax, magistrates courts, and officers dealing with all aspects of economic and social development. In addition, *upazilas* serve as the link between district offices and the UPs or the local people. There are a total of 482 *upazila parishads* in Bangladesh.

Third, Rajshahi was selected as the field of study for personal reasons as well. Rajshahi is the city where I have spent the past 17 years. Therefore, I know the city to a great extent and have access to various data and networks. With these considerations in mind, I have used my experiences and personal networks during the conduct of the research.

1.4.2 Data Collection

Due to time and resource constraints, it is neither possible nor feasible to conduct a study on elected women members of Bangladesh in general. Thus, a subset of individuals was selected from the total population through sampling. In the context of the present book, the sample sizes were determined based on the principle of purposive sampling.¹² Three elected women members of each UP and four UPs from each of the nine *upazilas*¹³ of Rajshahi district were selected for interview (among 70 UPs from nine *upazilas* of Rajshahi, 36 UPs were selected). In total, there were 108 [(3 × 4) = 12 × 9 = 108]¹⁴ elected women members selected for the interview. However, due to the untimely death of one woman member, the total number of women members selected for interview stood at 107. Besides the elected women members, different types of respondents were chosen for interview. Male members and chairmen (72) were selected as well to ascertain their perception about women colleagues. Meanwhile, the other category of respondents included different actors involved in the process of the 1997 reform. This included the leaders of different political parties (33),¹⁵ including the former prime minister of Bangladesh (1996–2001), members of leading women organizations (hereinafter WOs) (05), and representatives from nongovernmental organizations (hereinafter, NGOs) (07) and donor agencies (02). Primarily, these categories were selected for interview to ascertain the role of actors in the process of enacting the Act of 1997. Apart from these two major respondent groups, a few academics and civil society activists (04) were also consulted to obtain an understanding of the subject matter from a deeper perspective. Thus, total number of respondents stood at 230.

¹² Purposive sampling techniques are primarily used in qualitative studies. These may be defined as selecting units (e.g., individuals, groups of individuals, institutions) based on specific purposes associated with answering research study questions. Maxwell (1997, p. 87) further defined purposive sampling as a type of sampling in which “particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices”.

¹³ The *upazilas* of Rajshahi district are Bagha, Bagmara, Charghat, Durgapur, Godagari, Mohanpur, Paba, Puthia, and Tanor.

¹⁴ Among the 210 elected women members from 70 UPs, 108 were selected for interview which means that more than half of the total samples of *Rajshahi* District were selected for interview.

¹⁵ Among 33 leaders, 12 belonged to Bangladesh Awami League (AL), 09 belonged to Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP); 05 belonged to Jatiya Pary (JP), and 07 belonged to Bangladesh Jammāt-E-Islam (BJI).

As regard to the data collection, the book is a result of extensive fieldwork carried out by the researcher from December 2006 to July 2007. The majority of both primary and secondary data were collected during the fieldwork phase. The primary data were collected through a structured interview questionnaire having both closed and open-ended questions. Secondary materials were gathered from different published sources such as, books, book chapters, articles, unpublished dissertations, newspapers, and Internet browsing.

1.5 Organization of the Book

The book comprises seven chapters. This chapter includes a discussion of the issue's formation, the importance of the research, and the research methodology and data collection. In this chapter, it has been argued that the issue of women's political participation is a matter of great concern for not only in Bangladesh but also in other countries of the world. Reform has an intrinsic relationship with the issue of women's political participation since reform brings changes in the institutional design. Such institutional change is considered as one of the most important mechanisms to enhance women's political participation in a society which is dominated by patriarchy and males. It has also been argued that, in order to facilitate successful future research, the shortcomings of the previous research must be determined first. From this perspective, the book has immense importance to those who are studying and working on the issue of women's political participation. Accordingly, objectives of the research have been determined, research questions have been raised, and research methodology has been defined.

In [Chap. 2](#) various conceptual issues have been discussed along with operationalization of the key concepts, with the expectation that this will steer the whole study toward a meaningful and logical end. The institutional approach has been adopted in this study as an analytical lens in explaining the core issues of the research. To grasp the issue of women's political participation in local government institutions, it is necessary to discuss the role of institutions under this process. John Kingdon's (1984) model of agenda setting has been brought into the discussion in order to understand when an issue comes into a government's agenda. From this perspective, attempts have been made to discuss when, and in what context, the issue of women's political participation came into the government's agenda. Since the study deals with the reforms and their processes, it is necessary to identify different actors that influence the government to enact a particular law. In order to identify different actors, Howlett and Ramesh's (1995, 2003) actors and institutions in the policy process have been discussed as a theoretical base. Finally, attempt has been made to operationalize all core issues of the research. Based on these discussions, indicators to measure the state of women's participation have been identified.

[Chapter 3](#) discusses the changing patterns of Bangladesh's local government and outlines the structure and functions of local government bodies including the UP. The local government in Bangladesh is thought to be a legacy of British local

government. It is argued that successive governments in Bangladesh since 1971 brought changes in the structural design of the local government. All those efforts were politically motivated, since most of the Governments tried to strengthen their political base at the local level through changes in the structural design of the local government. Apart from these, efforts have also been made to discuss different reform initiatives aiming at enhancing women's political participation at the local level. It is found that before 1997, women used to be nominated by the central government representatives at the local level first, then by the elected members and chairmen of the UPs. Thus, the nomination of women was solely concentrated within the elite class only. However, enactment of the Act of 1997 has opened up wide avenues in front of ordinary women, who feel enthusiastic to take part in local government politics. Finally, an effort has been made to highlight the basic changes produced by the 1997 reform, as compared to other reform initiatives.

Chapter 4 focuses on the role of political parties and the governments with regard to women's political participation. Special emphasis is given on exploring general trend of working of the government and the political parties in Bangladesh. Attempt is also made to discuss the role that Awami League (AL), as a political party, played in the reform of 1997. Conversely, discussion also includes the role of other major political parties (the Bangladesh Nationalist Party [BNP], the Jatiya Party [JP], and the Bangladesh Jamat-E-Islami [BJI]) in the process of enactment of the reform of 1997. While explaining the role of the government in enhancing women's political participation in Bangladesh, why the AL government enacted the reform of 1997 (and why the earlier the BNP government did not) is also considered.

Chapter 5 critically analyzes the role of women's organizations (WO), NGOs, donors, and international conventions in the process of enactment of the Act of 1997. Special attempt is made to explore the channels through which these actors played their roles. To be more specific, whether the formal lawmaking process allows these actors to take part in it or not is considered. If they did not participate in the lawmaking process directly, we look for the channels which they actually used to influence the government. Another issue of concern of this chapter is to discuss the extent of different actors' influences on the Bangladeshi government when the reform of 1997 was being enacted.

Chapter 6 explores an assessment of the changes that are observed in the state of women's political participation at the local level as a result of the Act of 1997. It is argued that, since political participation of women has a close linkage with women's economic solvency and their frequent mobility, the reform benefitted the elected women members of the UP from three perspectives: economic freedom, societal liberty, and political decision making.

Chapter 7, based on the discussion in different chapters, makes an attempt to highlight the major contribution of the research. An attempt is made to analyze the context of the reform of 1997 and the role of different actors in this process. Emphasis has also been given on ascertaining whether the reform has had positive or negative consequences on the state of women's political participation in

Bangladesh. Finally, an attempt is made to make recommendations to break the shackles that still hinder women's political participation in Bangladesh.

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Chapter 2

Conceptual Discourses

2.1 Introduction

The main purpose of this chapter is to develop a conceptual framework for describing and analyzing the core issues of the research. In doing so, the institutional approach has been described in order to make an understanding of the essence of institutions (especially historical evolution and rules and norms) that shape the state of women's political participation in Bangladesh and its inter-relationship with reforms. On the other hand, since the main subject matter of the research is a policy issue, it is imperative to have a theoretical understanding about the issue of agenda setting (more specifically when an issue transforms on to the agenda of the government) and involvement of different actors in the reform process once the government initiates action to transform agenda into policies. Keeping these views in mind, John Kingdon's (1984) model agenda setting model and Howlett and Ramesh's (1995, 2003) concept of actors and institutions in the policy process have been discussed as a theoretical lens of this research. In addition to this theoretical discussion, the chapter also deals with the issue of operationalization of core issues of the reforms. Through operationalization of different key concepts, an effort is made to come up with different indicators to explore the state of changes that has been observed as a result of the enactment of the reform of 1997.

2.2 The Institutional Approach

The institutional approach has been adopted in this study as an analytical lens in explaining the core issues of the research. To grasp the issue of women's political participation in local government institutions, it is necessary to discuss the role of institutions under this process. In the succeeding paragraphs, the institutionalism concept is discussed to define the role of institutions in advancing women's participation.

The organizing concept of institutions is fundamental in the study of politics. In fact, the existing literature regarding “new” institutionalism over the last two decades has intensified the perception of the importance of the role of institutions in political life (Thelen 1999). Thus, the term “institution” is used very often in studying women in politics. In particular, this is employed for referring to formal political system features like electoral rules, ballot structures, district sizes, and the number of political parties (Caul 1999; Rule 1987; Rule and Zimmerman 1994). Generally, women’s political participation is influenced by these institutions. Meanwhile, other institutions such as procedures, routines, conventions, norms, and cognitive scripts have also been identified by scholars outside the field of women in politics and may constitute the relationship between gender and politics (Krook 2003). More specifically, institutions like institutional rules, norms, and routines are considered as determinants of politics and governance (March and Olsen 1984, 1993, 1995, 1996).

Hall and Taylor (1996) described three possible approaches to illustrate the study of institutions, which are historical, rational choice, and sociological institutionalism. Historical institutionalists conduct their research primarily at the meso or macrolevel, and their focus is on the long-term ramifications of largely contingent events (Pierson and Skocpol 2002). Here, institutions are considered as either formal or informal procedures, routines, norms, and conventions entrenched in the various political, societal, and economic organizations. The inequality of power related to these institutions has been emphasized by this kind of approach (Thelen and Steinmo 1992), where institutional change has been viewed as path dependence and unintended consequences (Mahoney 2000). In contrast, rational choice institutionalists focus at the microlevel. Primarily, their aim is to understand the origins of institutions, the mechanisms for their survival, and the nature of their effects on macrolevel political outcomes (Weingast 2002). Institutions are viewed as the conventions of actors in search for solving collective action dilemmas (Ostrom 1990). In this process, individuals are encouraged to work together by reducing uncertainty (North 1990) and restructuring incentives (Weingast 2002). Finally, sociological institutionalists position themselves between the micro and macrolevels of political interactions (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). They define institutions including not only formal rules, procedures, and norms but also the symbol systems, cognitive scripts, and moral templates that provide the “frames of meaning” which guide human action (March and Olsen 1989). The interactive and mutually constitutive character of the relationship between institutions and individual actions has been emphasized by this group of institutionalists, where change is an attempt to enhance the institution’s social legitimacy (Krook 2003). Despite having differences of opinion among institutional theorists on various approaches, they seem to agree on the following two fundamental points (Putnam 1993).

1. Institutions shape politics (Institution as Rules): Rules and standard operating procedures comprise institutions as well as affect political outcomes and behavior. In this regard, institutions affect outcomes because they shape the actors’ identities, power, and strategies.

2. Institutions are products of history (Institution as History): History tells us about the extent and degree to which rules and standard operating procedures are institutionalized in organizations. As such, the more they are ingrained in institutions, the more that institutional behavior and performance can be explained based on these aspects.

2.2.1 Institutions as Rules/Rule-based Institutionalism

This perspective advocates that rules are the most important means for defining institutions and the governing behavior within institutions (Peters 1999). Here, an individual's role is defined by rules which provide the context for action. Moreover, information on an individual's probable future behavior, including sanctions for noncompliance, is provided by institutional rules (Knight 1992). When the issue concerns women's political participation in the local government of Bangladesh, institutional rules can play an important role. Given the state of sociocultural impediments, it is very difficult for Bangladeshi women to win an election against male candidates. Thus, some rules must be structured to create an environment where women can easily take part and be involved within the political process. This exactly happened in 1997, when the Bangladeshi Parliament enacted the Act of 1997, which brought changes in the UP's structural design. Its main purpose was to enhance the political participation of women in the local government. On the other hand, institutional rules actually specify who will do what, how, and when. According to original laws, the roles of elected women members were not specified. Thus, it was suspected that women would face challenges from their male counterparts because of patriarchy. Under such circumstances, Parliament had to pass additional rules, specifying the roles of women members in the UP.

2.2.2 Institutions as History/Historical Institutionalism

Identifying the degree of a particular organization's institutionalization depends largely on its historical growth. We can get an understanding of the origin of an institution, as well as the paths of its development, from its institutional history (Berman 1998). Since institutions develop over a certain time period, they cannot be simply understood when uprooted from their historical evolution (Patterson 1995; Douglas 1982).

Since each institution has its own history, its structures and capacities for action are affected by its own time-dependent line of development and how a social system develops and operates (Scott 1995). During the course of time, an organization becomes institutionalized by reflecting its unique history, the people who have been involved in it, the groups it incorporates, the vested interests

they have created, and the manner in which it has coped with the environment (Selznick 1957). By definition, an institution is an association that has been around for quite some time and has a life history. For instance, the US Congress has reached its present state through an evolution of about 200 years (Patterson and Copeland 1994).

The logic of persistence or path dependency is one important aspect upon which institutions depend on. Once this path institution is launched, it continues until it is deflected by some sufficiently strong social/political forces (Krasner 1982). However, the change not only involves changes in structures but also reforms in prevailing mind-sets about an institution's responsibility. In addition, once public institutions are created, they maintain structural relationships with the society and with powerful social actors. However, a great deal of political will and strong determination to produce the change is required to alter this path (Peters 1999).

In the present study's context, a historical view of institutions conveys more information regarding the history of the UP's. How did this institution evolve over the decades? What types of changes were incorporated in its structural design in order to enhance women's political participation in a larger number? Since effecting changes in an institution's existing structure is a matter of government policy that requires enactment of reform, it is important to explore when a policy agenda draws serious government attention. It is believed that John Kingdon's model of agenda setting would provide a clear understanding about the issues.

2.3 John Kingdon's Model of Agenda Setting

John Kingdon's model of agenda setting concerns both the State and non-State actors' influence on the agenda setting. The model also highlights the roles of policy entrepreneurs within and outside the government who, after taking advantage of agenda setting opportunities (policy windows)—move the issue onto formal agendas of the government (Kingdon 1984; Howlett 1998). Kingdon argued that policy formulation comes from a process where different ideas float around in a kind of policy primeval soup. These ideas bump into one another while combining and recombining to form new ideas. Hence, policy ideas are kept ready to float by policy entrepreneurs. Generally, this stage is messy because it lacks any specific and sequential form. Thus, the three events of "problem stream," "policy stream," and "political stream" would have to interact in providing an opportunity to open up a *new window*, and only then will the proposal be put on the political agenda (Kingdon 1984).

In the *problem stream*, problems are perceived as public problems and arise on the political agenda, requiring government action. At this stage, problems are not influenced by political pressure. Rather, these concerns draw the attention of policymakers as a result of interest group agendas, political crises, budget issues, program responses, and the normal workings of the political system. Problems are

categorized based on the views of people who perceive these differently (Kingdon 1984; Weiss 1999).

In the *policy stream*, problems are examined by specialists who, in turn, offer solutions to such problems. At this stage, several alternatives of solving problems are analyzed and narrowed down. Moreover, the process goes well only when the community is tightly interwoven and concurs. However, the political agenda may be reduced to a relatively few items if the society remains fragmented. This, in the long run, delays the process of gaining acceptance of an idea for several areas. For survival in the policy stream, proposals must meet the survival criteria which include technical feasibility, value acceptability, and future constraints anticipation (Kingdon 1984).

Finally, the *political stream* is composed of factors such as national mood swings, election results, administrative and ideological changes, and special interest campaigns. A proposal on the political agenda is expected to receive support from different political forces who try to reach an agreement through bargaining instead of persuasion. During this process, all parties attempt to shield their individual interests (Kingdon 1984; Elrod 1994).

According to Kingdon, these three streams act independently on different paths until they reach a specific point in time, or *policy window*. Kingdon argues that

... the separate streams of problems, policies, and politics come together at certain critical times. Solution becomes joined to problems, and both of them are joined to favorable political forces. This coupling is most likely when policy windows - opportunities for pushing pet proposals or conceptions of problems - are open. (Kingdon 1984, p. 21).

Furthermore, he suggested two possible causes in the opening up of windows. Kingdon argues that "Basically, a window opens because of change in the political stream (e.g., a change of administration, a shift in the partisan or ideological distribution ... or a shift in national mood); or it opens because new problems captures the attention of governmental officials and those close to them" (ibid.: 176).

In the context of the present research, it is apparent that gender issues were highlighted as a problem by different international organizations and donors for a long time. Moreover, women's political participation in increasing numbers was adopted as a policy in the Beijing Declaration 1995, to mainstream gender in social development. A subsequent change in the government ideology also helped the issue to be included in the government agendas, when the more progressive Awami League (hereinafter, AL) came into power in 1996, in place of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (hereinafter, BNP).¹ Howlett and Ramesh's classification of actors in the policy process would provide a clear understanding regarding identification of different actors involved in the 1997 reform process.

¹ For more detail about ideologies of political parties in Bangladesh, please refer to [Chap. 4](#).

2.4 Howlett and Ramesh's Actors and Institutions in the Policy Process

Most policies are made through a policy subsystem, consisting of actors dealing with a public problem. The term “actor” includes both the state and societal actors, some of whom are intimately involved, while others only marginally participate in the policy process. These policy subsystems are forums, wherein actors discuss policy issues and persuade and bargain in favor of their interests. During their interaction with other actors, they often give up or modify their objectives in return for concessions from other subsystem members. However, these interactions occur in the context of various institutional arrangements which surround the policy process. Moreover, these affect how the actors pursue their interests and ideas up to the extent to which their efforts succeed.

The actors involved in the policy process may either be individuals or groups. However, there is an almost infinite variety of actors who may be members of policy subsystems and participants in the policy process simultaneously. Unfortunately, this makes the task of preparing a comprehensive catalog virtually impossible (Howlett and Ramesh 1995). In this regard, policy actors are divided into three broad categories: organization of the state, organization of the society, and organization of the international system. These will be discussed subsequently.

2.4.1 *Organization of the State*

Autonomy and capacity are the two most important dimensions under the organizations of the State category. In fact, these have insightful upshots on states' ability to make and implement public policies. Autonomy reflects the extent to which the State can act independently despite self-serving and contradictory social pressures. Political scholars hold the view that both self-serving motives and group actions intend to benefit their members at the expense of the rest of society.

Besides autonomy, it is also important for the State to have the capacity to create and implement effective policies. State capacity can be increased if various levels, branches, and agencies of the government remain united while high degrees of bureaucratic expertise are maintained (Olsen 1965, 1982, cited in Howlett and Ramesh 2003). With regard to policymaking intended to enhance participation of Bangladeshi women, the role of the government or elected officials has to be discussed elaborately.

2.4.2 *Organization of the Society*

The State's location in the international arena and its internal organization are not the only criteria to measure its capabilities. Rather, its linkage with the society is an important criterion as well. In addition, the support coming from prominent societal

actors is necessary for the state to make and implement policies effectively. Among others, the internal organization of these actors determines the extent to which they would offer the necessary level and form of support. Often, fragmented social groups affect the State's ability toward societal problem resolution (Howlett and Ramesh 2003). With regard to formulating gender-related policies in Bangladesh, identified important societal actors are political parties, WOs, and NGOs.

2.4.3 *Organization of the International System*

Scholars like Ohmae (1995) and Falk (1997) have opined that global forces restrain and outline each state. In contrast, most literature on public policy put emphasis on domestic state activities. Moreover, these tend to focus on the international system as an external coordination to which domestic policy actors react rather than as an integral part of the policy process (Howlett and Ramesh 2003). In fact, the international system always affected a state's public policy to some extent, but this influence's scope and intensity have greatly increased in recent years. Hirst and Thompson (1996) defined the cause of this effect as "globalization" or more particularly as "internationalization." Recent public policy literature (Bernstein and Cashore 2000; Benett 1997; Weiss 1999) recognizes the complex character, different forms, and the varying effects of internationalization on different policy sectors. It has also influenced modern day researchers to investigate the means, manner, and mechanisms of the international system, by which domestic policy processes are influenced (Coleman and Perl 1999; Risse-Kappen 1995; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Howlett and Ramesh 2003).

Often, it is difficult for states to stop foreign influences at the border, due to constraints emerging from the international system (Held and McGrew 1993; Walsh 1994; Howlett and Ramesh 2003). Thus, the "international regimes" concept has been developed by scholars (Krasner 1982; Haggard and Simmons 1987) to describe institutionalized arrangements in a given policy area. Considerably, this is necessary in trying to comprehend the incongruent international factors which are upsetting a state's behavior (Howlett and Ramesh 2003). Keohane (1989) defined regimes as "sets of governing arrangements" or networks of rules, norms, and procedures that regularize behavior and control its effects (cited in Howlett and Ramesh 2003). The instrument through which such a set is put into practice varies greatly in form, scope of coverage, and level of adherence (Haggard and Simmons 1987).

The national government and the citizens are expected to participate in the domestic policymaking of their country. However, when the question of international actors' role in public policymaking comes into play, the issue becomes both interesting and sensitive. The foregoing discussion established the fact that many areas within domestic political life are often influenced by international actors. International organizations play their role in the form of individuals working either as advisers or consultants to national governments or members of international governments with the authority under international agreements to regulate their members' behavior. Definitely, the intensity of an

international actor's influence in a country's domestic policies varies to a large extent. For instance, due to their central place in the international monetary regime, officials of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) often influence the policymaking of countries suffering from serious financial or fiscal problems (Howlett and Ramesh 2003).

Moreover, factors like the character of a national government's policy subsystem allow international actors to partake in the policy process. In addition, fragmented policy subsystems are more inclined to be influenced by international actors since fragmentation offers more scope for intervention. On the other hand, a coherent and united policy subsystem is less influenced by international actors, because it (policy subsystem) offers strong resistance to external intervention (Risse-Kappen 1995; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Generally, international actors influence policy subsystems and eventually become an integral part of the domestic policy process in situations where the subsystem remains coherent and in favor of external involvement (Pappi and Henning 1998; Howlett and Ramesh 2003). Regarding policymaking in Bangladesh as related to gender, the most important policy actors from the organization of international system's criteria are donors and international conventions.

2.5 Operationalization of Key Concepts

2.5.1 *Women's Political Participation*

Generally, political participation has come to mean the direct involvement of citizens in the processes of administrative decision making, policy formulation, and policy implementation. The intent of bringing the government "close to the people" through decentralization and devolution created immense opportunities for people to participate in the processes of priority setting, planning, and implementation. However, most of their involvement in these processes has been restricted by different types of barriers. Over the years, research findings suggest that citizens would have to cross several hurdles in order to gain opportunities for inclusive participation in "invited spaces" (opportunities created by either government or other powerful institutions) (Brock et al. 2001; Gaventa 2002; Cornwall 2004; Cornwall and Gaventa 2006). Recently, the concept of citizenship² has been described with greater importance as a new approach which aims

² The concept of "citizenship" can trace its roots in Western philosophical thinking outlined by the "two great citizenship traditions:" liberal and republican. These traditions have been discussed in different ways over certain periods of time in libertarian and communitarian variations (Kabeer 2002). While dealing with the issue of conceptualization of "citizenship," Jones and Gaventa (2002) identified the liberal, communitarian, and civil republican as the three main trends for the discussion of the concept. According to liberal theorists, citizenship is a status granted by the state that permits individuals to exercise specific sets of universal rights (Gaventa 2002). Meanwhile, the notion of a socially embedded citizen and community belongingness is the main focus of communitarian theorists about citizenship. They believe that the realization of interests and identity of an individual can only be defined in terms of his/her belongingness to the community (Jones and Gaventa 2002). Finally, the rights and obligations of citizens to participate in political affairs have been emphasized by civic republicans who see citizenship as "practice" (Kabeer 2002).

to bridge the gap between citizens and the state. In this approach, the agency of citizens is perceived as “makers and shapers” instead of mere “users and choosers” of interventions (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000). Lister (1998, p. 228) asserted that

... the right of participation in decision making in social, economic, cultural and political life should be included in the nexus of basic human rights.... Citizenship as participation can be seen as representing an expression of human agency in the political arena, broadly defined; citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents (cited in Cornwall and Gaventa 2006, p. 409).

However, Ellison (1997) pointed out that neither diversity nor difference is recognized by citizenship, which, in effect, fortifies the exclusion of some while looking for the inclusion of others. Thus, there is renewed emphasis on inclusion and social justice. More specifically, more weight is placed on involving people who have less power and voice, with emphasis on addressing the gender bias issue (Gaventa 2002). In Bangladesh, women’s access to positions of influence and power is limited: their occupational choices are narrower, and their earnings are lower compared with men. Furthermore, they must struggle to reconcile activities outside their respective homes with their traditional roles (Goswami 1998).

Often, it is easier for women to participate at the local than at the national government level, since the eligibility criteria are less rigorous in the former than the latter. Since the local government is physically nearer to ordinary women (they do not have to go to the capital to participate), it is easier for them to fuse the responsibility of nurturing children with their activities in local politics. Moreover, the local level can serve as an initial level, where women can start off their respective political careers. As such, it can also act as a catalyst for national political participation through the development of aptitudes and knowledge among women. Similarly, women can enjoy local politics in a larger extent due to their familiarity with their local community. In addition, they benefit from this by being the key users of local space and services such as water, electricity, waste disposal, health clinics, and other local government services. Women often energetically partake in organizations within their localities, which encourages them to be involved in the formal political decision-making process at the local level (Evertzen 2001).

Given all this, it is not surprising that women are more involved in local than national politics. Furthermore, according to Evertzen (2001), there are at least four reasons why women participate in (local) politics. These are:

Justice. Since women comprise half of any country’s total population, this alone reserves them the right to compose half of the decision-making bodies. In addition, women will feel truly represented and recognized in the democratic process only if more women are elected. To ensure justice in a society, it is crucial for women to take part in the political system.

Efficiency. Women possess diverse knowledge and resources to fetch into politics. Therefore, a political system which does not make use of both genders experiences and resources is incomplete, as it never can maximize use of all available inputs.

Diversity. Each gender needs separate political attention since each carries out unique tasks and survives in different financial and social circumstances.

Generally, women display meticulous concern in the allocation of local resources and services such as water, fuel, electricity, sanitation, housing, public safety, and health services. Moreover, they are mainly accountable for population and maternal services. Usually, male politicians do not represent women's interests in as effective a manner. As such, women's vigorous contribution in decision making is indispensable in making sure that females can support and protect their precise requirements and attention. In fact, they can be major performers in endorsing gender-responsive governance that tackles the concerns of both genders and in augmenting the access and power over local resources equally (IPU 2000).

Changing the political system. It is believed that the political system can be changed only if more women enter politics. Therefore, having more women in government may have noteworthy advantages for the society in general.

Moreover, participation can be viewed using the dimension of the powerful and powerless modes of representation. According to the proponents of this dimension, people act together with political organizations on a regular basis. Dewey (1970) and Pateman (1970) stated that people must be socialized into these organizations to develop a democratic attitude. This socialization process coincides with active political participation, which helps them learn democratic attitudes and skills through practice. Dewey (1970) further proposed that every human being is capable of contributing to the majority's benefit as long as he/she is given the opportunity to participate "in the organized total of similar contributions, not on the basis of prior status of any kind whatever" (Dewey 1970, p. 15, cited in Dudziak 1989, p. 48). If women's participation is described from this dimension's viewpoint, it is clear that women should participate in the political process. Evidently, they have the capacity to contribute to every country's wellbeing. Besides, women constitute half of Bangladesh's total population. Thus, a certain policy will not be as effective if it lacks representation from half of the total population. Also from this argument, it is essential that women should participate in the decision-making process for the sake of democracy and good governance.

It has been widely advocated in various international symposia, that women should participate in political decision making to ensure equality, democracy, and legitimacy. During the UN Women's Conference in Beijing (1995), it was declared that greater female participation is indispensable to ensure empowerment and autonomy of women, including the improvement of their social, economic, and political status. Also, this should be done to achieve a translucent and answerable government and administration, and sustainable development in all areas of life (Evertzen 2001). Women's political participation and empowerment are closely related. Since this study deals with women's political empowerment, it is thus necessary to define 'empowerment' and also to discuss various dimensions of women empowerment.

There are different interpretations of empowerment in the analytical world and in practice. Thus, sometimes it differs in meaning and understanding even within one organization. Friedmann (1992) asserted that empowerment brings social mobilization, brings changes in the state of the mind of women and helps in gaining access to the bases of social power. Alsop et al. (2006, p. 1) have defined

empowerment as “the process of enhancing an individual’s or group’s capacity to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes”. Morgen and Bookman (1988) asserted that the process of empowerment starts when women start to realize the causes of their powerlessness, identify factors that oppress them and do something to bring changes in the conditions of their lives. Scholars like Afsar (1998), Rowlands (1997), Kabeer (1994), and Batliwala (1994) stressed the grassroots, participatory methods, and the empowerment potential for the “poorest of the poor” (especially women). Karl (1995) viewed empowerment as a continuum of several interrelated and mutually reinforcing components which include (i) awareness building, (ii) capacity building, (iii) participation, and (iv) action.³

The feminists see empowerment of women as acting agents and not as beneficiaries, clients, participants, etc., and they deal with the question of power. In analyzing the literature on empowerment, Rowlands (1997) has suggested four classifications of power. (i) *Power over* refers to impose control or power over someone and something. Response to it can be compliance, resistance, or manipulation. (ii) *Power to* refers to generative or productive power that creates new possibilities and actions without domination. (iii) *Power with* refers to power to generate a feeling that the whole is greater than the sum of individuals and action as a group is more effective. (iv) *Power from within* refers to creation of a sense that there is strength in each and every individual. The recognition of one’s own self-acceptance and self-respect enables the acceptance of others as equals.

Based on the above discussions, it can be said that empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets, and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets. It is important to mention here that empowerment is not a single dimensional concept: rather it is a multi-dimensional concept which includes political, social, cultural, and so on. Based on frameworks developed by various scholars, Malhotra et al. (2002) presented a list of most commonly used dimensions of women empowerment that includes economic, sociocultural, familial/interpersonal, legal, political, and psychological. They asserted that these dimensions are very broad in scope, and within each dimension there is a range of subdomains within which women may be empowered. Thus, they have operationalized each dimension from household, community, and broader perspectives which can be found in Table 2.1.

³ “Awareness Building about women’s situation, discrimination, and rights and opportunities as a step toward greater equality. Capacity Building and skills development, especially ability to plan, make decisions, organize, and manage and carry out activities, to deal with people and institutions in the world around them. Participation and greater control and decision-making power in the home, community, and society. Action to bring about greater equality between men and women” (Karl 1995, p. 14).

Table 2.1 A list of most commonly used dimensions of women empowerment (Malhotra et al. 2002)

Dimension	Household	Community	Broader Arenas
Economic	Women's control over income; relative contribution to family support; access to and control of family resources	Women's access to employment; ownership of assets and land; access to credit; involvement and/or representation in local trade associations; access to markets	Women's representation in high paying jobs; women CEOs; representation of women's economic interests in macroeconomic policies, state, and federal budgets
Socio-Cultural	Women's freedom of movement; lack of discrimination against daughters; and commitment to educating daughters	Women's visibility in and access to social spaces; access to modern transportation; participation in extra-familial groups and social networks; shift in patriarchal norms (such as son preference); and symbolic representation of the female in myth and ritual	Women's literacy and access to a broad range of educational options; Positive media images of women, their roles and contributions
Familial/Interpersonal	Participation in domestic decision making; control over sexual relations; ability to make childbearing decisions, use contraception, access abortion; control over spouse selection and marriage timing; and freedom from domestic violence	Shifts in marriage and kinship systems indicating greater value and autonomy for women (e.g., later marriages, self-selection of spouses, reduction in the practice of dowry; acceptability of divorce); local campaigns against domestic violence	Regional/national trends in timing of marriage, options for divorce; political, legal, and religious support for (or lack of active opposition to) such shifts; systems providing easy access to contraception, safe abortion, and reproductive health services
Legal	Knowledge of legal rights; domestic support for exercising rights	Community mobilization for rights; campaigns for rights awareness; and effective local enforcement of legal rights	Laws supporting women's rights, access to resources and options; advocacy for rights and legislation; and use of judicial system to redress rights violations
Political	Knowledge of political system and means of access to it; domestic support for political engagement; and exercising the right to vote	Women's involvement or mobilization in the local political system/campaigns; support for specific candidates or legislation; and representation in local bodies of government	Women's representation in regional and national bodies of government; strength as a voting bloc; and representation of women's interests in effective lobbies and interest groups
Psychological	Self-esteem; self-efficacy; psychological wellbeing	Collective awareness of injustice; potential of mobilization	Women's sense of inclusion and entitlement; systemic acceptance of women's entitlement and inclusion

Following Malhotra et al.'s (2002) different dimensions of empowerment, an attempt here is made to identify different indicators to measure the state of political participation of women in the UP level. Although Malhotra et al. (2002) have provided a list of indicators for measuring the state of women's empowerment; however, political, economic, and sociocultural dimensions have been chosen in the context of the present research, since these three dimensions are closely related. As a matter of fact, women members of UPs receive an honorarium per month and they are required to be involved in societal affairs as part of their capacity as representatives of the people. Thus, these two concepts have close linkage with political participation of women. Considering different perspectives and indicators provided by Malhotra et al. (2002) and sensing ground realities of women's political participation in Bangladesh, a number of indicators have been identified. These describe the economic freedom and social liberty that these women enjoy after being elected as UP members, as well as their involvement in the political process of the UP. Keeping the term "manageability" in mind, indicators have not been divided into different perspectives, i.e., household, community, and broader arenas.

The above discussion leads us to finally identify some indicators through which the state of women's participation in the political process is explored. Indicators through which economic sovereignty of the women members have been discussed are: (i) freedom to spend money and (ii) role in family decision making. Societal freedom of women members has been explained through different indicators like: (i) societal acceptance, (ii) constraints from religious fundamentalism, (iii) use of purdah, (iv) freedom of movement, (v) access of the general public to the women members, (vi) incidents of fatwa, (vii) education and access to information, (viii) participation in nonfamily group activities and NGOs, and (ix) changes in attitude. Finally, involvement of the women members in the political process has been explained through indicators like: (i) perception of women members regarding their new roles, (ii) working environment of the UP, (iii) project distribution, (iv) committees of the UP, (v) women members in Party politics, and (vi) participation in the UP decision making.

2.5.2 Reforms and Institutional Change

Reforms and change are very much interrelated since the former is intended to bring changes to the existing system. To streamline the administrative system and carry out public policy choices, almost all governments in the world use "reform" as one of their most significant plans of action (Farazmand 2006). The UN defined reform as "the deliberate authority and influence to apply new measures to an administrative system so as to change its goal, structures and procedures with a view to improving it for developmental purposes" (United Nations 1983, p. 1). Changes and transformations, promises and prospects, as well as hopes and opportunities are reflected through reforms in governmental action. However, the promised expectations may not always be attained through reforms due to a variety of

reasons (Farazmand 2006). Reforms may be explained by three broad approaches which include (i) top-down elitist reforms, (ii) bottom-up reforms, and (iii) institutional and cultural reforms.

Top-down elitist reforms refer to an approach in which the top leadership initiates the reform, and their main responsibilities are to detect problems, identify needs, and develop issues. Generally, the conduct of reforms or change in programs is based on the top leadership's perspective. In this approach, the top leadership's power is absolute, although options exist for making announcements and seeking deliberations. The top leadership is perceived as knowledgeable about the whole organization, which permits it to initiate reforms and changes (Peters 2002; Farazmand 2002b, 2006).

On the other hand, the *bottom-up approach* facilitates citizens' participation in the decision-making process. Here, the changes and reforms are regarded in such a way that allows the development of movements from the political organization's environment. As such, the external pressure for change may influence the responses of leadership in three possible scenarios. First, the leadership may adopt changes and demands coming from the environment. This can be done by allowing the majority to partake in the decision making and implementation process by initiating reforms and changes. The second response would be a reactive and passive approach toward external pressure, where the leadership adopts as few demands as possible. Lastly, the third one involves the taking over of the entire leadership system as a consequence for the unwillingness of the leadership to initiate reform (Farazmand 2006).

The third and last approach is the *institutional and cultural approach*. It is considered as one of the most comprehensive models in initiating change and reform, since it combines the advantages of both top-down and bottom-up approaches. In this line, more attention is given to structure, process, and values. Actually, bringing change in the structure is not at all difficult since it is done by the top-down approach, while change can be brought out by the bottom-up approach. Here, the people are not threatened during the course of promoting the understanding of reforms and changes, as well as their implementation. Moreover, the third dimension involves value and cultural elements where the institutions, environments, organizations, system of governments, and society are imbedded. Thus, it is considered as the most comprehensive model in pursuing reforms and changes (for details, Farazmand 2002a and 2006).

Regarding the issue of greater political participation for women, reform is an important mechanism given the fact that women are underprivileged compared with men in all societies worldwide. Even their status is much more vulnerable in countries like Bangladesh, where they suffer from male domination and patriarchy along with other social and cultural impediments (Halder 2004; Chowdhury 2009). Besides, most institutions are designed in a way that is unaccommodating for women who are taking part in it. Therefore, such circumstances have brought the issue of reforms into the spotlight.

When the issue of women's local-level political participation comes into discussion, it is important to state that women were never actually barred from taking

part in elections. However, it is certainly difficult for them to win an election when contesting against a male candidate due to patriarchal domination and the existence of *mastan* culture and availability of illegal arms (Rahman 1999).⁴ In such cases, winning elections would only remain as a wish and not a reality. In realizing women's substandard status and recognizing the essence of their participation in politics, the Bangladeshi Government initiated a landslide reform in the local government level by enacting the Act of 1997. This Act has opened an avenue for women to take part in the local government decision-making process in a larger numbers than ever before.

Currently, an empirical question is being asked: on which conditions did the local government reform take place? Two decades ago, Esman and Uphoff (1982) stated that national governments and society elites are usually apathetic to the idea of initiating reforms to devolve power. Generally, they tolerate and even encourage local organizations only "when they (the organizations) do not threaten the regime." They further stated that "often, however, national elites, whether civilian or military, are deeply skeptical of the idea of democratic decentralization, even when a "democratic transition" has taken place in national-level institutions" (Esman and Uphoff 1982, p. 45). Another study, on democratic transitions in Africa, concluded that, even if there has been significant democratization in some important dimensions, administrative devolution and local government reform are usually not among the top priorities under the agenda of elites (Charlick et al. 1996). These points signify that institutional structure reforms in local government do not automatically take place. Actually, the reform process has to be steered by some actors, and the result of such interactions is the opening of a new window which facilitates the enactment of reforms. Now, the next question is: which Bangladeshi organizations influenced (and to what extent) the reform that brought about the changes in the local government structure? In the following section, the actors in the reform process have been identified, and their networks have been discussed.

2.5.3 Actors in the Process of 1997 Reform

From the discussion of theoretical orientation, it has been established that various State, societal, and international actors come into play when a policy is initiated to enact a reform. Actually, actors like the government, political parties, WOs, non-governmental organizations, donors, and different international conventions were involved in the process of enactment of the 1997 reform. In the following section, each actor has been discussed for operationalization.

⁴ *Mastans* are groups of killers, extortionists, looters, and perpetrators of violent crimes who work under the direction of so-called political godfathers (Rashiduzzaman 2001). This group of people is used by the politicians for winning elections, influencing local people, and threatening their oppositions.

2.5.3.1 The Government

Executive members and legislators are two types of elected officials who partake in a country's policy process. The executive, also referred to as the cabinet or the government, is the most important actor in a policy subsystem of any country. The executive holds the ultimate authority to make and implement policies despite the involvement of other actors in the process. This ultimate authority is derived from the constitution, which also provides the State the power to govern the country. Since there are only few mechanisms that exert control over the executive in a parliamentary system, executives exercise absolute power, because they enjoy majority support in the Parliament. However, the situation is somehow different in a republican or presidential system, where the president often faces difficulty to convince the legislature to approve its measures (Howlett and Ramesh 2003).

The State policy's character is determined by different courses and the political development that takes place in the country. Thus, the government has to create an environment to facilitate women's political participation, since the state is one of the most important agents for sociopolitical transformation. Provided that privileged classes and groups inherit political power, any opportunities for women are possible only through the benevolence of the state. For instance, in India's case, where political turmoil accompanied independence, such disorder opened up avenues for women and legitimized their participation at the public level (Mumtaz 2005). This took final shape when the government of India enacted the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the constitution, which ensured women a 33 % reservation of seats in the local government. In this light, the main concern of the present research is to determine the role of Bangladesh's Government in the enactment of the Act of 1997.

Regarding the issue of Bangladeshi women's political participation, it can be seen that windows have been opened for them to take part in local government politics only. Although 45 seats in the national parliament have been reserved for them, the direct election system has not been introduced in the Parliament yet. It is interesting to know why policymakers still restrict the introduction of direct election of women only to the local level. Evidently, a policymaker's personal interest comes into play while making any kind of reforms. This means that the reformers will allow women to exercise their rights up to certain level from where they (women) will not be able to challenge the power structure of policymakers.

In fact, several women related issues have been nurtured well in emerging democracies. Generally, countries that experience a transition from authoritarian to democratic consider gender-specific demands. This is because women's mobilization is seen as a necessary tool in consolidating the regime and in achieving larger development goals (cited in Sikoska and Kardam 2001). The governments of these countries showed commitment to their women's increased representation, which played a crucial role in advancing women's political representation. The enhanced political representation of women depends largely on the government's political will rather than on the world's economic standing or any other economic factor (Tripp 1994). For instance, despite being one of the poorest nations in the world, Mozambique achieved a remarkable improvement in the field of female legislative representation, as compared to many

advanced and industrialized countries. Besides Mozambique, greater female representation in Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa, and several other African countries have been accounted for due to the initiation of party quotas and reserved seats (Tripp 1994). Like developing countries, numerous women movements also gained momentum through the process of democratization in newly industrialized countries. In Turkey, women's rights and the diversity of women's voices gained momentum through economic transformation and democratization processes (Kardam and Erturk 1999; Caha 2010).

Similarly, the emerging democracy of Bangladesh had already begun its drive for women's participation at the end of 1990, when autocratic rule was overthrown by a mass movement. Since then, the democratization of local government units, along with enhanced women participation in political processes, has become an issue of concern for the government. In this regard, the changes in the UP's structure in 1997 may have been partially explained as a part of the democratization process of the entire country. Thus, considerable attention has been given to exploring why the previous Bangladeshi Government (the AL government) enacted the reform of 1997, which was intended to enhance women's political participation. Conversely, an attempt has also been made to discover why the earlier government (the BNP government) did not enact any reforms of such kind.

2.5.3.2 Political Parties

Irrespective of the electoral system pattern, the form of ballot used, or the rate of legislature turnover, it is the "will of political parties" that finally decides the selection of female candidates (Beckwith 1992; Pitre 2003). Hence, Parties are the real gatekeepers to elective office (Norris and Lovenduski 1995, Norris 1996), since they are responsible for the recruitment, selection, and election of candidates (Pitre 2003). While some Parties are well aware of women's political underrepresentation and adopt initiatives to ensure greater female participation, other Parties seem to be less enthusiastic. Moreover, initiatives can take the form of quotas, target numbers, or affirmative action measures (Pitre 2003).

According to Caul (1999), centralization is one of the three aspects of party organizational structure that may influence women's representation. Meanwhile, the other two aspects are institutionalization⁵ and the location of candidate nomi-

⁵ The degree of institutionalization determines the nature of the process by which MPs are recruited. Thus, a high degree of institutionalization denotes a more rule-oriented process (Norris and Lovenduski 1995). In fact, highly institutionalized parties provide potential MPs, especially those without ties to the power center, with a set of understandable rules. Czudnowski (1975) stated that the more institutionalized the selection process, the easier it is for any outsider to understand how the selection process works. In addition, party leaders have less leeway to bend the rules in favor of certain candidates under institutionalization. Meanwhile, weakly institutionalized parties tend to bias candidate nomination in favor of those who have accumulated "personal political capital" and resources based on personal status or external group support (Guadagnini 1993). Thus, being newcomers to parties, women may have fewer resources and might find it more difficult to catch up with established men.

nation.⁶ Centralization depicts the distribution of control over the decision making within the policy hierarchy. The leader can create opportunities for women when a party is highly centralized. Thus, it is considered to be 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 participate in electoral politics due to the emergence of new parties and a fragmented multiparty system.

As argued above, how can one assess the position of political parties in Bangladesh, where centralized political parties and a fragmented multiparty system promote greater women representation at the national and local level? First, there seems to be a centralized and multiparty 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 single-party basis, political parties, in power, have a leading role in enhancing the political participation of women. While opposition parties can only press their demands, it is still the government that actually decides. In fact, the ideology of political parties determines the limit to which parties could be in favor of greater women participation. Now, 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 here is to explore the extent of political parties' willingness to ensure greater women's participation in Bangladesh and to elucidate the degree to which they have influenced the government to initiate reforms in the local government level.

2.5.3.3 Women's Organizations

There is a large body of the literature concerning the role of WOs in developing countries. This suggests that WOs contribute to the process of development in various ways. First, they address the peoples' needs either through self-help or service provision. Studies have found that majority of such organizations initially form to address needs such as nutrition, food distribution, education, and shelter (Visvanathan et al. 1997; Moser 1993; Carr et al. 1996). In fact, it is believed that this can contribute to achieve an improved standard of living for women.

⁶ Scholars like Lovenduski and Norris (1993) deemed that a localized nomination is more hospitable for women, because they are likely to work in community politics and may work their way up to the national level.

Second, WOs provide a means of empowerment. The Pacific Institute for Women's Health (PIWH) evaluated the impacts of the Global Fund for Women, a California-based organization that offers small grants to WOs around the world. The evaluation team found that participation in these organizations benefits individual members in terms of self-esteem and confidence (Andina and Pillsbury 1997). Moreover, WOs contribute to collective empowerment and press for increased respect for women's rights.

Third, WOs contribute to the democratization process. According to Karl (1995, p. 19) "WOs are one of the principal means through which women participate in the life of society. While women are poorly represented in political bodies and power structures, they have learnt to use other avenues to turn their aspirations into political action." In other words, WOs help women make political demands and strengthen grassroots organizations. According to a diminutive body of the literature on gender and conflict, WOs serve several functions in democratization processes. Some of these are: (i) strengthening the grassroots organizational capacity and the democratic culture at the micro level during or after wars, (ii) instigating a transition to peaceful democracy, (iii) providing a means for collective action to advocate for women's rights during and after wars, and (iv) increasing women's participation in political processes at the local, national, and international levels (see Carr et al. 1996; Goetz 1995; El-Bushra et al. 1993; Greenberg et al. 1997; Jacqueline 1994; Moser 1993; Visvanathan et al. 1997). As such, they can be a useful mechanism in mobilizing women to advocate for change. However, not every organizational effort contributes to political change, nor do all WOs empower women. Often, tensions and rivalries within and among WOs can weaken these goals. Generally, WOs are just one of the many means through which positive change and reforms can be facilitated.

Meanwhile, women's agencies, pressing for equal social and political rights for women, have been a crucial factor which led the governments of various countries to enact policies in improving women's political participation. In this regard, India is a good example, suggesting how feminist activism can play a role in extending the space for women's participation in politics. In India, the debates around seats for women carried on to their post-independence period. The women members of the 1949 Constituent Assembly opposed special concessions for women, and thus reserved seats were not considered in the Constitution. Similarly, the Committee on the Status of Women in India rejected the idea of having reserved seats for women in 1975 (there was a dissenting note on the issue by two members, activist/academics Vina Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar, who saw reservations as a necessary affirmative action for women). However, the Committee did make a strong recommendation for the institutionalization of women's participation in local government through special quotas (Mumtaz 2005). Actually, there would be thousands of such examples if the role of women agencies in India in this process would be referred to. The emergence of a women's movement in rural India on a mass scale in 1979–1980 was sparked off by a case of police rape (a common but no means unique form of police brutality). During this period, massive demonstrations and agitations from women were held following the Supreme Court's acquittal of a policeman who raped a young female. This proved to be instrumental

for the development of a human and civil rights movement that protects citizens from the arbitrary violence of state functionaries. Moreover, several WOs that were formed during the course of that campaign survived and grew subsequently. They eventually extended their concerns to other forms of violence against women, including the apparent general social control of, and discrimination against, women (Hensman 1996).

At the same time, as in other organizations, rivalries and competition within and amongst WOs can undermine the influence of WOs on women's political participation. Sometimes changes achieved at an earlier time are undone or weakened as coalition partners shift positions or lose their power. The women's movement in some Latin American countries has had an ironic downturn after the return to democracy, for example. Major political parties, which had worked closely with WOs during the democratic transition, were no longer interested in gender-related causes when in government. International donors supporting the women's movement as part of the political transition processes turned their attention to other, more 'pressing' issues (Jacquette 1994). These twists and turns remind us of the embeddedness of women's movements in other, multiple, social processes, and the complex interactions of WOs with other actors. These actors are sometimes allies and, at other times, competitors, disinterested bystanders, or even sources of resistance. The role of WOs in promoting women's wellbeing involves a complex process that is far from fully understood.

In Bangladesh, a good number of WOs work for women's rights as well. An example of which is the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (hereinafter, BMP), a women's forum comprising females who were active in student politics in the 1960s and through the liberation movement of Bangladesh. It organized itself during the post-independence period, and in time developed its chapters across the entire country. BMP is probably the only group of its kind with such a broad network. BMP also takes a well-defined position in the areas of women's education, employment, and health as it raises social, economic, and political demands that are designed to remove discrimination and attain equality for Bangladeshi women (Panday 2008). Meanwhile, other groups such as the Naripokkho, Aion-o-Salish Kendra (hereinafter, ASK), Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangstha (hereinafter BNPS), Nari Unnayan Samity (hereinafter NUS), and others have been performing a major role as watchdogs.⁷ The concern of this research is to explore major channels of exerting influence and the extent of the successes of WOs in creating pressure on policymakers to bring positive changes favoring women's political participation in the local government structure.

2.5.3.4 Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs)

As the "new policy agenda" took off during the latter part of the 1990s, the emphasis was put on both good governance and neoliberal economic policies. As such, NGOs have since been viewed as alternative or substitute service providers in health, education, and agriculture, which occasionally come into effect as part of

⁷ *Naripokkho*, ASK, BNPS, and NUS are the leading WOs in Bangladesh.

the privatization policy (Fisher 1997; Robinson 1993). Bangladesh boasts of an extensive NGO community whose success in poverty alleviation through micro-credit programs has attracted the international community's attention. Microcredit programs of Grameen Bank, Proshika, Association of Social Advancement (ASA), The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), and so forth, have achieved tremendous success in alleviating rural poverty.⁸ It is also worth saying that women's welfare is a focal point of most NGO programs in Bangladesh. Due to his success in alleviating rural poverty through his Grameen Bank, Dr. Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. In recent years, NGOs have widened their roles in the political arena besides carrying out different types of development-related programs (Davis and McGregor 2000).

In becoming the "alternative or substitute service providers" or "authentic voice" of the poor, a few radical and moderate Bangladeshi NGOs have mobilized their members and the rural poor through their voter education programs. In the 1996 election, the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) coordinated a Democracy Awareness Education Program in which 15,000 trainers facilitated awareness-nurturing workshops across the whole country. In fact, these workshops contributed to an impressive voter turnout of 74 % (Ashman 1997). Another example would be the NGO Gono Shahajjo Sangstha's (GSS) efforts to campaign among its landless group members as candidates in the local UP elections in Nilphamari district (Hashemi 1995). However, these voter education programs have been criticized by a section of political parties and academics. This section perceived that NGO involvement in politics is a violation of the concept of an NGO (Islam 1998; cited in Siddiqui 1998) since an NGO's role should be limited only to developmental activities. In turn, NGO members who stood in electoral contests confronted serious challenges from the local power structure associated with the local bureaucracy. In general, NGO activities built awareness among their women members about their involvement in politics and created immense pressure on the government to make necessary policy changes regarding women's participation. Now, the study's concern is to explore the extent of influence these organizations have exerted on the government with regard to the enactment of the 1997 reform.

2.5.3.5 Donors

Most donor agencies, including the United Nations (UN) and bilateral donors such as Canada, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Netherlands, and others have been providing funds for gender equality-related programs and projects. The tendency of responsiveness to gender equality norms is frequently seen among donor-driven States and those having weak bureaucracy (Sikoska and Kardam 2001). In fact, the research carried out by Goetz stated that gender-related goals have been

⁸ Grameen Bank, Proshika, ASA, and BRAC are the leading NGOs in Bangladesh.

effectively employed in States having weaker bureaucracies. Furthermore, she pointed out that these States might have been influenced by international norms (Goetz 1995). Overall, the donor's priority determines the type of programs to be chosen and implemented by the government. In such cases, the government's interest and determination to implement these projects remain under suspicion, despite the fact that gender-related projects are being accepted by the citizenry.

On the other hand, various donor agencies like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and so forth have taken the issue of gendered governance as one of their priority objectives. For instance, although the World Bank is mainly an economic institution that has to maintain its political impartiality, the issue that "good governance is essential for development" is gaining importance within the said organization. In order to ensure good governance; therefore, women's political participation must be ensured as well. Moreover, these donors establish links with WOs and NGOs through networking, information building, consultation, conferences, and workshops in order to stimulate their political agenda (Sikoska and Kardam 2001). Occasionally, donors provide funds to these organizations to carry out gender-related projects where their ideas are reflected. As such, an effort has been made to explore the role of donor agencies in the process of enactment of the reform of 1997.

2.5.3.6 International Conventions

Meanwhile, several international organizations have long remained vocal in ensuring equal rights for women in every sphere. Among these organizations, a leading role has been played by the United Nations. From its inception in 1945, the UN had already directed its efforts toward securing, promoting, and protecting women's rights. The UN's main objectives have established the fact that equal rights of men and women are necessary conditions to ensure socioeconomic development (Khan 2000, cited in Jahan and Kabir 2006). Accordingly, they set up the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), in 1946, whose main objective was to evaluate and analyze the situation of women in their different member countries and to prepare a status report. Moreover, 1975 was declared the International Women's Year to facilitate women's social, political, and economic development. Apart from these initiatives, the UN also organized a good number of conferences and declared conventions that advocate women's rights. These actions convinced member countries to implement the decisions reached in talks.

Furthermore, a State's act of signing and endorsing international gender agenda documents becomes a commitment for it to ratify and comply with the agreements reached. In fact, UN-initiated action plans and programs that were followed by four major international conferences on women commit a State's compliance and accountability. For instance, an international legal instrument called the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) requires the respect and observance of human rights for women. After

it was adopted by the UN General Secretary in 1979, CEDAW came into full force in September 1991. By October 1999, it had been ratified by 165 states. It is worth noting here that the international community does not have a hierarchical structure to enact and enforce rules within a State. Thus, the sole responsibility of enforcing such rules lies with the State itself.

When countries ratify any particular convention, it is taken for granted that the formal commitment to apply the provisions of the Convention is an indication of willingness to accept a measure of international supervision. For instance, all signatories of CEDAW were obliged to take all necessary initiatives to eliminate discrimination against women whether in public or private life. These initiatives may include the enactment of new laws and nullification or abolition of the existing laws, regulations, customs, and practices that discriminate women in society. Thus, these conventions should promote equal opportunities for both genders in terms of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights (Sikoska and Kardam 2001). Since the reform of 1997 was enacted after the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, and Bangladesh was a signatory of the Platform for Action (PFA), an attempt has been made to determine the impact of the Beijing Plus Five Convention on the process of enactment of the Act of 1997.

2.6 Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion, it is argued that both rule-based and historical institutionalism are important for the cause of women's political participation. Rules shape the structure of an institution that create an environment where women can easily take part and be involved within the political process. Institutional rules also specify who will do what, how, and when. On the other hand, a historical view of institutions conveys more information regarding the history of the UP. How did this institution evolve over the decades? What types of changes were incorporated in its structural design in order to enhance women's political participation in a larger number? When it concerns agenda setting model, it is argued that the problem stream, policy stream, and political stream came together to open a new window for the government, based on which the government responded positively by enactment of the 1997 reform. Through discussion of Howlett and Ramesh's (1995, 2003) actors and institutions in the policy process, it has been argued that different State, societal, and international actors remained involved in the process of enactment of the Act of 1997. These actors are: the governments, the political parties, women's organizations, NGOs, donor agencies, and international conventions. All these actors have been chosen keeping in mind the theoretical orientation provided by Howlett and Ramesh and involvement of these actors for the cause of women's political participation in larger numbers. Apart from discussion on the theoretical orientation, an attempt has also been made to operationalize core

concepts of the research including women's political participation, reforms and institutional change, and different actors.

Finally, the above discussion suggests that gender-related policymaking in Bangladesh requires interaction among the different State, societal, and international actors. Actually, these actors each contributed to the enactment of the Act of 1997. However, the mechanism and the intensity of influence from each of these actors vary. In [Chaps. 4](#) and [5](#), an effort has been made to ascertain the role of actors in shaping the reform that was intended to ensure greater participation of women in local government. However, [Chap. 4](#) provides an overview of evolution and changing pattern of local government in Bangladesh, followed by a discussion on various reform initiatives that were intended to ensure participation of women in local government.

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Chapter 3

Local Government Reform Efforts: A Perspective of Women's Political Participation

3.1 Introduction

The Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) in 1995 called for an increase in women's political participation at all levels of governance. This urged heads of governments to initiate policy measures to augment women's political participation. Subsequently, the Act of 1997 was enacted to reserve three seats for women in each UP, who are to be elected, for the first time, through direct election. This Act was not the first Bangladeshi initiative on the enhancement of women's political participation in local government. There has been a stream of reforms since 1971, when 15 parliamentary seats had been reserved for women under the 1972 Constitution. This is alongside several local government reforms intended to integrate women into the political decision-making process. However, the changes in 1997 were remarkable in opening up wider avenues for women's participation in political decision making.

The main objectives of this chapter are twofold. The first part provides an evolution and outlines the changes in the local government system across different historical periods. The main concern is to explore the question: why did different governments, since the British period, bring about changes in the structural design of local government in Bangladesh? Were those initiatives taken for valid reasons or for serving ill purposes of the rulers? In addition, structure and functions of the UP has also been described. The second part deals with analysis of different reform initiatives intended to enhance women's political participation at the local level in pre- and post-independence Bangladesh (1971). With analysis of different laws, an effort has been made to specify different provisions in laws relating to women's political participation. Parallel to the main discussion, an attempt is made to analyze why the Act of 1997 is considered as a milestone in the context of women's political participation in Bangladesh.

3.2 The Evolution and Changing Pattern of Local Government in Bangladesh

In a democracy, the Constitution ensures legal recognition of the local government through Acts of the Parliament incorporating relevant provisions (Khan 1997). The legal basis and responsibilities of local government in Bangladesh are incorporated in the 1972 Constitution, in which Article 59 (Chap. 3) specifically states that “local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies composed of persons elected in accordance with law” (The Constitution of People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1991, p. 43). Article 60 stipulates that “for the purpose of giving full effect to the provision of article fifty nine, Parliament shall, by law, confer powers on the local government bodies referred to in that article including power to impose taxes for local purposes, to prepare their budgets and to maintain funds” (ibid, p. 43).

Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India share a common history of local government, considering that all had been British Colonies for centuries. The Bangladesh local government originated under British rule and passed through the neocolonial Pakistan period before arriving to its present state. Therefore, the evolution of local government in Bangladesh has been examined in terms of these three periods: the British (1757–1947); the Pakistan (1947–1971), and the Bangladesh periods (after 1971).

3.2.1 *The British Period (1757–1947)*

The local government system in the subcontinent became subject to a number of experiments during the 200 years of British colonial rule. The primary objective was to serve British imperial interests. Being an imperial power in India, the British were more concerned with the maximization of land revenue collection and the maintenance of law and order. Owing to this, they did not have a real understanding and interest in indigenous, self-governing institutions. The local government in British Bengal had its inception in the Bengal Village Chaukidari Act of 1870. Under this act, several villages formed a union, each creating a *chowkidari panchayet* (organization). These organizations comprised of five government-appointed members serving for 3 years. These also became responsible for the appointment of chowkidars (village police) tasked with law and order maintenance and who were given salaries paid through the tax imposed on villagers (Siddique 1992).

Members of the chowkidari panchayet were considered to be government functionaries rather than representatives of the villagers. Their main task was to assist the administration in maintaining law and order and in collecting taxes. To establish a more responsible government, the Bengal Local Self-Government Act, based on Lord Ripon's Resolution on local self-government in 1882, was passed in 1885. History tells us that this became the foundation of local self-government in British

India.¹ Under this Act, union committees, local government boards, and district boards were established for different levels. This resolution proved significant since it defined general principles for the development of local institutions in the future and provided the rationale behind the functions of local bodies (Siddique 1992).

Later, the Bengal Village Self-Government Act of 1919 was enacted to abolish the chowkidari panchayet and union committees. In place of these tiers, union boards, and district boards were set up. In 1946, a system of nomination was abolished. Until then, union boards were composed of two-thirds elected and one-third nominated members. The union board was entrusted with responsibilities of law and order maintenance, roads and bridges construction, health care provision, and charitable dispensaries and primary school maintenance. On the other hand, the district board became responsible for water supply and assistance. Apart from the above-mentioned responsibilities of the union board, it was also given power to adjudicate over minor criminal cases and even had the authority to levy union tax (Noor 1986). This system continued until August 14, 1947, when the Indian sub-continent was divided into two independent states—India and Pakistan.

During the British period, local government bodies were dominated by either appointed officials or representatives of the British ruler. Thus, the majority of the Indian population did not have any say in the activities of these bodies (Khan 1997). During the latter part of British rule, a number of laws were passed that made urban local government bodies more representative of the local communities. This was done through introducing elections and extending the powers of the local government bodies. However, provisions were also kept for the election of the chairman and vice-chairman from among the elected commissioners. The Bengal Municipal Act of 1932 was the first piece of municipal legislation in the region that widened and clarified the powers of municipalities in levying rates and taxes and in utilizing funds (Siddique 1994). Simultaneously, unequivocal powers were given to local officers to inspect, supervise, and control municipalities (Khan 1997).

The British passed several laws aligned with the establishment of responsible urban governments. Despite this, there was little means for the general public to participate in the decision-making process in reality. During the early days of municipal administration, the British introduced elections with a restricted franchise. The electorate was only 9 % of the total population, and voting rights depended on possession of property, income, and other qualifications. Voting was driven more by considerations such as kinship, group interests, or communal affiliations rather than the general welfare of city dwellers. Consequently, elections were turned into contests among the wealthy, the ambitious, and the individuals whose goals were to promote their self-interest. Such individuals did not hesitate to use thugs and musclemen to this end. As a result, internal disputes, jealousy, enmity, revenge, and personal aggrandizement came to be synonymous with the municipality (Ahmed 1991). In a separate study, Khan pointed out that due to the lack of available financing, the basic amenities provided by the Dhaka

¹ Bangladesh was part of British India then.

municipality between the 1920s and 1940s were inadequate and inefficient. Here, even the minimum mandated functions were financed by government grants. The municipality did not take any initiative to raise additional taxes or to even collect the estimated tax properly, thus adversely affecting the supply and maintenance of basic services. During this period, local patronage and traditional power structure preservation became the deciding factors of local government politics. Essentially, this system lacked vision for the development and provision of rudimentary amenities to all citizens (Khan 1997).

3.2.2 *The Pakistan Period (1947–1971)*

The Pakistan period (1947–1971) witnessed the development of representative government under the veil of authoritarianism. The government continued the same urban local government system that existed in British India during the first 10 years of its rule, except for a few changes in the composition and structure of the local government (Ahmed 1997).

In 1958, all local government bodies were suspended due to the promulgation of martial law by General Ayub Khan. Eventually, a four-tier hierarchical system of local government in the name of a “basic democracy system” was introduced (Siddique 1992).² These four tiers were the (i) divisional council, (ii) district council, (iii) *thana* council or municipal committee, and (iv) union council or union committee. On average, a union comprised an area with 10,000 inhabitants, with the union council constituting 15 members. Among these members, two-thirds were elected by general voters, and one-third was nominated by the government. However, the nomination system was abolished in 1962. Both the chairman and the vice-chairman of the council were elected by members from among themselves. The elected representatives of the union council were called basic democrats. The total number of such councils was 7,300. Along with the responsibility of law and order, the union council was given 37 functions. These include agricultural development, water supply, education, communications, and social welfare. Apart from these functions, the council was also given the authority to set up a conciliation court. Members of the court were vested with judicial power under the Muslim Family and Marriage Ordinance of 1961. Besides this, the authority to impose taxes on property and other sources was entrusted to the union council

² The military ruler who staged a coup d'état in 1958 used to believe that the intellect of the Pakistani people was not suited to a Westminster-type representative government. The regime was in favor of a guided democracy, which was to be characterized by authoritarian government at the top and representative government at the local level. This variety of local government was known as “basic democracy.” This local government system became unpopular in the then East Pakistan and faced vehement criticism. Later, the system was dissolved by General Yahya Khan when Ayub Khan was overthrown from power in 1969 (Siddique 1994).

with the intention to generate its own funds in addition to the existing chowkidari fund. Government grant was allotted for rural works programs and for UP office construction (Siddique 1992).

3.2.3 *The Bangladesh Period (1971 to Current)*

Since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the structure of urban local government bodies underwent changes of different features. Changes had been made from time to time in terms of the nomenclature of tiers of the local government. However, almost nothing was undertaken with regard to the establishment of these bodies as self-governing institutions. Therefore, the structure of the urban-local government system remained almost the same. This is despite different initiatives to effect changes in the structure of local government bodies. Immediately after independence, the union council was renamed as union *panchayet*, and an administrator was appointed. The thana council was called the thana development committee, while the district council became the zila board or the district board. In 1973, the union panchayet's name was reverted to union parishad. A more significant change was brought about in 1976 through the Local Government Ordinance. This ordinance provided for a people's assembly for each tier of local government. To be specific, these were the UPs for the union level, the thana parishad for the thana level, and the zila parishad for the district level. This marked the first time an ordinance was passed to bring all local government institutions under a single legal framework. The UP was composed of one elected chairman and nine elected members, two nominated women members, and two peasant representatives. The thana parishad consisted of the subdivisional officer who was also the ex-officio chairman, the circle officer, and a UP chairman. The zila (district) parishad included elected members, official members, and women members whose numbers were determined by the central government. They served under a 5-year term of office. However, no elections were held, and government officials oversaw the parishad (Siddique 1994).

In 1980, in accordance with an amendment of the Local Government Ordinance, the *swanirvar gram sarker* (self-reliant village government) was introduced at the village level. However, this was abolished by a martial law order in July 1982 (Huque 1988). Several laws were passed after that for local government in 1982, 1983, 1988, and 1989.³ The Upazila Parishad Ordinance (1982) was particularly significant as it was supposed to help implement the decentralization program of the government. In the *upazila* system (as it came to be known), the

³ A major change transpired in the local government system through the introduction of the Local Government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Administration Reorganization) Ordinance in 1982. This was followed by the Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance in 1983, the Local Government (Zila Parishads) Act in 1988, and the three Hill Districts Acts and Palli Act in 1989.

(directly) elected chairman would have the principal authority in running the affairs of the upazila system with a 5-year tenure. The upazila *nirbahi* officer (UNO), the administrative head of the upazila, served as his/her subordinate. This system lasted for 9 years and seemed to be effective (Siddique 1994).

One may wonder why the system was considered effective. This is because there was a balance of power between the people's representatives and government officials. A system of indirect participation of the people in the decision-making process of the upazila parishad was present. This was made possible through their elected representatives. Moreover, the chairman of the upazila parishad was previously elected based on universal adult franchise. The general public was much pleased knowing that the administration was decentralized and thus accessible and transparent.

However, the BNP government (1991–1996), which came to power through a relatively fair election,⁴ abolished the upazila system in 1991. The main intention behind such decision was to strengthen control of the members of Parliament (MP) over local affairs in their respective constituencies. As long as the elected upazila chairman was present in the upazila, MPs found it difficult to establish their supremacy over local administration. During its 5-year tenure, the government could not provide an alternative democratic form of local government.

When another relatively free and fair election in 1996⁵ brought the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) to power (1996–2001), the new administration constituted a Local Government Commission. In May 1997, it came up with the Report on Strengthening Local Government Institutions. The Commission recommended a four-tier local government structure, including gram (village) parishad, union parishad, thana/upazila parishad, and zila (district) parishad. The then AL government started to implement recommendations forwarded by the commission since 1997.

Nevertheless, this system did not last long because the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government (2001–2006) introduced changes in the local government structure once more after coming into power in 2001. Specifically, it introduced the gram sarker (hereinafter, GS) in place of the gram parishad at the ward levels. Each gram sarker represented one to two villages comprising about 3,000 people on average. The UP member elected from the ward chaired the GS, which consisted of other members, both males and females, elected in a general meeting of ward voters under the supervision of a “prescribed/directing authority” (Panday and Assaduzzaman 2011). There were defined functions of the GS, while other responsibilities might be assigned by the government from time to time. The GS reserved the right to constitute issue-based standing committees as and when required, and to determine the membership of such committees.

⁴ The parliamentary election of 1991 had been considered as a relatively fair election since it was held under a nonpartisan caretaker government and was praised by international election observers.

⁵ The parliamentary election of 1996 was also held under a nonpartisan caretaker government, which was praised by international election observers.

However, after coming into power on January 11, 2007, the army-backed caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed abolished the GS on April 20, 2008.⁶ It did so considering that the GS was created to serve the political purposes of the BNP. All these tiers are concerned with rural/local government in Bangladesh. In addition to the abolition of the GS, the caretaker government made a noteworthy amendment to the upazila parishad (UZP) Act of 1998 through an ordinance. Basically, the caretaker government amended the controversial provision of the Act of 1998 that made it mandatory for the UZPs to follow suggestions of local MPs as advisors. Following the directive of the last caretaker government, election to the UPs was held in January 2009 under the newly elected AL government that was sworn in power on January 6, 2009. Later, the AL government brought in some changes in the structure, composition, and functions of the UZP through an amendment to the 1998 UZP Act in 2009 (Panday and Assaduzzaman 2011).⁷ Apart from these tiers, the two major tiers of urban local governments, the *pourashava* (for smaller municipalities) and city corporation (for eight of the largest cities),⁸ are in order. Figure 3.1 demonstrates the existing local government structure in Bangladesh.

One may argue as to the rationale behind the occurrence of such changes in the structural design of the urban/local government bodies. From the perspective of an outsider, it may seem that the government initiated all changes either to cope with the demand of the modern times or to decentralize the administration nearer to the people.

However, viewing this in critical terms, one will find some serious hidden causes. In Bangladesh, every administration, once in office, initiates changes in the structure of urban/local government bodies in such a way that such institutions may be run by their own party members. These same people would assist them in winning the next parliamentary election. More specifically, most administrations introduce changes in the structural design of urban/local government bodies to strengthen their political base in that area rather than to ensure opportunities for common people to participate in the decision-making process. On the efficiency of the local government system in Bangladesh, Ahmed commented that,

The existing administrative structure and elected local bodies do reach the grass-roots level and have almost all the features necessary for participatory decentralized administration. But, this structure has failed so far to perform efficiently for two reasons. Despite the strong support for local government enshrined in the Constitution, the central government has compromised these advantages by exercising control over local government and starving these agencies of resources. Most administrative decisions still remain to be taken

⁶ Due to political turmoil centering on the issue of the caretaker government, the Army-based caretaker government took over the state responsibility on Jan 11, 2007 and ruled the country until democratically elected the AL led grand alliance government took over the state power on Jan 6, 2009.

⁷ Among different changes, the most controversial one was the revival of the obligatory advisory role of the MPs for the UZPs.

⁸ The eight city corporations are Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Barisal, Sylhet, Rangpur, and Comilla. However, elections for the Rangpur City Corporation are yet to be held.

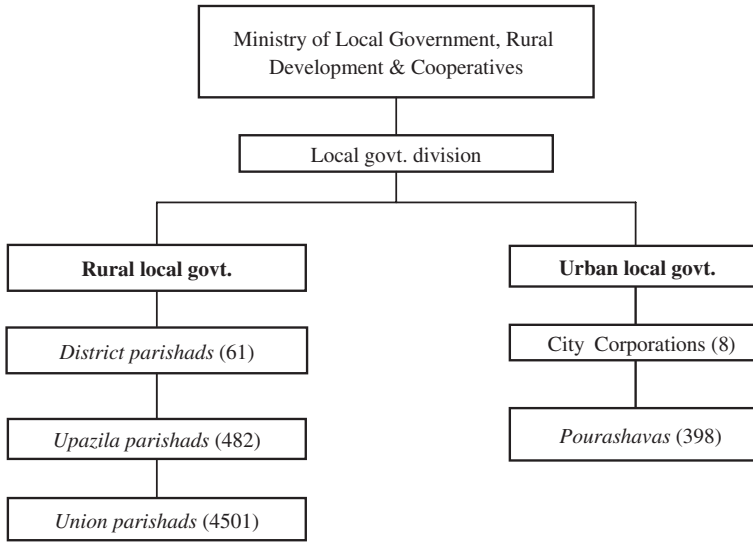


Fig. 3.1 Existing structure of the local government in Bangladesh. *Source* Quddus et al. (1995) and Panday (2011)

centrally. Frequently they involve top-level officials in the secretariat, even some ministers depending on the subject. Several abortive attempts have been made at decentralization, but the system has remained highly centralized. As of such, local bodies are characterized by weak administrative capacity, a limited financial and human resource base and little public participation (Ahmed 1997, p. 35).

3.3 Structure and Functions of the Union Parishad

The UP consists of a chairman, nine members elected from general seats, and three women members elected from the reserved seats for them. These reserved seats equal one-third of the total general seats. The nine general seats represent nine wards in each UP, and each reserved seat is assigned to three wards. To assist in the activities of the UP, there is one secretary and three village police in each. Apart from this, there is a village court where the chairman and members of the UP settle matters of dispute among villagers which are brought to their consideration. Regarding the functions of rural and urban local government bodies in Bangladesh, these organizations are entrusted with a large number of functions and responsibilities relating to civic and community welfare as well as local development. The Ordinance specifies the following functions for the UP (Fig. 3.2):

Maintenance of law and order and assistance to administration in the maintenance of law and order; adoption of measures for preventing crime, disorder and smuggling; adoption and implementation of development schemes in the fields of agriculture, forest, fisheries, livestock, education, health, cottage industries, communication, irrigation and flood

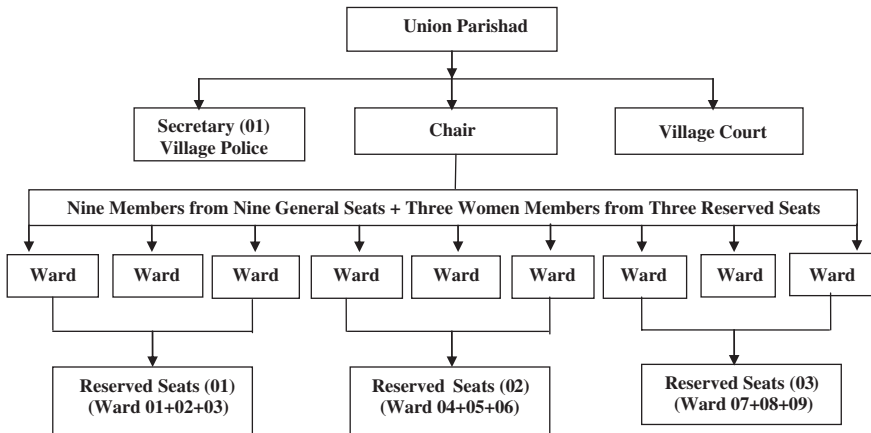


Fig. 3.2 Presents the organization of the UP in Bangladesh. Source The figure is drawn by the author

protection, with a view to increasing the economic and social upliftment (sic) of people; promotion of family planning; implementation of such development schemes as may be assigned to *Union Parishad* by the *Upazila Parishad* or *Thana Parishad*, as the case may be; development of local resources and their use; protection and maintenance of public property, such as, roads, bridges, canals, embankments, telephones and electricity lines; review of the development activities of all agencies at the union level and to make recommendations to the *Thana Nirbahi Officer* (TNO) in regard to their activities; motivation and persuasion of the people to install sanitary latrines; registration of births, deaths, blinds, beggars and destitute; and conducting of census of all kinds” (Government of Bangladesh 1983, Article 30[2]).

3.4 Local Government Reforms in Relation to Women: The Legal Point of View

In this section, an attempt is made to critically discuss various reform efforts that were initiated to create an opportunity for women to take part in the political decision making in Bangladesh. The Act of 1997 is discussed in detail since it is the main focus of the present study. Prior to analyzing several reform initiatives, a brief introduction of different fundamental principles of state policy related to gender which is mentioned in the Constitution of Bangladesh deserve special mention here.

3.4.1 Constitutional Provisions Relating to Gender

The Constitution of People’s Republic of Bangladesh recognizes basic and fundamental rights of citizens irrespective of gender, creed, caste, religion, and race. It

also makes provision of promoting causes of the backward sections of the population. For example, Article 9 of the Constitution states that “the State shall encourage local Government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation shall be given, as far as possible, to peasants, workers and women”. Article 10 of the Constitution states that “steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life.” Article 19 (1) states that “the State shall endeavour to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens.” Article 19 (2) mentions, “the State shall adopt effective measures to remove social and economic inequality between man and woman and to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth among citizens, and of opportunities in order to attain a uniform level of economic development throughout the Republic”. According to Article 27, “all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law.” Article 28(1) expresses that “the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.” Article 28 (2) provides that “women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life”. Article 28 (4) states that “nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favor of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizen” (the Constitution of Bangladesh 2004: 9, 10, 19[1&2], 27, 28[1,2&4]). The following section deals with an analysis of different reform initiatives relating to women's political participation in the pre- and post-Bangladesh period with a particular focus on the Act of 1997.

3.4.2 Reforms in the Pre-Bangladesh Period

Similar with local government institutions, women's political participation in Bangladesh is characterized by a history of prolonged struggle. Women's participation in both the public and political domains came strongly into discussion during the nationalist struggle in India (Jayawardena 1982).⁹ Although progressive males had supported the struggle of women for social reforms and political participation, religious fundamentalism had opposed it (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987). At the onset of the twenty-first century, the issue of women's political participation faces strong resistance from religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The issue of women's participation in politics gained momentum when a delegation of Indian women made a demand for franchise to Secretary of State Edwin Montagu in 1917. The mobilization of women was instrumental for their achievement of the right to vote between 1920 and 1930. Nevertheless, they remained disqualified for membership in the legislature. The Governor General in Council allowed membership of women in legislatures in 1930, as a result of lobbying efforts by the Indian Women's Association (Forbes 2002). The issue of seat reservations for women in the subcontinent had been discussed from the

⁹ For more details about nationalism in India, consider referring to Jayawardena (1982, pp. 77–103).

pre-independence period. While participating in Round Table Conferences in 1930, active members of WOs recommended reservation of 5 % seats for women.¹⁰ However, their recommendations were not duly considered due to opposition from other WOs. Other organizations, which opposed the reservation, demanded universal adult franchise in place of “privileges” and “favors” for women. With an intention to reach a consensus on the issue of universal adult franchise, the debate continued throughout the colonial period. It was very difficult to reach a consensus since there was a division of opinion on the issue of communal versus noncommunal reservations (with Muslim women arguing for and Hindu women against said issue). Another issue in dispute is the form of election to the Federal assembly, may it be direct or indirect (Forbes 2002).

The entry of women into the political process, through broadened franchise and contesting elections in both reserved and general seats, was first introduced through the enactment of the Government of India Act of 1935. Under the said Act, a total of 56 women (out of 1,500 seats) were elected in various provincial legislatures (Forbes 2002).¹¹ In addition to these numbers, 30 more women were elected to the central assembly (Mumtaz 2005). After the political turmoil during the war of independence, new avenues for women’s participation in public life in India and Pakistan (including Bangladesh) were created.¹² Muslim women gained political experience through their participation in the Pakistan movement.¹³ After 1947, activists in the Pakistan movement strongly demanded women’s participation in representative bodies.

3.4.3 Reforms in the Bangladesh Period

Since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, efforts have been made to change the composition of the UP in order to incorporate more women in political

¹⁰ These members include Begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz, and Mrs. Radhabai Subbarayan (Forbes 2002).

¹¹ Among these 56 women, 41 were elected in reserved constituencies, 10 in general seats, while 5 were nominated (Forbes 2002).

¹² The Indian independence movement was a series of revolutions by the people of British India put forth to battle the British Empire for complete political independence. The term “Indian independence movement” is fairly diffused, incorporating various national and regional campaigns, agitations, and efforts of both nonviolent as well as militant philosophy. It likewise involved a wide spectrum of Indian political organizations, philosophies, and movements which had the common aim of ending the British colonial authority, and other colonial administrations in the Indian subcontinent. The movement culminated in the independence of the subcontinent from the British Empire and the formation of India and Pakistan in August 1947.

¹³ The Pakistan movement or Tehrik-e-Pakistan is a name given to the movement carried out by Muslims of British India to create a separate homeland for Muslims out of British India. This struggle was led by the Muslim League and resulted in the partition of the British Empire in India into India and Pakistan, with Pakistan including West Pakistan (Pakistan) and East Pakistan (Bangladesh). Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah was the head of the movement (<http://english.turkcebilgi.com/Pakistan+Movement>, accessed on 12 Feb 2013).

decision making in the local government. From 1971 to 1975, no efforts were made by the Government to incorporate women in the political process of local governing bodies. This is despite the clear provision in the Constitution of 1972 stating that equal rights for women in all spheres must be ensured. At the same time, it is important to note that Bangladeshi women were not barred from taking part in public arenas. However, given the socio-cultural state of Bangladesh, it remained very difficult for a woman to be elected in contest against a male counterpart. The enactment of the Local Government Ordinance of 1976 became the first initiative to incorporate women into the local government political process.

3.4.3.1 The Local Government Ordinance of 1976

The Local Government Ordinance of 1976 brought a significant change in the local government system in Bangladesh. In particular, it provided for the establishment of a three-tier local government system. These tiers were the UP at the union level, the thana parishad at the thana level, and the zila parishad at the district level. The structure of the UP was changed, and a provision for seats reservation for women was likewise made. This was the first instance that women were considered by the Government as important actors whose participation in local government bodies must be ensured. Article 5 of the Local Government Ordinance stated that,

The Union Parishad comprised one elected chairman and 9 elected members, two nominated women members and two peasant representative members (Government of Bangladesh 1976, Article 5).

Through this Ordinance, an avenue was created for the integration of women alongside the activities of local government bodies. However, the selection method of women members was nomination by government representatives. This nomination system was restricted only within the higher strata of the society. Women having linkage with the chairman of the UP usually obtained the nomination. Taking this into account, the decision to integrate women into the political process was not that successful. Since territories for women members were not demarcated, and their duties and responsibilities were not specified and clearly spelled out in the laws, they had to rely on the discretion of the UP for their activities.

Given the sociocultural tradition of Bangladesh, taking care of families was perceived as the main responsibility of women. Such values were the ones dominant in the society upon the proclamation of the Ordinance of 1976. Moreover, women at that time were not so enthusiastic to be involved in local government politics. Thus, policymakers, who were mostly males, did not consider women so important that their duties and responsibilities would have to be defined separately. They perceive that the female community would remain satisfied if it was offered with any array of opportunities. Having this in mind, the government enacted the Act of 1976, where no provisions were specified for women members other than creating a scope for their nomination as members of the UP.

3.4.3.2 The Local Government (UPs) Ordinance of 1983

In providing for the constitution of the UP in rural areas, the Local Government (UPs) Ordinance of 1983 was passed by the then Government of Bangladesh. Article 5 of the Local Government Ordinance of 1983 provided for changes in the composition of the UP. Apart from this, reserved seats for women were increased from two to three. The Ordinance provided for the following composition for the UP:

(1) A Union Parishad shall consist of a Chairman, nine elected members and three women members. (2) The Chairman and the elected members shall be elected by direct election on the basis of adult franchise in accordance with those provisions of this Ordinance and the rules.¹⁴ (3) The Government shall nominate three women members from amongst women of the union. (4) The Chairman of a Union Parishad shall also be deemed to be a member of the Parishad. (5) There shall be paid to the Chairman and members of a Union Parishad such Honorarium as may be determined by the Government (Government of Bangladesh 1983, Article 5)

While the Ordinance increased the number of women members to three, the system of selection of women members remained more or less the same. Women members would be nominated by the government or government representatives. This provision allowed government officials to nominate women members from influential or pro-government families. Hence, the opportunities to be involved in the activities of local government bodies by women from a lower class family remained restricted. Similar to the 1976 Ordinance, this legislation did not specify the duties and responsibilities of women members and did not demarcate territorial jurisdiction. Thus, like the situation of women members under the earlier act, women still solely depended on the mercy of the UP regarding the activities they would be tasked with.

3.4.3.3 The Local Government (Union Parishads) (Amendment) Act of 1993

The Local Government (Union Parishads) Amendment Act of 1993 was enacted to amend a few clauses of the Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance of 1983 (LI of 1983). The Act instituted the following changes in Section 5 of the Local Government Act of 1983:

(a) for subsection (1) the following subsection (1) shall be substituted, namely:-

“(1) A Union Parishad shall consist of a Chairman and nine members.”; (b) in subsection (2), for the words “The Chairman and the elected members” the words, comma and brackets “Subject to the provisions of subsection (3), the Chairman and members” shall be substituted; (c) for subsection (3) the following subsection (3) shall be substituted, namely:-

(3) There shall be reserved three seats exclusively for woman members in each Union Parishad, hereinafter referred to as reserved seats, who shall be elected by the members

¹⁴ Subsection (3) was substituted for the former subsection (3) by Ordinance No. III of 1989, s.2.

aforesaid in such manner as may be prescribed. Provided that nothing in this sub-section shall prevent a woman from being elected to any of the seats provided for in sub-section (Government of Bangladesh 1993, Section 5).

In this Act, the provision of reservation of three seats for women in each UP remained the same. However, the Act introduced a system of indirect election for the selection of women members instead of the conventional nomination process. Prior to the implementation of this Act in 1993, women members were nominated by representatives of the government. After the enactment of the Act of 1993, they were then elected by the Chairman and members of the UP. Resembling previous Acts, nothing was specified in this Act with regard to the duties and responsibilities of the women members. Consequently, this compelled them to play subordinate roles compared with the elected Chairman and male members of the UP. The Act did not even demarcate the territorial jurisdiction of the women members' wards.

3.4.3.4 The Local Government (Union Parishads) (Second Amendment) Act of 1997

As a means of filling the gaps of the previous Acts and ensuring greater political participation of women at the local government level in Bangladesh, the government enacted the Local Government (Union Parishads) (Second Amendment) Act of 1997. The major objectives of this Act were to create more opportunities for women and to ensure greater involvement of women in local government decision making. The Act of 1997 has brought the following changes in the UP composition:

(1) A Union Parishad shall consist of a chairman, and twelve members including three members exclusively reserved for women. (2) Subject to the provision of subsection (3), the Chairman and the members would be elected by direct election on the basis of adult franchise in accordance with the provisions of this Ordinance and the rules. (3) There shall be reserved three seats exclusively for women members in each union parishad, hereinafter referred to as reserved seats, who shall be elected by direct election on the basis of adult franchise in accordance with the provision of this Ordinance and rules. Provided that nothing in this sub-section shall prevent a woman from being elected to any of the nine general seats provided for in sub-section (Government of Bangladesh 1997, Section 2, Amendment of Article 5).

Article 18 of the Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance of 1983 has been amended in Section 5 of the Act of 1997. Here, the territorial jurisdiction of wards has been demarcated for members in general seats as well as for women members:

(1) For the purpose of election of elected members, the union shall be divided into nine wards. (2) For the purpose of election of members in the reserved seats, the union shall be divided into three wards" (Government of Bangladesh 1997, Section 5).

In addition to the above amendments, delimitation of the wards of reserved seats for women has also been established in Section 6 of the Act of 1997. This

was done through the incorporation of Article 20A after Article 20 of the Local Government Ordinance of 1983:

For the purpose of election to the reserved seats, the Thana Nirbahi Officer shall cause the nine wards, delimited under section 20 to be regrouped into three wards and shall publish the list of such wards in the official Gazette (Government of Bangladesh 1997, Section 6).

Several changes in the composition of the UP were introduced through the Act of 1997 in terms of ensuring greater political participation of women. 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 made is the territorial demarcation of wards for women members. Although the UP is divided into nine wards for general members, it is divided into three for the purpose of election of members for the reserved seats. This has entrusted serious responsibilities to the women members. A woman member's constituency is three times bigger than a general member's constituency. However, despite this, the Act remained silent on the specific duties and responsibilities of a woman member in the UP. After the enactment and implementation of the Act, the government realized its failure. It later on issued a number of circulars with the intention to assign women members' specific responsibilities.

The Local Government Division, under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (hereinafter, LGRD&C) issued a circular on May 22, 1998 instructing the chairpersons of all UPs in Bangladesh to construct five more standing committees in each union aside from the provision of seven standing committees.¹⁵ The circular raised expectations that the formation of new committees would provide opportunities, for each women member, for committee chairmanship. As a result, the equality of men and women would be ensured, and women members would be able to discharge their responsibilities well. However, it was found that the women members were not given their share of different committees in the UP. Besides the establishment of additional standing committees in each UP, the Ministry of LGRD&C urged other ministries to initiate the system of reservation of women members in their local government projects. Accordingly,

¹⁵ Provision for the constitution of standing committees has been incorporated in the Article 38 of the Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance, 1983. Article 38 stated that (1) "the Union Parishad shall, at its first meeting, in each year, or as soon as may be at any meeting subsequent thereto, constitute Standing Committees for dealing with (a) finance and establishment; (b) education; (c) health, family planning, epidemic control and sanitation; (d) audit and accounts; (e) agriculture and other development centers; (f) social welfare and community centers and (g) cottage industries and co-operatives. (2) The Union Parishad may, with the previous approval of the Deputy Commissioner, constitute additional Standing Committees for such purpose as may be prescribed by regulation. (3) A Standing Committee shall elect one of its members, to be its Chairman (4) A Union Parishad may co-opt a person of either sex who is not a member of the Parishad but who may in the opinion of the Parishad, possess special qualifications for serving on any Standing Committee; and such member shall not have any right to vote at meetings of the Standing Committee but shall be deemed to be member thereof for all other purposes." (Government of Bangladesh 1983, Article 38).

other ministries issued circulars to reserve the participation of women members in various projects, which are as follows.

There is a provision on the constitution of project committees in each UP to implement projects undertaken by the Thana Development Assistance Fund. Through a circular, the Local Government Department instructed all upazila nirbahi officers (UNOs) that each UP was capable of undertaking eight projects worth BDTK¹⁶ 25,000 (equivalent to about US\$ 305) in a year. To implement these projects, eight committees must be formed. Through the circular, several changes were recommended in the structure of the project implementation committee:

- (i) The chairman or a member would not be able to be the chairperson of more than one project committee.
- (ii) One-third of these committees must be chaired by elected women members.
- (iii) Women members who would not be able to act as the chairman of project committees (due to the reservation of one-third quota) must be members of such committees.

Through another circular, instruction was given stipulating the inclusion of women members in the committee. This is for the selection of places for tube well construction in the ward. As women members get elected in a ward comprised of three wards for general members, "ward" has come to mean three wards for general members. To facilitate the inclusion of poor women in vulnerable group development (VGD)¹⁷ programs, provisions have been made to include three women members in that committee. To provide old-age benefits to citizens, the Ministry of Social Welfare has instructed the formation of a committee in each union where women members have been made vice-chairpersons. Besides, women members have been made chairpersons of the ward committee relating to the compulsory primary education program by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education. Provision for the establishment of village social development committees has been introduced in each ward, which would be headed by an elected woman member. The committee deals with issues like collection of information on birth and death, expansion of female education, improvement of health awareness, motivating people to adopt family planning methods, and prevention of violence against women and children, among others.

¹⁶ BDTK is the name of the local currency ("Bangladeshi Taka"). USD 1 equals to about 82 BDTK.

¹⁷ Since its inception in the mid-1970s, the VGDP has been extended nationwide. It is largely a relief-oriented program with limited provision for the longterm economic development of vulnerable sections of the population. Under the program, destitute women are identified and provided with VGD cards to secure food support from the UP (council)—the lowest tier of the local government. The overall objective of the VGDP is to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the poorest, distressed, and most disadvantaged women to keep them above the hard-core poverty level.

3.4.4 The Context of the Act of 1997

The development process needs to be participated in by all government sections. Similar to central government bodies, the local government should play an active role in development undertakings. For this reason, the importance of local-level governance for women (and men) is twofold. First, the distribution of resources and opportunities between women and men is influenced by decisions made at local levels. Second, an individual prepares for office at higher levels by gaining experience and knowledge at this tier. It is expected that women's interests will be advocated by women members themselves in the local bodies. In other words, taking care of issues related to women development is the responsibility of women members as well (Shamim and Nasreen 2002). However, this does not mean that the male chairmen and members would not take care of issues relating to women. In a male-dominated society, if women's issues are not nurtured by women themselves, then the men will not be so enthusiastic about these either (Halder 2004; Chowdhury 2009).

It has been previously mentioned that women were incorporated into the local government political process, either through nomination or through indirect election, until 1997, before which the importance and scope of women's active participation were neglected. The role played by the nominated women members was nothing more than the role of the "yes" person of the chairperson and members who are predominantly men. It must also be noted that the credibility and acceptability of women members in their constituency had been lost due to the system of nomination or indirect election. Their role became subject to serious controversy as to the issue of whose causes they actually represent. On the other hand, the system of nomination was a sign of male biases in policymaking. Hence, the elected bodies became extremely male dominated (Khan 1998).

Another important aspect related to the system of nomination and indirect election was the dominance of rural elite groups in the selection process, as women members usually came from this group. Status, kinship, and relationship with the chairman used to play a dominant role in the selection of women members. This particular system had kept rural women away from taking part in election of their own representatives. These women members do not usually know or care about their role and function as people's representatives since they were not products of an election. Regrettably, women representatives were not known to the voters and lacked proper knowledge regarding their duties and responsibilities (Shamim and Nasreen 2002). On the other hand, the system of nomination or indirect election made the women members less accountable than those elected members. In reality, these women remained more accountable to those who selected them since they will tend to ensure their chance of being elected in the future (UNDP 1994). As they did not have any urgency to appeal to the voters, they were reluctant to serve their purpose.

Moreover, the effectiveness of women members was constrained by the system of nomination or indirect election to a great extent. Argument was put forward along the lines that the responsiveness of women members to the electorate was

limited by the nomination or indirect election. This is because the chairmen and the members played the dominant role in their selection, while the electorate did not have any significant role to carry out. Aside from this, these women members lacked authority compared with those elected members precisely because they did not have their own electoral base (Panday 2008).

The chairmen and the elected members used these women as “tools” to dominate the UP meeting. There were several instances when the meetings of the UP were attended by the husbands of the women members (Shamim and Nasreen 2002). Logically enough, one may argue that women members had an equal voting power even though they were nominated. However, the fact was that, although women members had equal voting rights, they were more inclined to please the male members and the chairmen who were the key actors in their selection. These women were not inclined to cause any aggravation among the males by exercising their voting rights against them. If they resorted to such tactics, their chances of getting selected in the next term would be reduced. These factors substantiate why the system of nomination or indirect election did not bring any prolific results with regard to women's political participation in Bangladesh.

On the other hand, the Act of 1997 has proven to be a revolution in terms of women's political participation in Bangladesh. This Act has provided elected women members a special authority by introducing the systems of direct election with demarcation of territorial jurisdiction for their ward. At present, some of them at least claim they have rights equal with those of other elected members of the UP. They can even go one step forward by stating the fact that the size of their constituency is three times larger than a general member's constituency.

The Act of 1997 has created an environment where women have begun to exercise their voting rights also. Prior to 1997, women could hardly cast their votes due to various social constraints even though their names were enlisted as voters. This does not mean that women did not actually face any social constraints amid the changing environment. However, the situation started to change gradually. Shamim and Nasreen (2002) stated in a study that women had started to cast their vote in places where their rights had been ignored even some years earlier. Nowadays, the fact that women would take part in the local government election is taken for granted in Bangladeshi society. Presently, women who used to stay at home before 1997 started to come out and even wanted to campaign door-to-door for their candidate. Such enthusiasm of women with regard to the UP election has indeed increased to a great extent. In some cases, women have started to challenge traditional norms, values, and superstitious beliefs. For instance, the daily paper *Dainik Janakantha* reports that in 1997, women of Nandigram in the Bogra district, who were forced to stay at home by religious fundamentalists prior to 1997, attended that year's election by breaking the blockade of fundamentalists. Initiatives of different governments in relation to increasing women's political participation have been discussed in this chapter. Now, a comprehensive review and analysis of women's share in the development components will illustrate the extent of the government's commitment to incorporating gender equality in the country. Thus, a brief discussion of this aspect deserves special importance here.

3.5 Women's Share in Development Components

The issue of gender-sensitive budget has gained enormous importance for last few years as a result of continuous research efforts by different organizations and institutions and holding of seminars, workshops and discussions at both the national and local level to disclose the findings of these studies (Paul-Majumder 2011a, b). As a result, the issue of a gender-sensitive budget was highlighted by the then finance adviser of the caretaker government (2007–2008) in his presentation of the 2008–2009 national budget. It was also mentioned that 24 % of total budget of 2008–2009 was earmarked for social protection for poor and destitute women (Paul-Majumder 2011a, b). Women's share in the development components has been discussed from the perspective of share of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) in the national budget and women's share in the budgetary allocation for other sectors of economy.

3.5.1 *Share of the MoWCA in the Annual National Budget*

The MoWCA, formed in 1978, is the nodal ministry responsible for dealing with issues relating to women and children affairs. Since 75 % of the total population of Bangladesh belongs to the category of women and children, it can be claimed that three-fourths of the country's population are represented by this ministry. Of course, the issue of women's development has been integrated to the agendas of other ministries for mainstreaming development of women with the national development. Despite incorporation of the issue in other ministries, the MoWCA implements more than half of women-focused development projects (Paul-Majumder 2003). Apart from nurturing women-related issues, the MoWCA remains responsible for dealing with issues relating to children's development and coordinating gender-related activities of the line ministries. Despite enormous workload and responsibilities, this ministry received a marginal amount of national resources in the national budget whose increasing rate is also very insignificant. Available data suggests that share of the MoWCA in the total proposed budget (both revenue and development) from 2002–2003 to 2008–2009 remained 0.28 %, 0.47 %, 0.96 %, 1.02 %, 1.11 %, 1.06 %, and 1.50 %, respectively (Paul-Majumder 2011a, b). One significant feature is that the percentage of allocation has increased in revenue budget than development budget. For instance, the share of revenue budget in total budgetary allocation increased to BDTK 1,212 crore in 2008–2009 from 27 crore in 2002–2003. In the budget of 2011–2012, BDTK 43,194 crore was allocated for gender-related expenditure. Of this amount, allocation for the MoWCA was 1,237 crore. Budget allocation for the MoWCA in the financial year 2012–2013 remained almost the same at 1,306 crore. Allocation for gender-related issues in major ministries is indicative of growing consciousness about the issue (Unnayan Onneshan 2012). This increase has helped the ministry

to play a catalyst role, since most of the amount was spent in increasing the manpower of the ministry. Although the catalyst role of the ministry has increased, they have failed to play a lead role in their original responsibilities, which was to ensure the development of women and children. One of the prominent causes of their nonfunctional role is the lack of adequate resources necessary for any sort of development work (Paul-Majumder 2011a, b).

3.5.2 Women's Share in the Budgetary Allocation Earmarked for Other Sectors of the Economy

It has already been mentioned that the issue of women development has been added to the agendas of other ministries in addition to the MoWCA for the purpose of mainstreaming the development of women in all sectors. In order to have a better understanding of the status of women in the national budget in Bangladesh, it is essential to make an assessment of the budgetary allocation earmarked for various sectors. For the purpose of assessment, Paul-Majumder (2011a, b) has divided all development programs included in the development budget into three categories, including (i) women-focused programs, (ii) gender-sensitive programs, and (iii) gender-blind programs.¹⁸ Available data suggests that there is a steady decline in the allocation for women-focused programs despite the existence of a wider gender gap in the society. The allocation for women-focused programs was 3.6 % in the fiscal year 2002–2003, while it was 1.5 % in 2008–2009. However, there has been a steady increase in the allocation for gender-sensitive programs in the national budget, since the allocation was increased to 38.2 % in the fiscal year 2008–2009 from 34 % in 2002–2003. Even the ratio was 41.3 % in the fiscal year 2006–2007. This finding is an indication of the shifting focus of mainstreaming of women through gender-sensitive programs, instead of women-focused programs. Another important dimension is the gender-sensitive nature of social safety net programs that are funded by the allocation of the revenue budget, where most of the beneficiaries are women, despite the fact that these programs are not undertaken only for them (Paul-Majumder et al. 2002; Paul-Majumder 2011a, b).

The increasing amount of budgetary allocation for gender-sensitive programs does not guarantee the attainment of a national policy of gender mainstreaming or women's empowerment. As a matter of fact, the attainment of women's empowerment depends to a large extent on the mainstreaming of development in activities of directly growth-oriented sectors, including agriculture, rural development, industry, power, transport, communication, and others. Despite the enormous importance of increasing allocation in growth-oriented sectors, the statistics show that allocation in gender-sensitive programs in different growth sectors has

¹⁸ Women-focused programs refer to those development programs that target only women. Gender-sensitive programs refer to programs that benefit both women and men. Programs that do not have any direct impact on women's life are treated as gender-blind programs.

decreased quite significantly. For instance, the budgetary allocation for gender-sensitive development programs in the industry sector, the most influential sector that affects women's empowerment quite significantly, has decreased from 57 % in the fiscal year 2002–2003 to 21 % in 2008–2009. The situation is almost same in other growth-oriented sectors like agriculture, rural development, and others (Paul-Majumder 2011a, b). Thus, it can be claimed that due to having less focus on the development and empowerment of women the national budget of Bangladesh cannot be considered women-friendly. As a result, a widespread discrimination between men and women is evident in the national budget (*The Daily Star* 2011).

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, the changing pattern of local government bodies in Bangladesh has been discussed. We saw that the existing local government structure of Bangladesh had its origin in British rule and remained almost the same after that, with only a few changes incorporated into its structure. Regarding the issue of women's political participation, the Bangladesh government has used "changes in the structural design" as one of the most convenient ways of incorporating women in the political process since its independence. For this reason, changes were incorporated into the structure of UP every now and then. These various changes in the structure of the UP were made through the enactment of several Acts that were initiated between 1976 and 1997. One may ask whether or not all the initiatives were the same.

It is also important to understand in what respects these Acts were different from one another. Overall, the Act of 1997 is different from those of 1976, 1983, and 1993. The latter focused on reservation of seats but did not distinguish the constituencies for women and introduce the system of direct election for women in reserved seats. The Act of 1997 proved to be a breakthrough in women's political participation in Bangladesh since it provided for a special division of territory for women members and introduced the system of direct election in reserved seats. The provision of direct election for women has generated enthusiasm among women in the Bangladesh society. Not only are a good number of women now getting elected in the UP but many women are also taking part in elections.

Without proper evidence, it would be hasty to conclude, at this stage, that the Act of 1997 promoted all possible needs of women in terms of their political participation. In [Chap. 6](#) a detailed discussion is presented on the impacts of the Act of 1997 on women's political participation in Bangladesh. What remains true is that the Act has created windows of opportunity through which women have started to take part in the political process. But, before we proceed to exploring the impact of the Act of 1997, it is essential to have a detailed analysis about the policy dynamics and role of different actors in the process of the reform. [Chapter 4](#) will provide a detailed analysis of the role of the government and political parties in the 1997 reform process.

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Chapter 4

Government and Political Parties in the Reform Process

4.1 Introduction

In [Chap. 2](#), I discussed that different actors try to influence the enactment of reforms. In this regard, the government, political parties, WOs, NGOs, donors, and international conventions, have been identified as the main actors during the enactment of 1997 reform in Bangladesh. However, this book's task is to specify the roles these actors played and the reasons behind such. Often, the idea that the government plays the most important role in reform is taken for granted. This is even more central in the case of enhancing women's political participation in Bangladesh, given the profoundly strong male domination amid the patriarchal culture of its society. Thus, an equal opportunity for women in all spheres is not accepted by the society yet, and their rate of success in winning electoral seats remains very low as compared to their male counterparts. In these circumstances, the Government's action becomes important in the struggle for women's political participation. This is only possible if the government wants to act toward this direction. Since societal values and existing institutional designs are not conducive for increasing women's political participation in Bangladesh, special arrangements are considered necessary to facilitate their higher participation rate in the political process. To implement such arrangements, the Government should feel the urgency to bring about changes in the institutional design of local government bodies, so that more women could participate in politics. It is worth mentioning here that an amendment to existing laws is required in bringing changes in an institution's structure. In reform initiatives, the Bangladeshi government only has legitimate power to make any amendments to existing law if they enjoy a majority in the Parliament.¹ Hence, the government

¹ For the enactment of the Local Government (Union Parishads) Second Amendment Act of 1997, the AL government was required to obtain majority votes in the Parliament. Accordingly, this was considered necessary since this move was an amendment to the existing law. However, any constitutional amendment requires absolute majority (two-thirds majority) in the Parliament (201 votes in the Parliament out of its 300 general seats). It is important to mention that women Parliament members from the reserved seats (45) do not have voting right in constitutional amendments.

should play the most significant role in that reform process. Since political parties form a democratic government, both actors (the government and political parties) are closely related. Thus, an effort is made to determine the respective roles of government and political parties in the 1997 reform process.

The main thrust of this chapter is to explore the answers to three important concerns. The first one is on the role of political parties in enacting the 1997 reform. The next is on the reason behind the inability of the previous governments (especially the BNP government elected after 1991) to formulate any law enhancing women's participation. This is in relation to the last issue, which are the factors that influenced the AL government to approve the 1997 Act. Prior to exploring the first question, it is important to know the profiles of respondents whose responses have been used as the major sources of information for the discussion. An important characteristic of this chapter is that the analysis is based on interviews with 33 political leaders from four major political parties in Bangladesh.² These interviewees were serving either for the Government or the Opposition when the Act was enacted in 1997. The views from other categories of respondents have also been consulted in this chapter to substantiate arguments of different types. These categories include the top officials of different WOs, NGOs, and donor agencies.³ Before engaging in any discussions on political parties, it is important to comment on the ideologies of the four leading political parties as well as the determinants of the relationship among parties.

4.2 Ideologies of Political Parties in Bangladesh

Bangladeshi political parties are distinct from one another in a number of ways. For instance, the AL and the BJI originated in the public forum, while the BNP and the JP were established as “*sarkeri* parties” or “parties of the State”. General Ziaur Rahman and General Hussain Mohammad Ershad, who ruled the country from 1975 to 1990, set up the BNP and JP, respectively. The objectives in establishing these Parties were mainly to legitimize their rule and fulfill their desire to stay in power for a long time (Ahmed 2003). With regard to ideological orientation, AL was more oriented toward the left-of-center political spectrum in its early days. It transformed to a more “centrist” position in 1992, when it changed its manifestos and by adopting a “free market” economic policy. On the other hand, BJI is oriented toward “rightist” politics by having a fundamentalist focus, while the BNP and the JP have “centrist” orientations and adopted different strategies for creating a social base. Notwithstanding conflicting orientations, the politics of convenience rather than ideological affinity determines the relationship among political parties in Bangladesh. For instance, there was hardly any communication

² These parties include the AL, BNP, JP and BJI. These parties were selected considering the history of their representations in the National Parliament since 1991.

³ The names of these organizations have been mentioned in [Chap. 5](#).

between the BNP and JP in the Fifth Parliament (1991–1996) despite their ideological affinity (Ahmed 1995). In contrast, the AL and JP were allies in the mid-1990s, despite having obvious ideological differences. Yet, the latter offered unconditional support to AL in forming the government in 1996.

Another interesting example of such “marriages of convenience” was the alliance between AL and BJI in 1996. This occurred when they acted together to organize a movement against the BNP government, even though they stood ideologically opposite to each other.⁴ Ahmed describes the characteristics of Bangladeshi political parties in the following manner:

The organizational hierarchy of the major parliamentary parties in Bangladesh parallels the administrative hierarchy of the government; most of them have organizational units at division, district and thana (sub-district) levels. Only a few, however, organize parties at the grass roots level. None of the major parties in Bangladesh is democratic in composition. In almost every party, the president enjoys widespread powers, including the power to take unilateral action on whatever issues he/she thinks fit. The top leadership in each party also selects members of the parliamentary board, which nominates candidates for parliamentary polls. Local branches of different national parties in Bangladesh are, in fact, no better than extended agencies of the central party (Ahmed 2003, p. 61).

The discussion above presents some information about the similarities and differences among four Bangladeshi political parties, along with their ideological orientations. This discussion also confirms that these political parties are conceived by the politics of convenience rather than ideological imperatives. In other words, they can sacrifice their ideology for the sake of political gain. The following section examines the perception of political parties regarding political participation of women, and explores how these participation issues have been prioritized in their party agendas.

4.3 Political Parties and the Reform of 1997

Since political parties form the government, they can influence the latter more firmly than any other actor. With regard to Bangladeshi women’s participation at the local government level, political party leaders recognize the essence of enhancing women’s political participation, since women comprise half of the country’s total population.⁵ Nevertheless, leaders supporting their participation in politics believe that most

⁴ During later part of BNP’s tenure (1991–1996) in state power, the BJI curtailed its alliance with BNP. In turn, the latter supported AL which organized an anti-government movement demanding a provision for the caretaker government to hold a free, fair, and credible election in 1996. Finally, the BNP government had to step down from state power after making a constitutional amendment which provided for the establishment of the caretaker government. In that election, the AL secured 146 seats, which eventually formed the government because they received unconditional support from JP who secured 32 seats, while the BNP secured only 116 seats.

⁵ Author’s interviews with the leaders of political parties, Dhaka, 2007. During the interview, 91.67 % AL leaders, 88.89 % BNP leaders, and 80 % JP leaders expressed positive views in this regard excepting all BJI leaders expressed negative views.

Bangladeshi women have low levels of education and that they lack leadership qualities.⁶ Thus, political leaders think that it is sometimes perilous to bestow power and authority upon women. This also means that these leaders consider women incapable of carrying out responsibilities in the public sphere. Particularly, BJI leaders still insist that women should stay at home, since their main responsibility is taking care of the family. Moreover, Islam prohibits women from coming out of their homes and participating in the political process.

Although most of the leaders of the major three political parties (AL, BNP, and JP) have been found expressing positive views about the issue of women's political participation, still there is another group, although very insignificant in number, who do not believe in the philosophy of enhanced participation of women in the political process. One possible explanation is that there are some Islamic-minded political leaders in every party, who do not want women to come out from their homes and participate in politics. One high-profile leader from AL stated that "I am an advocate of the Bangladesh Supreme Court. When I married, my wife was a schoolteacher. I compelled her to remain at home, resigning from her job. I want my wife to take care of my family".⁷ Such a frame of mind shows the conservative attitudes of some political leaders about women's participation, even in the leftist Party. Fortunately, their number in the AL, BNP, and JP is not large. On the other hand, due to ideological orientation, all BJI respondents have been found expressing negative views about women's politics participation. Table 4.1 summarizes the major arguments of different political party leaders on women's political participation.

4.3.1 Awareness of Political Leaders About Reform and Women's Political Participation

Since political party leaders currently serving in the government make decisions on several issues relating to women's political empowerment, it is important for them to be well aware of local government reforms and women's political participation. Most of the political leaders are supportive about women's participation in the activities of the UPs since it is the organization to which the majority of women have access.⁸ Moreover, according to political party leaders, the UP's structural design is very important in ensuring women's participation, since it is very difficult for women to win elections while competing with male candidates.

⁶ Such claim of political party leaders seems valid when it is supported by the findings of the study conducted by Farouk (2005, p. 1). Here, the author asserted that "although women constitute half of the population, various indicators reveal that the status of women is much lower than that of men. Their literacy rate is only 43.2 %, much lower than that of men 61 %".

⁷ Author's interviews with a top leader from AL, Dhaka, 2007.

⁸ Author's interview with leaders of political parties, 2007.

Table 4.1 Arguments of the leaders of political parties

Awami League (AL)	Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	Bangladesh Jammāt-e-Islami (BJI)	Jatiya Party (JP)
<p>Since half of the total population is women, their demands will not be reflected in the decision-making process if they stay away from that process</p> <p>For ensuring proper development, both men and women should take part in decision making</p> <p>One woman should be elected from one ward instead of one woman from three seats which will foster equal representation</p> <p>Women at the local level are backward. For making them self-dependent, they should be integrated into the process of politics</p>	<p>Each woman should be elected from one ward instead three reserved seats</p> <p>Since women comprise half of total population, their equal participation should be ensured</p>	<p>Islam does not permit women to come out from their home and take part in public arenas</p> <p>Since their main responsibility is to take care of their family, they should stay there</p> <p>For above reasons, they do not support initiatives of the government to increase the number of reserve seats for women as well as introduction of direct election for them</p>	<p>If more women can take part in decision-making process, dominance of male in that process would be reduced</p> <p>Women are subjected to different types of restrictions (from family to societal level). If more women can take part in the political process, violation against them would be reduced to a considerable extent</p>

The table is a summary of opinions expressed by leaders of different political parties on the issue of women's participation in politics
Source Compiled from Interview Data, 2007

Thus, there is a necessity to bring changes in the structural design of the UP, in order to create an environment where they compete with their fellow women only. It is only then that common women would feel encouraged to join UP elections. In fact, the Act of 1997 has been enacted for this purpose.

When it concerns the importance of bringing changes in the institutional design, political party leaders perceive that a patriarchal institutional design usually does not allow women to take part in political affairs equally with their male counterparts. For them, males will always dominate the public arena. Hence, the institutional design has to be changed, to create a special provision for women, through an affirmative action. Moreover, modern times demand that antique institutions should be transformed to cope with changing circumstances.

However, level of knowledge of the leaders of political parties about the Act of 1997 remains at a fairly general level. Although they know that the Act introduced a direct election and reservation of three seats for women, they do not have any understanding about the context, process, and reasons of enactment of the Act. The politicians' ignorance about such an important issue is indicative of their lukewarm attitude regarding women's political participation. Nevertheless, political leaders have acknowledged that "at least more women" are now participating and getting elected as a result of enactment of the reform. However, they still believe that women do not exercise equal rights with men. In other words, they are always treated like a second fiddle, as the society has not yet accepted them to take part in public arenas.⁹

Now it is important to know the perception of the leaders of the political parties about the necessity of reform, for whom, and for what purpose reform was initiated. In fact, for most of the leaders of political parties, reforms are the smoothest way of effecting changes in the institutional design that can facilitate greater female participation. Likewise, the government is the ultimate authority to initiate reform, either to gain political advantage or under the influence of different actors.¹⁰ It does not necessarily mean that the reforms are not initiated for other purposes. As a matter of fact, the government sometimes initiates reform on its own motion, while keeping in mind the welfare of stakeholders. Moreover, reforms to the institutions structure take place when it is felt that the existing design is no longer appropriate for the demands of modern times. Despite having different reasons for reforms, it is deemed that the government initiates reforms as a result of constant pressure from different actors.¹¹

It is perceived that, since political parties form the government, they can benefit the female community if they are genuinely interested. Among all Parties, the role of the ruling Party on the issue of women's political participation is more important

⁹ Author's interview with leaders of political parties, 2007.

¹⁰ For instance, governments may try to attract women voters by enacting a particular law to possibly enhance their participation. Author's interviews with the leaders of political parties, 2007.

¹¹ Author's interviews with the majority of the political leaders, 2007.

than that of the opposition parties.¹² However, political leaders' accountability to the party men remains questionable in Bangladesh.¹³ In fact, both major political Parties (AL and BNP) are dominated by women leaders who have obtained their leadership by inheritance.¹⁴ However, their power and influence in party matters are taken for granted and are not subject to challenge by others.

From a theoretical point of view, this argument is evident that political parties can do several things for the betterment of the country's women folk. In reality, it is the two women leaders who decide the fate or destiny of women's political participation. When either is in power, they could enact different reforms through which women's participation can be increased, since the possibility of their decision being challenged is very low, despite the society's patriarchal domination.

4.3.2 Advocacy Programs of Political Parties

Political party leaders agree that most Bangladeshi women are illiterate and lack leadership qualities. Hence, the importance of advocacy programs to make women aware about their political rights and inspiring them to participate actively in the political process is beyond question.

Regarding the role of political parties in women advocacy programs, two interesting findings deserve special attention. First, despite having any sort of engagement of political leaders in any formal way of encouraging women, the majority of them hold positive impression about inspiring women to join politics. Even political leaders have failed to identify different methods of persuading women to join in politics.¹⁵ The responses of some leaders will offer an idea about their involvement in the advocacy program. For instance, one of the political leaders stated that, "We encourage women to take part in politics in an informal way. When women come into contact with us in the locality, we inspire them to take part in party affairs".¹⁶ Simultaneously, the party's leadership at the apex level actually decides what would be done for women where local- and mid-level politicians do not have any access. Such claim can be substantiated through the following statement of a political leader:

Sometimes, 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

¹² Author's interviews with the majority of the political party leaders, 2007.

¹³ Author's interviews with a group of political leaders, 2007.

¹⁴ Sheikh Hasina (daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was the first president of Bangladesh) and Khaleda Zia (wife of General Ziaur Rahman who was the president of Bangladesh) were made the chairpersons of the AL and BNP, respectively, to keep their parties united and as symbols of their dead family members, both assassinated.

¹⁵ Author's interviews with the majority of the political leaders, 2007.

¹⁶ Substance of opinions expressed by some leaders of the AL, BNP, and JP; Author's interview with the political leaders, 2007.

to face harassment even though we belong to the same political party. Such things happen if the Party remains in power. Therefore, it is very difficult to carry out any significant advocacy program for women.¹⁷

The above discussion leads to a conclusion that none of the Bangladeshi political parties implement programs that train women and build awareness among them. This is a reflection of the reluctance of political parties toward women's political participation. In contrast, WOs and NGOs are carrying out different programs for building awareness among women.

4.3.3 The Issue of Women's Political Participation in Election Manifestos

All four major parties have a separate section in their election manifestos that feature their key policy objectives for meeting women's needs. Yet the issue of children's affairs has been incorporated in the same section. The tendency to mixing women's and children's issues in the same section is perhaps a bequest of the welfare approach. Although the issue of *narir khomotayon* (women's empowerment) has been used in the section heading of the three parties (AL, BNP, and JP), the word *narir odhikar* (women's rights) has been used by BJI. As a matter of fact, the issue of women's empowerment has never been used in the election manifesto or any other policy document of BJI. Through their presentation, BJI has tried to place the issue of women within the purview of Sharia (Islamic laws) related rights discourse, which ultimately has separated the agenda from the development discourse. Table 4.2 illustrates the manner in which women's and children's affairs were highlighted by major political parties during the 2008 election.

Tables 2.4 and 4.4 highlight the commitments of the AL toward greater female representation in the national Parliament. This is done by making a commitment to increase the number of reserved seats up to 100 in the Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) for women and to introduce the direct election system for the reserved seats. In contrast, no other political parties have made any sort of commitment as regards to the increase of reserved seats for women as well as system of direct election. Meanwhile, BJI did not include the issue of women's political participation in their election manifesto despite the long list of other issues concerning women and children. Another important observation from the manifestos is that no political party has mentioned women's participation at the local government level. This may indicate their belief in the sufficiency of actions for women issues at the local level. Thus, they consider that no urgent action is necessary. To know more about the issue of women and children affairs in the election manifestos of four political parties in the 2001 and 1996 elections, please see Tables 4.3 and 4.4.

¹⁷ Author's interviews with an ex-member of Parliament from AL, 2007.

Table 4.2 Issue of women and children in the 2008 parliamentary election manifestos

Awami League (AL)	Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	Bangladesh Jammata-e-Islami (BJI)	Jatiya Party (JP)
<p>(i) In order to ensure women's empowerment and equality in rights and opportunities, the Women Development Policy formulated by AL in 1997 will be revived</p> <p>(ii) The number of reserved seats for women by direct election in the Parliament will be increased to 100</p> <p>(iii) Necessary measures will be taken for appointment of women in senior posts in the administration and in all spheres of employment</p> <p>(iv) Strictest legal measures will be taken to stop oppression of women. Discriminatory laws against the interest of women will be rectified</p> <p>(v) Child labor will be gradually abolished in all sectors. Use of children in political and other activities through coercion or enticement will be prohibited. In keeping with the UN convention on children's rights, adequate measures will be taken for developing their physical and mental capacity and for their nutrition and entertainment</p>	<p>(i) Loans on easy terms will be extended to small scale women entrepreneurs and self-employed women for greater women's participation in development activities</p> <p>(ii) More women will be offered government jobs along with augmentation of promotional opportunities and service related opportunities</p> <p>(iii) Necessary actions will be taken to train women on various issues including maternal and child mortality, family planning, environment, agriculture, live stocks and so on</p> <p>(iv) Qualified women candidates will be prioritized in the process of recruitment of government officials at the rural areas</p> <p>(v) Assistance will be extended to social movements against dowry and anti-dowry laws will be severely implemented</p> <p>(vi) Laws on acid throwing will be severely implemented</p> <p>(vii) Appropriate measures will be taken to stop trafficking of women and children</p> <p>(viii) Children will not be allowed to partake in any political activities</p> <p>(ix) All initiatives of the previous BNP government will be continued to reduce maternity mortality rate. Steps would also be taken to ensure consistency in the reduction of maternity and child mortality rate</p> <p>(x) All vaccination programs for the child will be continued effectively</p> <p>(xi) Public toilets for women will be built all over the country including Dhaka City</p> <p>(xii) Congenial atmosphere will be created so that women can be elected in increasing numbers in the decision-making process at all levels including Parliament</p>	<p>(i) Functioning of the Family Courts would be further strengthened to protect the rights of women</p> <p>(ii) Necessary steps would be taken to protect child mortality rate</p> <p>(iii) Policy on compulsory marriage registration would be implemented irrespective of religion and caste</p> <p>(iv) Efforts and assistance of the state would be continuing until women are empowered at all levels</p> <p>(v) Cost of higher education of poor women would be borne by the government. Rate of female student's admission at the Public Universities would be increased. The process would be continuing until the ratio of male-female student is equal</p> <p>(vi) Appropriate steps would be taken to safeguard children rights</p> <p>(vii) Social awareness would be strengthened against sexual harassment of women in the educational and industrial institutions and miscreant would be brought under punishment under special tribunal</p>	<p>(i) In order to restore the status and rights of women, they shall be provided with employment in accordance with their talent and qualification</p> <p>(ii) Befitting steps shall be taken to rehabilitate women including widow, needy and homeless in order to reduce oppression on women and restore their status</p> <p>(iii) In order to bestow due recognition and honor upon the women as enshrined in Islamic tenets, prostitution shall be abolished and necessary programs for rehabilitation of the affected women shall be undertaken</p> <p>(iv) In order to ensure children right based on NU's declaration "Children in advance of all", necessary steps shall be taken to halt child labor and rehabilitation of street children</p> <p>(v) All sorts of Oppression against women and children including acid throwing and dowry shall be curbed with an iron hand</p>

Source Compiled from Election Manifestos of four major political parties

Table 4.3 Issue of women in the 2001 parliamentary election manifestos

Manifesto topics	Awami League (AL)	Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)	Jatiya Party (JP)
Women's development	<p>"The number of reserved seats for women in the Parliament would be doubled (i.e. 60) and system of direct elections would be introduced. New steps would be taken for achieving women's right, dignity and empowerment. Stringent measures would be taken to stop violence against women and children"</p>	<p>"Women's seat in the Parliament will be increased and they will be elected directly to the Parliament. Education of female children will have free education up to 12 classes. Loans on easy terms will be extended to needy women for greater women's participation in development activities. Education, training and development of skill of women will be ensured to enable them to earn livelihood. Greater opportunity will be provided for women for employment and promotion in government service. Priority will be accorded to employment of women in the fields of teaching in primary schools, medical treatment, family planning and social service in rural areas. Laws on repression of women, social and family discrimination, torture, acid throwing, and anti-dowry will be severely implemented. Steps will be taken to remove discrimination between men and women.</p> <p>All measures will be taken to make children healthy, happy and educated in order to make them worthy citizens of the future. Anti-repression laws against children will be rigorously re-enforced"</p>	<p>"In order to restore the status and rights of women as enshrined in Islam as well as halting of oppression on women the following steps shall be taken:-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Women shall be provided with employment in accordance with their talent, qualification and needs (2) Oppression on women in and outside the family shall be curbed with an iron hand. Befitting steps shall be taken to bring the dowry system to a grinding halt (3) Women's right to inheritance in property shall be safeguarded (4) Separate seat reservations for women in trains, steamers and buses shall be introduced together with separate bus services for them in cities and towns (5) Due protection to the security of women, their luggage, honor and prestige shall be provided while they are on a journey. Besides, severe action shall be taken against those behaving indecently with women (6) Poor and shelter less women including the helpless widows shall be rehabilitated at the State expense (7) In order to bestow due recognition and honor upon the women as enshrined in Islamic tenets, prostitution shall be abolished and necessary programs for rehabilitation of the affected women shall be undertaken (8) Family Courts shall be constituted for safeguarding the rights of women (9) A composite program shall be started to facilitate earning by women living in their houses or in the hamlet itself (10) Women shall be provided with full opportunity to earn their living and participate in nation-building activities keeping themselves within the bounds of <i>Shariat</i>" 	<p>"Functioning of the Family Courts would be further strengthened to protect the rights of women. (b) Reserved women's seat will be raised to 64 from 30 after due amendment to the constitution and (c) Necessary steps would be taken to protect child mortality rate"</p>

Source <http://www.elive.matamat.com/women.php>. [Online]. Accessed on April 05, 2008

Table 4.4 Issue of women in the 1996 parliamentary election manifestos

Manifesto topics	Awami League (AL)	Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	Bangladesh Jamaat -e-Islami (JI)	Jatiya Party (JP)
Women's development	Necessary policies and programs will be taken up to establish women's rights and their dignity in every tier of society.	Socio-economic condition of women to be improved. Empowerment of women to be continued. Employment opportunities to be increased.	Jobs would be ensured for women as per their qualifications, and they would be allowed to earn their living as per the <i>shariat</i> . Repression of women would be checked.	Special measures for women's rights would be initiated.

4.3.4 Women's Leadership in Political Parties

Party affiliation depends on membership drives as well as the organizational and electoral needs of each party. Since gender-related information is not recorded in a party's database, the actual number of women members among different Bangladeshi political parties cannot be ascertained. However, it is believed that women party workers can mobilize women voters well. Although women in leadership positions are only few, their number has started to swell over the past decades. Ironically, female participation in party hierarchies is limited, despite the fact that women are occupying positions of leadership in the two largest political parties (AL and BNP). Both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia were made leaders to overcome crises in their respective parties. Despite being relatively newcomers in their Parties when they assumed leadership, however, they managed to stay at the helm for quite a long time. Most importantly, it is not easy for women to lead large parties in a society where patriarchy and Muslim culture dominate, and most leadership positions are occupied by men. Therefore, these two women may serve as role models for the women community. In fact, they have immensely helped the process of democratization and brought about a certain degree of continuity into the political process of the country. Although these two women ruled the country for about 15 years, it is deplorable to say that nothing exceptional has happened with regard to the status of women's political participation other than the introduction of direct elections at the local government level. A possible explanation is that these political leaders are insufficiently committed to this cause, and thus they do not create any proactive policies regarding women. In fact, their

Table 4.5 Female members in the party hierarchy

Name of the party	Structures of party	Total number of members	Female members	% of female members
Awami League (AL)	Presidium and secretariat	36	5	13.89
	Working committee	65	6	9.23
Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	National standing committee	15	1	6.67
	National executive committee	164	11	6.71
Jatiyo Party (JP)	National standing committee	31	2	6.45
	National executive committee	201	6	2.99
Bangladesh Jammāt-e-Islami (BJI)	Majlis-e-Shura	141	0	0
	Majlish-e-Amela	24	0	0

Since political parties in Bangladesh do not maintain any data base, it was hard to find updated information about numbers of women in the party hierarchy

Source Adopted from Ahmed (2005) and Mahtab (n.d.)

leadership positions are only acquired due to family background.¹⁸ Since women leaders are surrounded by men, they do not intend to annoy them by being too assertive regarding women policies.

As of 2002, the AL and BNP had the highest number of women in decision-making structures among the four political parties. Women constitute 13.89 and 9.23 % of the AL's Presidium and Secretaries (which is the highest decision-making body of AL), and Working Committee, respectively. Meanwhile, 6.71 % of women comprise BNP's National Standing Committee (highest decision-making body), while they make up 6.71 % of the National Executive Committee's member population. In contrast, only a few women belong to JP's presidium, and there are absolutely no women in the top leadership of BJI. Table 4.5 provides an overview.

4.3.5 Nomination of Women Candidates to Parliamentary Elections

Not only are women thinly represented at the top positions of major parties, but they also experience difficulty in being nominated during elections. Bangladeshi

¹⁸ Politics in South Asia has been dominated by family tradition. For instance, Indian politics has been dominated by the Nehru-Gandhi families, while the Late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his successors ruled Pakistan for a long time. In Sri Lanka, Sirimavo Ratwatte Dias Bandaranaike and his successors ruled the country for more than a decade. In Bangladesh, successors of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and General Ziaur Rahman dominated politics for the most time.

political parties are very conservative in nominating women members to participate in parliamentary elections. Similarly, this conservatism applies to AL and BNP, despite having women as top party leaders. Generally, elections are considered as a “political game” where the major objective is to capture State power by whatever means possible. As such, party leaders do not want to risk their chances of winning by nominating women candidates in national elections. This is very much possible given the state of patriarchy and influence of Islam. It is difficult for women candidates to win elections against male opposition (Halder 2004; Chowdhury 2009). Political party leaders place more emphasis on the general seats than the reserved ones since the former is considered as the reservoir of political power. Exclusion of women from the general seats has left the entire electoral field to male politicians. However, it is possible to put forward some counter arguments, since the women heads of AL (Sheikh Hasina) and BNP (Khaleda Zia) vied for six seats (each contested in three seats) in the 2008 parliamentary election and were successful in six seats.¹⁹ Another point is that Bangladesh voters cast their vote more on political party symbols than judging the merit of individual candidates. As such, gender is not of great importance in selecting candidates. It is the lukewarm attitude of political parties that is responsible for the low number of women nominees in parliamentary elections.

Given the conservative attitude of political party leaders, novices or experienced women must find a pathway of quotas to reach the legislature. Since the country’s independence, only a few women from the four parties which held State power received party nominations to contest general seats and won (Chowdhury 2002). However, the situation has improved a little in the 2008 parliamentary election, where 55 women managed to get nomination to contest 60 constituencies.

It is interesting to note how these women managed to get nominated. Chowdhury (2002, p. 3) pointed out that nominated women usually fall under three categories: (a) those having close relationships with the current leadership, (b) a wife/daughter of a deceased member of Parliament, and (c) those whose political strength was accrued from years of association with the party organization. However, political parties do not want to take any risks by nominating “ordinary” women candidates. This perpetuates women’s marginal presence in the Parliament. Table 4.6 illustrates the nomination of women by political parties in the 2008 parliamentary election.

Table 4.6 shows that, during the parliamentary election of 2008, the total percentage of women candidates nominated from major political parties was less than 7 % (the percentage of women candidates in AL was 6.56 %, while the percentage in BNP was 5.08 %). Surprisingly, the table shows that some smaller political parties even nominated more female candidates than larger ones. For instance,

¹⁹ It is important to mention here that the existing electoral law in Bangladesh permits an individual to contest for three seats in one parliamentary election. Once elected, he/she is allowed to keep his/her membership in one parliamentary seat only.

Table 4.6 Nominated women candidates in the 2008 election

Name of the political party	Number of seats contested by each political party	Number of women candidates contested	% of women candidates in relation to seats contested
Bangladesh AL (AL)	259	17	6.56
Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	256	13	5.08
Gono Forum ^a	45	5	11.11
JP (JP)	46	2	4.35
Bd. National Awami Part (Bd-NAP) ^a	14	1	7.14
Bikalpadhara Bangladesh ^a	62	3	4.84
Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal (BSD) ^a	57	1	1.75
Krishak Sramik Janata League (KSJL) ^a	46	2	4.35
National People's Party (NPP) ^a	29	1	6.90
Bangladesh CP ^a	38	2	5.26
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD)	06	1	16.67
Independent ^b	141	7	4.96

^aPolitical parties having no representation in the Parliament

^bIndependent candidates do not belong to any political parties

Source Election Commission of Bangladesh. [Online]. www.ecs.gov.bd. Accessed on July, 04, 2009

the percentage of women candidates in Gono Forum (People's Forum) and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (hereinafter, JSD) was 11.11 and 16.67 %, respectively. However, the Gono Forum did not achieve any representation in the Parliament. JSD won only three seats in Parliament. Hence, political parties' tendency to nominate fewer women for general seats has bound them within the reserved seats only. Table 4.7 shows the state of women members in the Bangladesh Parliament (both general and reserved seats) from 1973 to 2009.

Table 4.7 confirms that there are fewer women Parliament members in general seats compared with those in reserved seats. The highest number of women elected in the general seats was 20, and this only happened during the last parliamentary election that was held on December 29, 2008. It is of note that Parliament members in general seats are elected based on universal adult franchise. However, women Parliament members in reserved seats were elected by the votes of Parliament members in general seats. This electoral process continued until the seventh parliamentary election (1996–2001). From 2001 onwards, a provision was made to distribute quotas for women among the political parties on the basis of their representation in the Parliament. Like Bangladesh, the political status of women in other South Asian countries is not more encouraging. For instance, Sri Lanka has a considerable tradition of democratic

Table 4.7 State of women's representation in parliament since 1973–2008

Parliament	Number of women parliament members in general (G) and reserved (R) seats		Number of women parliament members in each political parties					
	No. of Quotas for women (R)	Women MPs from general seats (G)	Total number of women MPs (R + G)	Women MPs from AL (R + G)	Women MPs from BNP (R + G)	Women MPs from JP (R + G)	Women MPs from JEI (R + G)	
1st Parliament (1973–1975)	15	–	15(R)	–	–	–	–	
2nd Parliament (1979–1982)	30	2	32	–	30 + 2 (R + G)	–	–	
3rd Parliament (1986–1987)	30	5	35	1	–	30 + 4 (R + G)	–	
4th Parliament (1988–1990)	–	4	4	–	–	4(G)	–	
5th Parliament (1991–1995)	30	4	34	3(G)	28 + 1 (R + G)	–	2(R)	
6th Parliament (1996–1996)	30	3	33	–	30 + 3 (R + G)	–	–	
7th Parliament (1996–2001)	30	8	38	27 + 3 (R + G)	3(G)	3 + 2 (R + G)	–	
8th Parliament (2001–2006)	45 ^a	7	52	2(G)	36 + 4 (R + G)	4 + 1 (R + G)	3(R)	
9th Parliament (2008–2013)	45	20	65	36 + 16 (R + G)	5 + 3 (R + G)	4 + 1 (R + G)	0 + 0 (R + G)	

^aThe table states distributions of 43 reserved seats for women. The rest two seats belonged to Islami Okkoyjot and Bangladesh JP (Nazir Rahman group). Their figures have been excluded since they had very few representations in the Parliament

Source Firoz (2007) and Election Commission of Bangladesh. [Online]. www.ecs.gov.bd. Accessed on July, 04, 2009

participation with a relatively high ranking on the gender development index.²⁰ Surprisingly, it failed to have more women participating in the political arena, despite that the country's literacy rate among women is very high.²¹ Overall, the number of women candidates partaking in general elections during the period of 1947–1977 was very low. Until 1970, women merely accounted for only 3 % of the total number of candidates, which increased up to 3.2 % in 1977. However, this increase started to slow down since 1977. Most political parties (other than the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFA) which nominated 17 women candidates in 1994) had never nominated more than 13 women candidates in a single election. From 1974 to 1994, the percentage of women candidates nominated by major political parties were 5.6 % by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Lanka Equal Society Party or LSSP), 2.7 % by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), 2.8 % by the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CP), and 2.9 % by the Tamil United Liberation front (TULF) (Liyanage 1999; Cited in Basu 2005). However, the situation has not changed significantly when only 6.53 % of the candidates were women, and only 4.4 % (10 MPs) of them were elected in the 2004 parliamentary election (European Union 2004).²² This figure clearly replicated the ongoing under-representation of women in Sri Lankan politics. Moreover, it is also important to note that there were some political parties that were more progressive in nominating women candidates. Unfortunately, they were not able to leave an overall impact since none of their candidates won any of the seats.²³

The situation of women members in political parties is equally terrible in India, despite its rich history of popular participation and elections. For instance, the 81st Amendment Bill proposed to reserve around 33 % of the total seats for

²⁰ According to the Human Development Report of 2013, Sri Lanka's position in the Gender Inequality Index is only 75, while the position of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan is 132, 111, and 123, respectively (Human Development Report 2008, Available online at: http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2013_EN_complete.pdf, Accessed on 02/05/2013).

²¹ As a result of the comparative welfare package (that included free education and health services and a subsidized food scheme) adopted by the post-independence Government, the literacy rate of women rose from 67.3 % in 1963 to 87.9 % by 1994. This was followed by a steady increase in life expectancy, which was 41.6 years in 1946 to 74.2 years in 1994 (De Mel 2001).

²² Even though the number of women running as candidates for the UNP and UPFA was under the national average, women managed to secure nine out of the ten seats obtained by women in the Parliament, five seats for the UPFA (two coming from the JVP), and 4 for the UNP. Meanwhile, a TNA candidate in Jaffna won the remaining seat (European Union 2004).

²³ The case of the New People's Party is peculiar since it could be considered as a "women's party" when it put up 23 females out of the 23 candidates in Colombo (European Union 2004, p. 31).

women in the Parliament as well as legislative assemblies.²⁴ Although this Bill was first introduced in the Parliament in 1996, it has not been enacted, in spite of its credentials. Ironically, the Bill was endorsed by political parties in their election manifestos, but most of them did not actually support its enactment. In fact, it failed to pass in the Parliament in several occasions. This is mainly due to the evasion and even outright objection of various political parties. In an attempt to make a compromise, the former Home Minister L.K. Advani extended his support to the chief election commissioner's proposal, in 2000, which would have implemented the provision for seats reservation for women contestants in all political parties. However, this was widely considered as unfeasible and might have lead political parties to nominate women in constituencies where their chances of winning were nil. In any event, political parties have poor records in nominating women candidates. In the 1996 elections, less than 15 % of the nomination slots went to women (Rai 1997). Moreover, the aforementioned Bill has still not yet been enacted.

4.3.6 Women in the Cabinet

Another indicator of women's political participation is their representation in the Cabinet, when a political party forms the government, after winning the Parliamentary election. Generally, women have had very insignificant Cabinet participation, despite having two women heads of government from 1991 to 2006 and from 2009 onwards. While discharging the responsibilities of the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia kept a number of important ministries under their jurisdiction and dominated the Cabinet during their rule. Apart from these two women, when women are offered responsibilities of being a minister, minister of state, or deputy minister, they are usually allocated portfolios that are not regarded as crucial nor important (Islam 2003). Instead, they are accorded such "feminine"

²⁴ The 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill for the reservation of 33 % of seats for women in the Parliament and state assemblies was first introduced by the government on September 4, 1996. The Bill was then sent for review in the Joint Parliamentary Committee which was headed by Geeta Mukherjee (an MP from the Communist Party of India (CPI)). The Committee's report was then placed before the Lok Sabha on December 9, 1996. The Bill was placed for the second time during the 12th Lok Sabha by the former National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government on June 26, 1998. Subsequently, the 84th Constitution Amendment Bill was reintroduced by the same government in the 13th Lok Sabha on November 22, 1999. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government brought the Bill to the Lok Sabha twice consecutively in 2002 and 2003. Unfortunately, it was never passed even though the Congress and the Left which constitute the majority had assured support for the NDA. The present government of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which was elected in May 2004, expressed its intention to enact the Bill as part of its commitment to the Common Minimum Program (CMP). However, the bill has not yet been placed before the Parliament for consideration even though the government had completed four years of its tenure http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/politics/womens-reservation-bill-on-the-anvil-for-12-years_10045208.html.

or “soft” portfolios like women’s affairs, culture, and social welfare.²⁵ However, a more significant change has happened in the case of the AL government of 2009, where five women are leading ten important ministries including the defense, foreign, agriculture, and energy and home ministries. Sheikh Hasina, sworn in as prime minister for a second term, leads six ministries—Energy and Power, Housing and Public Works, Women and Children’s Affairs, Religious Affairs, Defense and Establishment—and two divisions—Cabinet and Armed Forces. Dr. Dipu Moni has been named the first female foreign minister of the country, while Sahara Khatun has been given the home ministry. On the other hand, Matia Chowdhury leads the agriculture ministry, while Munnujan Sufian has been made the State Minister for Labor and Employment. Table 4.8 contains a list of women who assumed responsibilities as minister, minister of state, and deputy minister in Bangladesh’s Cabinet since its independence.

Table 4.8 shows that, besides the two women prime ministers, women were mostly assigned the responsibility of administering ministries that are considered relatively less important. This practice continued until 2008. Such a finding reflects the fact that Bangladeshi women are not conceived to be equal with men in administering important ministries. However, the current prime minister has broken all previous tradition by putting women in charge of three most important ministries. Still, the male–female ratio in the Cabinet is very skewed, despite the sharp increase in the ratio in the present government (from 2009 onwards). Table 4.9 depicts the ratio of women ministers in the Bangladesh Cabinet under different political regimes.

Statistics show that the percentage of women in sub-ministerial positions in Bangladesh was also quite small. The highest number of women’s representations attained is 13.89, and it is now, when the AL is in power (from 2009 onwards). However, even this percentage is still indicative of women’s under-representation in the decision-making process of the country.

It is interesting to ask why the percentage of women representation at the sub-Cabinet level did not go beyond 13.89 % in the past 17 years, even though there were two female prime ministers during this period. One possible explanation is that female leaders do not want to create annoyance among their male party leaders by being proactive toward recruiting more women as Cabinet members. Another explanation is the apathetic attitude of political parties toward women. As a result, female leadership is not emerging in greater numbers. This result also contributes to a low number of women Parliament and Cabinet members.

²⁵ Among the general public, the society, and political community of Bangladesh, only a few ministries like the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Establishments, Ministry of Law and Justice, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs are considered high-profile ministries. In contrast, ministries like Women and Children’s Affairs and Culture, Sports, and Social Welfare are considered less important.

4.3.7 The Influence of Political Parties on the Government Decision Making

Since political parties constitute governments, it is common for parties to fix the priority agenda and for the government to then act accordingly. In other words, the government's agenda-setting in a democratic state is influenced by political parties to a great extent.

However, the governing political party's influence on the government remains very weak in Bangladesh.²⁶ It is important to note here that the leaders of AL have been found positive about the issue of parties' influence on the government to enact reform. This situation can be described from two perspectives: One, the ruling party enjoys more power and authority in Bangladesh with regard to government influence. Second, the opinions of opposing parties are always neglected in Bangladesh, which is representative of typical Bangladeshi political culture.²⁷

If political parties can really influence the government, it is reasonable to ask how they do it. As a matter of fact, different mechanisms are used to influence the government. For instance, members of Parliament express their opinions in the Parliament directly, while district-level political leaders speak in either their respective party forum or through seminars, symposia, and public discussions. Although politicians try to influence the government through different mechanisms, they do not have any accurate understanding about the extent of influence that can be substantiated through the opinions of a party's local and regional leaders. One of the respondents stated 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".²⁸ This is indicative of the lack of democratic practice within political parties. As such, decisions are taken arbitrarily by upper-level political leaders, without even consulting the local-, mid-, and regional-level leaders.

Regarding the extent of political parties' influence on the ratification of the Act of 1997, it has been found difficult to reach a concrete conclusion. Most of the leaders of AL have been found positive in saying that they exerted tremendous influence on the government: however, they failed to explain how they come to

²⁶ Such conclusion is made based on the testimonies of the majority of the respondents; Author's interviews with the leaders of political parties, 2007.

²⁷ A typical political culture exists in Bangladesh in which the relationship between the ruling and opposing Parties 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 leaders. An example of which is the two women leaders (Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia), of two leading political parties, having no communication between them. As such, this kind of relationship always hinders the process of reaching unanimity on a particular issue.

²⁸ Author's interviews with an ex-MP from AL, 2007.

Table 4.8 List of women ministers and their portfolios

Name	Status	Ministry	Tenure
Nurjahan Murshed	Minister	Ministry of Social Affairs and Family Planning	1973–1975
Badrunnessa Ahmed	Minister	Ministry of Education	1973–1975
Benita Roy	Minister	Ministry of Land Administration and Land Reforms	1975–1976
		Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation	1976–1978
Aminah Rahman	Minister	Ministry of Women's Affairs	1978–1981
Rabia Bhuiyan	Minister	Ministry of Social Welfare and Women's Affairs	1986–1987
Seyda Razzia Faiz	Minister	Ministry of Women's Affairs	1988–1991
Begum Khatleda Zia	Prime Minister	Ministry of Information, Energy and Resource, Ministry of Defense, Establishment, Cabinet Division and Planning Ministry of Cabinet Division, Establishment, Defense, Armed Forces Division (AFD), Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, Primary and Mass Education Division, Power, Energy and Mineral Resources	1991–1996 2001–2006
Sarwari Rahman	Minister	Ministry of Social Welfare and Women's Affairs	1993–1996
Sheikh Hasina	Prime Minister	Ministry of Armed Forces Division (AFD), Cabinet Division, Defense, Establishment, Information, Planning, Jute, Textiles, Health, and Family Planning Welfare Ministry of Armed Forces Division (AFD), Cabinet Division, Energy and Power, Housing and Public Works, Women and Children Affairs, Religious Affairs, Defense and Establishment	1996–2001 2009–Onwards
Matia Chowdhury	Minister	Ministry of Agriculture, Food, Disaster Management and Relief Ministry of Agriculture	1996–2001 2009–Onwards
Sajeda Chowdhury	Minister	Ministry of Environment and Forests	1996–1998
Khurshid Jahan Haque	Minister	Ministry of Women and Child Affairs	2001–2006
Nurjahan Murshed	Minister of State	Ministry of Health and Social Welfare	1972–1973
Qamrunnabhar Zafar	Deputy Minister	Ministry of Health and Population Control Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives	1979–1981 1981–1984
Taslima Abed	Minister of State	Ministry of Women Affairs	1980
Mahbad Fateman Kabi	Deputy Minister	Ministry of Health and Population Control	1981–1984
Shafia Khatun	Adviser-in-Charge	Ministry of Social Welfare and Women's Affairs	1982–1985
Mamata Wahab	Deputy Minister	Ministry of Health	1985–1986
Sarwari Rahman	Minister of State	Ministry of Social Welfare and Women's Affairs	1991–1993

(continued)

Table 4.8 (continued)

Name	Status	Ministry	Tenure
Professor Jahan Ara Begum	Minister of State	Ministry of Cultural Affairs	1991–1996
Zinatunessa Talukder	Deputy Minister Minister of State	Ministry of Primary and Mass Education Division Ministry of Primary and Mass Education Division Ministry of Women and Child Affairs	1996–1997 1997–1999 1999–2001
Selima Rahman	Minister of State	Ministry of Cultural Affairs	2001–2006
Dr. Dipu Moni	Minister	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	2009–Onwards
Advocate Sahara Khatun	Minister	Ministry of Home Affairs	2009–Onwards
Munnujan Sufian	Minister of State	Ministry of Labor and Employment	2009–Onwards

Source Female Ministers of Bangladesh, [Online]. www.guide2womenleaders.com/Bangladesh.htm, Accessed on June 30, 2008 and Election Commission of Bangladesh. www.ecs.gov.bd [Online]. Accessed on July 05, 2009

Table 4.9 Ratio of women ministers during different governments

Government	Total number of ministers	Total number of men ministers	Total Number of women ministers	Percentage of women ministers
Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972–1975)	50	48	02	4.0
Ziaur Rahman (1979–1981)	101	98	03	2.97
Hossain M. Ershad (1982–1990)	133	127	6	4.51
Khaleda Zia (1991–1996)	39	36	03	7.69
Sheikh Hasina (1996–2001)	46	42	04	8.70
Khaleda Zia (2001–2006)	60	56	03	5.0
Sheikh Hasina (2009 Onwards)	36	31	05	13.89

Source Chowdhury (1994), Mahtab (n.d.) and Election Commission of Bangladesh. www.ecs.gov.bd [Online]. Accessed on July 05, 2009.

such assessment of their influence, nor how they exerted such influence. In contrast, the leaders from BNP and JP have been found expressing negative views about their influence on the Government. On the other hand, BJI leaders neither tried to influence nor obstruct the process of ratifying the Act.²⁹ Thus, it can be concluded that the 1997 reform is not an outcome of the political parties' strong pressure on the Government. Under such circumstances, it is important to ask why the BNP (which was in power in 1991–1996 and 2001–2006) did not initiate any similar reforms to enhance women's political participation and why did AL enact such reform.

4.4 Causes of the BNP's Reluctance to Enact Women-Friendly Reform

Before proceeding to explain the BNP's reluctance to enact women-friendly reform, it is reasonable to ask why the BNP is singled out for discussion among others. Actually, the emphasis of this study is on democratic rules that were

²⁹ Since BJI had only three (3) Parliament members out of the total 345 (300 general seats and 45 seats reserved for women) seats in the Seventh Parliament (1996–2001), their influence in the decision making process was insignificant or negligible.

restored for the second time in 1991.³⁰ From 1991 to 2006, there were only two political parties which ruled the country: the BNP-led allies who ruled the country for separate periods from 1991 to 1996 and 2001 to 2006, and the AL who ruled from 1996 to 2001 and from 2009 onwards. Moreover, the issue of women's political participation gained momentum after the declaration of PFA of the Beijing conference in 1995. Thus, the BNP's role will be discussed, along with the discussion of the role of the AL, which enacted the reform of 1997.

First, in considering the BNP, we should consider whether the BNP's policy toward women is conservative or whether it was compelled not to take any initiatives. Prior to answering these questions, it is important to explain the context in which the BNP enjoyed a majority in the national Parliament in both tenures.

During the 1991 elections, the BNP was not able to obtain parliamentary majority.³¹ Despite this, they became the largest political party in the Parliament by winning 138 seats. During that time, the BNP obtained support from the BJI to form the government.³² Although the BJI did not participate in the government directly, it offered its support to BNP in forming the government.

In this context, it is important to note BJI's philosophy of politics. Basically, the BJI is constituted by those who were against the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Subsequently, it played a significant role in the formation of all successive governments since 1991. Through the alliance with the BJI, the BNP secured a majority in 1991 and an even bigger majority in 2001. However, the BNP had to pay the price in 1996, when it lost the election to the AL due to the breakdown of its alliance with the BJI (Choudhury 2006). BJI leaders were mostly the Razakers, Al-badr, or Al-Shams during the liberation war, who opposed the independence of Bangladesh and assisted the Pakistani Army in trying to put down the uprising.³³ As a political party, the BJI intends to establish the rule of Islamic law in the entire country. Thus, it is quite evident that it does not believe in women's active participation in politics, because, as discussed earlier in [Chap. 1](#), some Islamic scholars

³⁰ It is important to mention here that, although Bangladesh emerged as an independent state in 1971, it remained under military rule from 1975 until the 1990s. Democracy was only restored for the second time in 1991. Since then, there have been three democratically-elected Governments. However, the country was again subject to a military-backed Caretaker Government from the 11th of January, 2007 to 5th of January, 2009. This stopgap arrangement was made due to a heavy political collision among contending political parties.

³¹ In all Parliamentary elections, a political party has to win 151 seats out of 300 constituencies in the National Parliament to have a majority on its own. It does not necessarily mean, however, that, if no Party wins the 151 seats, another election will be held. In the event that no Party wins the 151 seats, the largest Party would be called on by the President to form the Government and would be asked to prove its majority in the Parliament within a stipulated time frame.

³² In the 1991 Parliamentary election BJI secured 18 seats.

³³ The Razakers, Al-badr, or Al-Shams, were considered traitors or collaborators with the Pakistan Army. These leaders helped the Pakistan Army during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 in identifying and killing millions of residents of present-day Bangladesh involved in or even supporting the liberation war.

believe that the idea of women leaving their homes to vote or taking leadership positions is contrary to the teachings of the Koran (AbuKhalil 1994).³⁴

Given this position of its major ally, the BNP was under extreme pressure not to take any initiative that aimed at ensuring greater women's participation. The BNP leadership did not want to create any conflicts among its political allies. On the other hand, they argued that they did not have enough time to enact new laws on this topic, as they had only signed the Beijing Declaration in 1995. However, this argument is not really convincing, since the law-making process in Bangladesh does not require years to take effect.

Rather, it is believed that they intentionally avoided it due to their difficulty in gaining the BJI's support on this matter. Thus, if the BNP would have placed any Bill aimed at enhancing women's political participation, the BJI would have certainly declined to support it. In turn, the BNP would have had to depend on AL's support to pass the Bill. Unfortunately, such support was highly unlikely, given the political rivalry of these major two parties (BNP and AL). The BNP's second term in power (2001–2006) proved even more difficult, since the BJI was its partner in government. The BNP contested in the parliamentary election of 2001 in alliances with the BJI and two other political parties.³⁵

Once it took state power from AL in 2001, the BNP did not pursue constitutional amendments quickly, despite having absolute majority. This amendment was required for the continuation of the provision for the reservation of seats for women in the Parliament.³⁶ The process of modifying the Constitution had taken almost three years by the time that the BNP government finally amended the Constitution in 2004.³⁷ Through the 14th Constitutional Amendment, the reserva-

³⁴ Situation of women in other Islamic countries is also the same. For instance, the Islamic state of Pakistan made the overall condition of the country especially disadvantageous to women. Therefore, despite the reserved seats for women in the parliament, Pakistani women can hardly advance because other religious and cultural factors remain. Muslim women in the Middle East, especially in Kuwait, are still fighting for voting rights (Hensman 1996).

³⁵ The two other political parties were the Bangladesh Jatiya Party (BJP) and Islami Oikya Jote.

³⁶ The quotas for women in the Parliament experienced a remarkable journey before reaching their present level of 45 out of the total 345 seats. Since gaining independence in 1971, the State has sought to bring women into national politics through electoral quotas. Under the Constitution of 1972, only 15 seats for women (4.8 % of total seats) were reserved in the Parliament, and this number of seats was increased to 30 in 1979 (or 9.7 % of the total). This provision lapsed in 1987, and there were no quotas for women in the national Parliament for the next 3 years. This situation ended in 1990, when a constitutional amendment restored the 30 seats that were reserved for women. However, the provision which reserved 30 seats lapsed again in 2000, which required another round of constitutional amendment to continue reserving seats for women in the Parliament.

³⁷ On May 16, 2004, the Jatiya Sangshad (the national Parliament) passed the 14th Constitutional Amendment to reinforce quotas for women (Article 65). The number of seats in parliament was raised to 345, 45 (13 %) of which were reserved for women in the next Parliament. The seats were allocated to parties on the basis of proportional representation in the Parliament.

tion of seats was increased to 45, in place of 30, despite strong opposition from political parties, WOs, and other strata of the society. Moreover, the mode of election was changed from indirect election to proportional representation, which means that the 45 reserved seats would be distributed among political parties based on the strength of their representation in the national Parliament. In protest of this arrangement, the AL did not accept its ratio of women Parliament members, who were eventually replaced by BNP candidates.³⁸

At this point, it is interesting to ask why the BNP did not increase the number of reserved seats for women in the Parliament, despite the demand of opposition parties and WOs. In addition, it can also be inquired as to why the system of direct election was not introduced for women. The obvious explanation is that, since BNP had an alliance with BJI, it had been pressured not to increase the number of seats for women by the latter. Understandably, BNP leaders would not risk losing their partnership. They acknowledge that they would not have been able to win the election, scheduled in 2006, if they would contest the elections without the BJI as an ally. In fact, the 4.2 % of votes that the BJI secured in the 2001 election had a great impact on many aspects of the BNP's politics. This was due to the fact that as a single party, the AL, secured a higher percentage of votes (40.2 %) in 2001 than the BNP alone (42.3 % for BNP-BJI less 4.2 % for the BJI, or 38.1 %)³⁹ in the said election.⁴⁰ Keeping this in mind, the BNP did not do anything that could offend the BJI.

Moreover, the BNP failed to see any urgency to increase the number of reserved seats for women, since it had absolute majority in the Parliament. Halder (2004, p. 55) pointed out that "as the BNP won more than two thirds of the seats in Parliament and formed a coalition Government with the fundamentalist Party, it (did) not need any support from the 'vote bank' of women". In fact, its political strategy was to delay the process of the constitutional amendment with regard to

³⁸ Based on the strength of representation of each political party in the national Parliament, 45 reserved seats for women were distributed among them. The distribution was: BNP 30, AL 9, Jatiyo Islami Okkojot 3 (JP, in alliance with some Islamic Parties, contested the election of 2001 under this name), and BJI3. Since AL declined to accept those women parliamentarians in protest against the amendments, the nine seats were also filled up by the BNP, whose total number of women Parliamentarians stood at 39. Thus, the BNP's total number of seats in the last Parliament was 238 (199 from general seats plus 39 reserved seats for women).

³⁹ It is important to note that the BNP, having an alliance with the BJI, secured 42.3 % votes in the 2001 election. Out of the total votes, the BJI's individual vote ratio was 4.2 %. However, this same ratio was previously higher at 8.6 and 12.1 % in the 1996 and the 1991 elections, respectively. If the BNP decided to run in the election without any alliance, the results would have been different. In the 1996 election, the BNP participated in the election alone. The group secured 33.6 % votes, while the AL secured 37.4 % votes, indicating that the AL as a single party has more support than BNP. For this reason, the BNP was keen at maintaining its alliance with the BJI.

⁴⁰ Data on the percentage of votes obtained by political parties are based from a study by Ahmed and Ahmed (2001).

reserving seats for women in the Parliament.⁴¹ Although this issue was prioritized by the BNP in its election manifesto in 2001, it remained confused as to the drafting of the Bill, and thus spent a great deal of time on it. Moreover, reaching a consensus became a difficult task within the BNP since some influential leaders were not that convinced on the issue. Such scenario was highlighted when one of the senior BNP leaders and the Speaker of the Seventh Parliament, Jamiruddin Sircar, commented on the issue during the AL regime (1991–1996). He was stated that the demand for women’s increased seats in the Parliament and the principle of direct election are not the concerns of the majority of women; rather, it is an issue of those women who are well off (Chowdhury 2000).⁴² In fact, BNP resorted to delaying tactics while making the 14th Amendment to the Constitution during its tenure (2001–2006) (Halder 2004). Halder asserted that,

The Law Minister only expressed his intention to get the support of the opposition party in the case of the Women’s Parliamentary Representation Bill. But once the opposition party indicated that it would not oppose the bill, the Law Minister raised another issue: the lengthy examination process (*ibid.*, p. 55).

To justify delays in the enactment of the amendment, various problems for raising the Bill for direct election in the reserved seats were brought up in the government circle.⁴³ However, administrative practice in Bangladesh suggests that everything can be achieved in the shortest possible time if the prime minister agrees to the proposal. Moreover, it is important to mention that two BNP governments were headed by Khaleda Zia, whose supremacy over State as well as party affairs was unquestionable. On the question of delay associated with the amendment, Das expressed her opinion:

⁴¹ One may wonder why the issue of reservation of seats for women in the Parliament was taken into consideration. While in power, the BNP did not take any initiative at enhancing women’s participation at the local level. Through the discussion on the 14th Constitutional amendment, attempts have been made to explore BNP’s attitude toward the issue of women’s political participation.

⁴² Mr. Sircar provided some comments when the reservation of seats for women in the Parliament expired in 2000 during the AL regime. BNP, being the opposition, had boycotted the Parliament for a long time. Due to this stalemate situation, the AL Government could not pass the Bill on the reservation of seats for women in the Parliament without the support of the BNP. This is because a two-third majority was required to introduce an amendment to the Constitution, which AL did not have at that time.

⁴³ The problems discussed at the Government level include: “(i) There is the need to refer the same to the Supreme Court for legal and constitutional explanations on the issue of whether this law can be applied in the 8th Parliament. (ii) Election Commission has to re-determine the area and boundary of constituencies of all general and of reserved seats. This will take about a year. In view of this, those who will be elected in the reserved seats for women will not be able to function for the full term. Whether this will create legal obstacle will have to be made clear by legal experts. (iii) Many people put doubt on the issue on whether it will be possible to sanction the huge amount of money of reserved seats, being 100 or 150, and the number of general seats being 300, there would not be adequate accommodation in the Parliament auditorium” (Das 2005, p. 13).

We feel there is no logical reason to obstruct or defer the placement of the Bill on increasing the reserved seats for women and introducing direct election in those seats on the pretext of these problems. Every problem has a solution. If the Government is sincere to its election pledges, Government should not be hesitant in placing the Bill. We, on behalf of the women-folk, demand the placement and passing of the Bill immediately (Das 2005, p. 13).

In other words, the scenario described above is a reflection of the conservative attitudes of the BNP itself toward the issue of increased women's political participation. Moreover, BNP leadership had a conception that, only if it would contest the 2006 election in alliance with BJI, would it win more seats than AL and other political parties. This is tantamount to securing more women seats in the Parliament as well. These factors prompted BNP to increase women's seats only up to 45, as well as introduce the system of proportional representation as a means of filling in reserved seats for women.

Apart from this Constitutional amendment, another initiative of the BNP Government was highly criticized by women activists and civil society members in Bangladesh. This was when the government issued a new National Policy for Women's Advancement in May 2004. The policy was a revised version of the National Policy for the Advancement of Women that came into effect under the AL Government in March 1997.⁴⁴ As a matter of fact, the BNP brought changes quite sneakily in 2004 that appeared in the MoWCA's publication in the name of Jatiya Nari Unnayan Niti (National Women Development Policy) 2004. Through amendments to Articles 7, 8, 9, and 12 of the Women's Development Policy of 1997, women's rights to property, land, and inheritance were denied, their access to employment opportunities were limited, older women were deprived of their much-needed support and their participation in public decision making was undermined. Such reverse changes on the part of the government was shocking and puzzling for most women's rights activities. As a result, women's rights activities organized series of protests against the government. Most importantly, the BNP government played a contradictory role by bringing changes in different articles on the one hand and stressing the importance on gender equality on the other. For instance, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in all her public speeches highlighted her government's intention to advance the cause of women. Even the minister for the MoWCA, while submitting Bangladesh's Fifth Report to the UN Committee on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UNCEDAW) in 2004 expressed the strong commitment of her government to remove all sorts of obstacles to equality in different sectors, including marriage, property, citizenship, and political participation. Such contradictions on the part of the government were suspected to be influenced by the BNP's extremist partners, the BJI (Hossain 2011).

On August 3, 2008, the chief adviser of the caretaker government (2007–2008) declared the National Women's Development Policy of 2008. In the policy, the government reversed many of the changes in the 2004 policy, to create greater semblance with the 1997 policy. Among the suggestions made by the government

⁴⁴ The National Policy for the Advancement of Women of 1997 is included in Table 4.10.

Table 4.10 Changes to the national policy for women's advancement

	National policy for women's advancement, 1997 (During AL Regime (1996–2001))	National policy for women's advancement 2004 (During BNP Regime (2001–2006))
1	Article 1. <i>Implementation of Women's Human Rights and basic Freedom</i>	Article 1. <i>Ensure women's Human Rights and basic freedom</i>
2	Article 1. <i>Ensure women's Human Rights and basic freedom</i> Article 7. (serial 5): "Provide Equal opportunities and <i>partnership</i> to women in matters of access to <i>property</i> , employment, market and business"	Article 7. <i>Ensure women's Constitutional rights in formulating and implementing economic policies (commercial policy, monetary policy, fiscal policy etc.)</i> Article 7: "Provide <i>Equal opportunities</i> to women in matters of access to employment, market and business"
3	Article 7.2: Ensure women's equal access to and equal control over the matters which are important for women's economic empowerment, such as health, education, training, education through lifecycle, technical education, information, <i>opportunity to earn, inheritance, property, credit</i> and rights to property acquired <i>through market-management including rights to land</i> etc. and enacting necessary new Laws for achieving these goals	Article 7.2: Ensure women's equal access to and equal control over the matters which are important for women's economic empowerment, such as health, education, training, education through lifecycle, technical education, information, <i>opportunity to earn, credit</i> and rights to property acquired <i>through market-management etc.</i> and enacting necessary new Laws for achieving these goals
4	Article 8. (serial 5): Motivate the NGOs including WOs to undertake campaign programs for creating the atmosphere to ensure women's active participation in politics Article 8 (serial 6): <i>Make efforts for holding Direct election</i> to the increased number of reserved seats for women after the expiry of current tenure of women's reserved seats in the National Parliament in the year 2001 Article 8 (serial 8): Appoint significant number of Women <i>in the Cabinet—the highest decision-making level</i> , under the provision of the relevant Article of the Constitution	Dropped Article 8: Take effective measures including increasing the women's reserved seats for ensuring women's more participation in the National Parliament Article 8: Appoint significant number of Women <i>in all decision-making tiers</i> under the provision of the relevant Article of the Constitution
5	Article 9. (serial 2): Appoint women at the higher positions of judiciary, University Grants Commission, Planning Commission including Ambassadors in the Embassies of Bangladesh Article 9 (serial 7): Take all out efforts for <i>appointing 30 % women</i> at all levels of decision making including the policy level posts to ensure women's equal and full participation in accordance to the recommendations of Economic and Social Council of UN	Dropped Article 9: Take initiatives for <i>gradually increasing the existing quota</i> at all levels of decision making including the policy level posts to ensure women's equal and full participation in accordance to the recommendations of Economic and Social Council of UN

(continued)

Table 4.10 (continued)

	National policy for women's advancement, 1997 (During AL Regime (1996–2001))	National policy for women's advancement 2004 (During BNP Regime (2001–2006))
6	Article 10,(serial 11): Enact laws to enable women to avail leave for 4 months since the birth of the child in order to ensure child's right to breast-feeding (only breast-feeding for 5 months) and sanction of required maternity leave <i>before the birth</i> of the child	Article 10: Enact laws to enable women to avail leave for 4 months since the birth of the child in order to ensure child's right to breast-feeding (only breast-feeding for 5 months) and sanction of required maternity leave <i>before and after the birth</i> of the child
7	Article 12, (serial 4): Encourage women and provide them <i>equal access to</i> agriculture, fisheries, livestock and forestation	Article 12: Encourage women and provide them <i>priority access-rights</i> to agriculture, fisheries, livestock and forestation

Source Adapted from the World Bank (2008, pp. 135–137)

in the new Women's Development Policy of 2008, three notable features were that: (i) laws should be formulated to ensure equal rights of women in all sorts of wealth; (ii) one-third of parliamentary seats should be reserved for women with a provision of direct election to the reserved seats; and (iii) appointment of an adequate number of women, if necessary, under the related section of the constitution, to the highest level of the Cabinet and policy making of the administration (see, for example, The World Bank 2008). However, the announcement of the policy created an opportunity for Islamic political parties, including the Islami Oikya Jote, to take to the streets against the provision of equal rights of women leading to creation of their wealth, although inheritance was a taboo. This relapse in women's rights was made worse as three of the advisers openly courted the agitators and conceded to their threats to withdraw the policy (Hossain 2011). Despite different initiatives of the governments, the 1997 national policy was highly praised by different WOs in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Mahila Parishad expressed that:

In that policy there was a reflection of demand, recommendations of women's movement during the last one decade and also the reflection of the program and recommendation on gender equality of the global conferences...organized by UN during the whole decade such as:

- Rio Earth Summit-1992
- Vienna Human Rights Conference and Plan of Action-1993...
- International Conference of Population & Development, Cairo-1994...
- 4th World Conference on Women-1995...⁴⁵

Owing to this, WOs did not accept the revised National Policy for Women's Advancement of 2004. A World Bank Report stresses that

...these groups question the Government's intention behind changing the Policy, and suspect that the changes reflect an increasingly conservative attitude within the Government. Though the changes are subtle, the women's movement believes that they could provide the basis for further policy changes and erode the gains made over the years (The World Bank 2008, p. 25).

Appendix 2 presents the changes initiated by the BNP government in the National Policy for the Advancement of Women, 1997. Essentially, the changes effected by the BNP Government in the Women Development Policy of 1997 also reflect its conservative attitudes toward women's issues in some context. On the other hand, such initiatives could not even be viewed as democratic since it was not discussed with some major stakeholders such as WOs and women's movements. Owing to its ideological leanings, along with its alliance with BNP in terms of tenure in power, the BJI is against women's participation in politics. With this in mind, it would be interesting to discuss the growth and development of the BJI's politics in Bangladesh.

⁴⁵ http://mahilaparishad.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=445, accessed on May 9, 2013.

4.4.1 Growth and Development of the BJI's Politics

When Bangladesh achieved its independence in 1971, “secularism” was one of the four founding principles of the country.⁴⁶ In the context of Bangladesh, the term “secularism” is a hazy and often misunderstood concept, which is expressed in Bengali as “dharma nirapekshata”. This literally translates to “religious neutrality”. Hence, the term “secularism” has been used differently in Bangladesh as compared to the West. Major Ziaur Rahman,⁴⁷ who seized state power in the mid-1970s, dropped “secularism” from the Constitution in 1977. In turn, this successfully changed the image of Bangladesh from a liberal Muslim country to an Islamic one (Linter 2002). Zia actually ushered in religious politics that grew even stronger under the rule of Lt. General Hossain Muhammad Ershad (1982–1990). Ershad eventually institutionalized Zia’s new brand of nationalism with an Islamic flavor, by making Islam the State religion of Bangladesh, in 1989. To counter secular opposition like AL, Ershad then revived the Jamaat. It is worth noting that most of the Jamaat leaders who fled to (West) Pakistan after 1971, returned to Bangladesh under the Zia regime with a new brand of fundamentalist ideas. However, Islam gained enormous importance as a political factor under the Ershad regime (Linter 2002).

Furthermore, BJI politics feature several instances of ideological confusion. During the election campaign, BJI leaders attempted to motivate Islamic-minded voters by stressing that women’s involvement in politics is against the philosophy of Islam. However, there are also instances where they deviated from their commitments and allied with the BNP, a party headed by a woman. Such deviation from their ideology reflects their urgency to gain political advantages. Another philosophy of the BJI is to ensure that the AL remains out of power. Since the AL had a history of steering the liberation war, the BJI fear that if the AL would regain State power, they would pursue trials of war criminals. However, this did not happen when the AL ruled the country from 1996 to 2001. One may wonder why this was the case, although the AL claimed it as a potent force that upholds the spirit of independence. One possible explanation for this is that since the AL organized a movement against the BNP jointly with the BJI in 1996, it did not want to create rivalry with the latter. Another rationale is that the AL did not want to annoy a segment of Islamic-minded voters who support the BJI. In fact, Islam as a religion has a strong influence on the politics of Bangladesh. While describing such influence of Islam on the politics of Bangladesh, Huque and Akhter (1987, p. 2001) asserted that,

Generally, the people of Bangladesh have strong attachment to Islam, and no one among the rulers and the ruled would risk retribution by opposing or criticizing religious customs, practices and beliefs. A large number of Bangladeshis do not perform the mandatory religious practices, but most display their devotion to Islam in public. The slightest aspiration on Islam results in hostile public reaction, which is why neither the government

⁴⁶ The other three principles were democracy, nationalism, and socialism although no socialist economic system was ever introduced in the country.

⁴⁷ Major General Ziaur Rahman was the founder of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

nor the opposition political parties of Bangladesh speak out against Islam. Even the leftist secular political parties, which consider religion to be an instrument of exploitation, do not make anti-Islamic statements in public. Government announcements are often sprinkled with references to the establishment of Islamic values, and politics are determined in such a way as not to disturb this sensitive issue. The rulers may or may not be inclined to establish Islam in Bangladesh, but they have displayed a tendency to strengthen their base of power by exploiting the people's attachment to Islam.

Under such circumstance, a secular political party such as the AL (it claims to be secular) did not show the courage to challenge deep-rooted Islamic values. Such attitude of the AL leads one to the conclusion that even the party itself is driven by the intention to gain political advantages rather than by ideology. It is worth noting that the present AL government (from 2009 onwards) has initiated the procedure of trial of war criminals after taking over State power.

Based on the arguments presented, it can be said that the growth and development of BJI politics in Bangladesh was aided by the major political parties. Each tried to win the support of this party whenever necessary; thereby establishing the BJI as a potent force in national politics. After 1991, the BNP allied with this party for the most part. In some cases, it obtained support from the BJI in the formation of the government. In other cases, it participated in the national election and formed the government in alliance with the BJI. Having a rightist orientation, the BNP can establish alliance with the BJI. The majority of the people will not react seriously about the BNP's alliance with the BJI. However, if people saw the AL making alliances with the BJI, they would respond differently. The existence of these two political parties in Bangladesh is at opposite ends. The AL is one of the progressive political parties that led the war of liberation, while the BJI is the most fundamentalist among parties and has war criminals as its leaders.⁴⁸ Thus, it seems strange that the AL would make any alliance with the BJI to obtain political gain. This initiative of AL leadership was highly criticized by common people, as well as by AL's own voters, during that time. Such alliance with both parties established BJI as a political party in Bangladesh that is, at times, instrumental in deciding who would run the country. Indeed, in Bangladeshi politics, history proves that nothing is impossible. Any political party can compromise its ideology at any time for political ambition as in all countries.

4.5 Factors Influencing the AL Government to Enact the 1997 Reform

The section above explored the reasons why the BNP did not initiate any affirmative reform to enhance women's political participation in Bangladesh. In the succeeding part, the main thrust is to explain the contextual factors in which the AL government initiated the 1997 reform and the factors behind such a move.

⁴⁸ Apart from the AL, there are a few other political parties: Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Workers Party of Bangladesh, that are ideologically more progressive than the AL. However, their representation in the Parliament is negligible.

4.5.1 Philosophy of the Government: Strengthening Local Government Institutions

Once it took power in 1996, the AL government, under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, showed its extreme interest to establish a powerful local government system in the country. To suggest recommendations on strengthening the local government system, the Local Government Commission of 1997 was formed, with M. Rahmat Ali (MP) as chair, along with six other members and a secretary-general.⁴⁹ The main task of this commission was to formulate recommendations to strengthen the local government system. This concept is related to the concepts of decentralization and good governance. Principles of decentralization suggest that power needs to be decentralized in the hands of local government bodies, so that these groups can plan independently and devise their own budgets. On the other hand, the establishment of good governance in the country requires that decision making at all levels must be a joint act of the representatives of all of the population.

Having these considerations in mind, the commission submitted its report, suggesting the introduction of a four-tier local government system. This was only after careful consultation with every stratum of the society.⁵⁰ One notable characteristic of the report is its suggestion to reserve one-third seats for women in local government bodies and the provision of direct election to fill in those reserved seats. As a means of transforming the recommendations of this commission into reality, the government implemented the four-tier local government system as well as enacted the Act of 1997. Through this, three seats in each UP were reserved for women, and the system of direct election in the reserved seats was introduced.

The establishment of a powerful local government institution at the local level requires enhanced women's participation, since they constitute half of the total population of Bangladesh. This implies that the decision making will suffer from lack of legitimacy if half of the population remain absent from this process. At the same time, the existing institutional setup of the local governing body (i.e., UP) was not conducive for ensuring the representation of this group. In other words, women were only nominated in three reserved seats in each UP. For this reason, the Local Government Commission of 1997 suggested greater participation as well as the introduction of direct election for women in the local government. Its recommendations were accepted and implemented, in letter and spirit, by the AL government. The chairman of the Local Government Commission, 1997 expressed that:

The prime minister was really willing to establish a powerful local government, as well as ensure the greater participation of women. She was committed, and instructed me to carry

⁴⁹ The names of other members of the Commission are Surinjit Sengupta (MP), Fazle Rabbi (MP), Kazi Azhar Ali, A.T.M. Shamsul Huque, Taherunnesa Abdullah, B. K. Jahangir, and A. H. M. Abdul Hye as the member secretary (Government of Bangladesh 1997a, b).

⁵⁰ The four tiers were the zilla parishad, thana/upazila parishad, union parishad, and palli/gram parishad.

out my assigned duties without any reservation. She instructed me to suggest recommendations that would serve both objectives.⁵¹

Since the UP is located in the rural areas, where the majority of ordinary women live, the Government initiated the opening up of new avenues for women's participation with the expectation that female leadership would build up in due course. It is important to note that, prior to the introduction of quotas for women in the UP, they were not barred to run for election in the general seats. Nevertheless, given traditional constraints, women were running an uphill battle if they participated in general seats elections and competed directly with male candidates (Panday 2008; Chowdhury 2009). There are instances where women candidates won elections in general seats (Panday 2008), but the number is too small to draw a favorable conclusion about that system. Besides, participation at the local level is less challenging than that in the center. All these considerations prompted the AL government to enact an affirmative action strategy to ease the route to broader political participation by women.

4.5.2 Constitutional Obligations

Several constitutional provisions prompted the AL government to pay closer attention to women's political participation. Article 9 of the Bangladesh Constitution states that, "the State shall encourage local government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation shall be given, as far as possible, to peasants, workers and women" (Article 9, Part II, Constitution of Bangladesh 2002). It is also clearly stipulated that "Steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life" (Article 10, Part II, Constitution of Bangladesh 2002). On the other hand, it was also established that "Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life" (Article 28(2), Part III, the Constitution of Bangladesh 2002). All these constitutional provisions suggest that discrimination against women should not be allowed. Since these provisions were not observable in reality, the then AL government felt the urgency to initiate the process of transforming constitutional provision into evident application. As an AL leader put it,

There was a constitutional direction regarding the establishment of a powerful local government as well as equal participation of men and women. Without the establishment of a powerful local government, good governance will not be ensured. Articles 59 and 60 of the Constitution of Bangladesh speak about the strengthening of the local government.⁵²

The issue of the BNP's reluctance to initiate any affirmative reform to improve women's political participation has been discussed in the earlier section. In case of

⁵¹ Interview with the chairman of the Local Government Reforms Commission, 1997, Dhaka 2007.

⁵² Author's interviews with a top level leader from the AL, 2007.

the AL, it is difficult to believe that its government acted because of constitutional obligations alone; rather, they wanted to win the support of women voters through the enactment of the reform of 1997.

4.5.3 Willingness of the Prime Minister

The AL prime minister was actually the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who served as president of Bangladesh when the country gained its independence in 1971. In her own words, she grew up in a political family and became involved in politics from the early days of her student life. Moreover, being a woman herself, she was well aware of the status of Bangladeshi women. Thus, she was inclined to do some things which could help open up opportunities for greater women's participation. While explaining possible reasons for the enactment of the reform, she expressed herself in the following way:

Actually, it was in my mind for a long time. I was committed to do this before I came to power. We highlighted the issue of women's political participation in our election manifesto also. From the very beginning of my involvement in politics, I was vocal on this issue. But we remained away from power for a long time. As you know, in Bangladesh, you cannot do anything while in opposition. The party in power does not take into account the opposition's suggestions. While in the opposition, I urged the government several times to take the initiative to enhance women's political participation, but they did not respond to our demands. That is why I started the procedure to enact the reform of 1997 after a few days of my oath as prime minister. Now, the women's community is enjoying the benefits of that reform. A large number of women are taking part in the political decision making at the local government level.⁵³

This opinion was echoed by one of the top political leaders of the AL when he expressed his feeling about Hasina's willingness in the following manner:

Our prime minister had a special feeling about increasing women's political participation. During her reign, women started to serve in the army. We also had women police commissioners during her regime. She was very optimistic about women's empowerment at all levels.⁵⁴

It cannot be denied that the reform of 1997 was a personal commitment of the prime minister, who was truly one of the driving forces behind it. However, it is very difficult to discern the deeper motive behind such initiative. Given Bangladesh's political culture, political leaders are inclined to take decisions in order to gain personal glory rather than ensure the welfare of the stakeholders. For instance, the case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord of 1997 can serve as reference. The accord was signed between the AL Government and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), on December 2, 1997, to resolve a

⁵³ Author's interviews with Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh (1996–2001) (from 2009–onwards) and Chairperson of the Bangladesh AL (1981–till date) (Dhaka, July 09, 2007).

⁵⁴ Author's interviews with an ex-MP of AL (1996–2001), Dhaka, 2007.

long-enduring conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).⁵⁵ Generally, the CHT accord was considered necessary, appropriate, and a commendable initiative from the AL. In fact, it helped Hasina win the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Peace Prize in 1998. Unfortunately, it failed to achieve its desired goal, since the formulation of such policy was predominantly one sided. An accord with such a national character did not anchor widely in the political arena and was not even placed in the Parliament for discussion. Hence, it did not receive sufficient political support, especially from the main opposition party, which was the BNP, who called it the “black pact” (Rashiduzzaman 1998). Like the CHT Peace Accord, the 1997 reform gave Sheikh Hasina personal glory and international recognition, and was considered a milestone in AL politics. By discussing the role of different actors (WOs, NGOs, and donors) in the reform process (discussed in Chap. 5), it can be ascertained whether the AL prime minister was truly sincere to pursue the welfare of the female community or whether she did that only to gain personal glory and political advantage.

4.5.4 Relationship of the Leaders of WOs with the AL Prime Minister

Most leaders of WOs in Bangladesh were involved in politics during their early days. In fact, majority of them were involved in leftist political parties and took active parts during the liberation war. Ever since, they have had good communication with Sheikh Hasina, who was herself involved in politics as well as in liberation movements. Consequently, Hasina maintained good relations with some of them, who remained involved with different WOs and movements advocating women issues. When the AL came into power in 1996, the leaders of WOs had easy access to the prime minister. Apart from organizing several movements for greater female participation, these leaders directly contacted the prime minister and requested her to take the initiative to increase women’s political participation. This personal relationship between the leaders of WOs and the prime minister accelerated the reforms process in 1997. During an interview, one renowned women activist expressed that,

The prime minister was dedicated to establishing a powerful local government in the country. She perceived local government institutions as the focal point of development. She also believed that, in order to strengthen local government in the country, women should be involved in the process, since they constitute 50 % of the total population.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ The Chittagong hill tracts (CHT) are the only extensive hill area in southeastern Bangladesh. They are bordered by Myanmar to the southeast, the Indian states of Tripura on the north and Mizoram to the east, and the Chittagong district to the west. The CHT covers about 13,184 km², approximately one-tenth of the total area of Bangladesh.

⁵⁶ Author’s interviews with a woman activist in Bangladesh, Dhaka 2007.

Another respondent held the view that:

The personal relationship of leaders from WOs with the prime minister helped them pursue the issue. Since these leaders had easy access to the prime minister, they insisted on action on the issue with the prime minister directly, which might have had an influence on the process of the reform enactment.⁵⁷

This statement was also supported by a top AL leader, which was expressed in the following:

Most of the prominent leaders of WOs were very close to the prime minister. They had a personal connection with her, which offered them easy access to her. They convinced the prime minister that she should take some initiative to increase women's participation. Since the prime minister herself was interested, their suggestions motivated her to initiate the reform.⁵⁸

It is interesting to ascertain why these leaders of WOs did not contact the previous prime minister of Bangladesh, who was also a woman. Accordingly, the process would have started 5 years earlier if they would have contacted her. The answer to this question can be found in the response of one respondent from the BNP who expressed her view in the following manner:

We tried to contact the prime minister (Khaleda Zia) to talk to her personally and initiate the process of doing something for womenfolk. But it is regrettable to say we did not get access to her in most cases. If we would have succeeded in contacting her, we could have convinced her to take the initiative, since she was a woman herself, and she knew the status of women in Bangladesh.

She further expressed that:

During the AL regime, when the provision for reservation of seats for women in the Parliament expired in the year 2000, the BNP, the largest opposition, was boycotting the Parliament. We urged the leader of the opposition, Khaleda Zia, to go back to the Parliament for the sake of the seat reservation Bills, even though she was determined not to cooperate with the Parliament. However, she made the commitment that the Bill for the reservation of seats for women in the Parliament would be in the priority list of her government if she could form the government. But we all know that the BNP-led government took more than 3 years to pass the Bill, despite having an absolute majority in Parliament.⁵⁹

Since the respondents expressed these kinds of comments, it is reasonable to ask: why did Khaleda Zia act in that way? A few respondents from WOs expressed their views in the following way:

Actually, we did not have any direct linkage with her (Khaleda Zia) as she was not involved in politics during her early days. She was basically a housewife and was made the chairperson of the BNP after President Zia was assassinated by a group of military personnel. She was made the chairperson of the BNP to keep the party united. Moreover, she was not inclined to do something for women, since consensus was not reached on the

⁵⁷ Author's interviews with a member of the Civil Society Organizations, Dhaka 2007.

⁵⁸ Author's interviews with an ex-MP of AL (1996–2001), Dhaka, 2007.

⁵⁹ Author's interviews with a respondent from the BNP, Dhaka, 2007.

issue within her party, and they were in power with the support of the BJI that was against women's political participation. This meant that the then BNP government (1991–1996) did not want to do anything that might annoy the BJI.⁶⁰

Such comments indicate that the BNP government was not so committed in initiating affirmative action for enhancing women participation in politics. However, it is not at all correct to conclude that the BNP administration failed to do anything for the betterment of women. Actually, it was the BNP government that sent representatives to the Beijing Plus Five Conference in 1995 and signed the PFA without any reservation. When this issue was brought up with the respondents from WOs, they expressed their views thus:

The then BNP government attended the conference only to attract the attention of the international community that was advocating greater women's political participation. Even though they signed the Platform for Action (PFA) and were committed to ratifying all clauses of the declaration in Bangladesh, they did nothing to enhance women's political participation.

The respondents further added that the BNP Government (2001–2006) made several changes to the National Women's Policy of 1997, which was brought in by the Awami League government in 1997.⁶¹ However, opposing such claims of the WOs, all BNP leaders expressed their views in the following way:

We were also supportive of the cause to enhance women's political participation. Our intention behind signing the PFA was sincere. We were willing to ratify all clauses in the case of Bangladesh, but we did not have enough time to enact the necessary laws to create opportunities for women, since the next election was nearing at early 1996. We started the procedure, and the AL completed this by enacting the reform of 1997.⁶²

They further added that, "We introduced the Female Secondary School Stipend Program (FSSSP)⁶³ scheme for female students during our first tenure in government (1991–1996)".⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Author's interviews with several respondents from WOs, Dhaka, 2007.

⁶¹ Author's interviews with leaders of WOs, Dhaka, 2007.

⁶² Author's interviews with leaders of the BNP, 2007.

⁶³ The Female Secondary School Stipend Program (FSSSP) scheme was introduced by the Bangladeshi government as a conditional cash transfer intervention in 1994. This program was designed for girls through the assistance of the World Bank and other donor agencies. Eligibility for the stipend program is automatic for all girls who have completed primary school and are currently enrolled in grade 6 from a junior/high school. The program also covers government-affiliated rural and non-metropolitan secondary schools in Bangladesh. The government did not impose restrictions to limit the beneficiaries' participation in government schools. Rather, girls have been given freedom to choose their own school whether it be secular or religious. The awarding of stipend for all eligible female students is contingent upon some conditions that include the following: (i) they must attend at least 75 % of classes in an academic year, (ii) they must get passing grades in the annual examination, and (iii) they should remain single until passing the secondary school certificate (SSC) examination. The stipend amount is deposited directly into the commercial bank savings account of the student in two annual installments. However, the amount is way too small for the poorest girls to cover expenses like shoes or uniforms (The World Bank 2008, p. 45).

⁶⁴ Author's interviews with the leaders of the BNP, 2007.

Is unrealistic in the context of Bangladeshi politics to assume that, due to lack of time, the BNP were not able to enact women-friendly laws. As a matter of fact, Bangladeshi politics is solely dominated by the two women heads of government, who ruled the country for about 15 years. Thus, everything could have been done, even in such a short time, if they really wanted to. Unfortunately, it was commitment on the government's part which was lacking, as the BNP administrations avoided conflicts among their political allies, who were against female participation in the public arena.⁶⁵

However, the above discussion does not necessarily mean that the AL Government is very much proactive in working toward greater women's political participation. Although it may have opened up new avenues for women's participation in the local government by initiating reforms, it has failed to open wide avenues for women at the national level. It is understandable that it did not have the two-thirds majority in the Parliament required to make constitutional amendments during 1996–2001. Still, it should have taken proactive initiatives with regard to women's participation in the Parliament. Its initiative was only confined to the reservation of 30 seats for women, which was already being practiced before. Sheikh Hasina, in response to the introduction of direct election for women in the National Parliament, expressed her opinion in the following:

We were eager to increase the number of reserved seats for women in the Parliament along with the introduction of direct election in reserved seats. But we did not receive support from opposition parties, which was badly needed to make an amendment to the Constitution. Moreover, there were some obligations in proposing a Bill for approval in the Parliament. If the treasury bench fails to pass any Bill proposed by them, they cannot propose such bill in the Parliament again. That is why we were taking time and trying to convince the then opposition to support us on the issue of introduction of direct election for women in the Parliament. Finally, we did not receive support from the opposition, which compelled us not to proceed with it.⁶⁶

Hasina's argument is valid in terms of legitimate procedures, but it is also true that her administration was not ready at that point in time. Das (2005) wrote that

...unfortunately, the AL Government that declared the women development policy of 1997 did not take any initiative to resolve the issue of reservation of seats for women in the Parliament. It was, however, true that there was no scope for the AL Government to amend the Constitution due to the lack of two-thirds majority and the continuous absence of the opposition in the Parliament. Had they been sincere, they could have tabled the Bill incorporating a provision for direct election. In contrast, they raised a Bill for 30 reserved seats in the Parliament, as was practiced in the past. They took the initiative in a manner that ensures the benefit of a bonus in the event of coming to power. The said initiative also failed due to the absence of the opposition party.

On the other hand, one respondent from a women organization expressed that

Once, when we met Hasina and pressed her to increase the reservation of seats for women in the Parliament, and introduce the system of direct election, she told us that women

⁶⁵ In most cases, the BNP's political ally was the BJI.

⁶⁶ Author's interviews with Sheikh Hasina (Dhaka, July 09, 2007).

were not yet ready to compete for direct election in the Parliament. She further stated that women Parliamentarians in reserved seats cannot do anything anyway other than gossiping.⁶⁷

This opinion seemed to be founded on strong ground, when the two other influential AL leaders expressed their opinion regarding women's participation in the Parliament:

We [members of Parliament] elected 30 women Parliament members in the reserved seats in 1996. But we were not really dissatisfied with their performance. They did nothing other than gossiping with one another. They also did not attend the Parliament every day when the Parliament was in session. We would have to wait for a long time for the development of women leadership. Only then can direct election for women in the Parliament be introduced.⁶⁸

Another respondent from AL expressed his feeling in the following:

Actually, women are not yet ready to accept the challenge of being an elected parliament member. They lack accountability and efficiency to carry out the responsibilities of a parliament member.⁶⁹

These points substantiate AL's reluctance about women's participation in the National Parliament. Such feelings among the top leadership signify the existence of strong patriarchal values even though the Party is headed by a woman. An example of which can be illustrated from different points of view. Although AL was headed by a woman who had great supremacy over party decisions, she had to act according to the sentiment of male political leaders. From another point of view, it could be said that Hasina did not want to do anything that would annoy the male politicians.

In addition to above factors another important factor that accelerated the process of enactment of the reform of 1997 was the contribution of the late Ivy Rahman, together with her husband. Before discussing how they played their role in the reform, it is important to first mention who they are.

Zillur Rahman was the former minister of Local Government Rural Development & Cooperatives in the AL government (1996–2001). Subsequently, he served as the general secretary of the AL during that time.⁷⁰ From the perspective of power and influence, he was placed next to the prime minister, both in party matters and in the Cabinet, during 1996–2001. It is worth noting that local government bodies remain under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of LGRD and Cooperatives. Meanwhile, Ivy Rahman was the wife of Zillur Rahman and the former president of the Bangladesh Women AL. She remained in close contact with party politics by virtue of her husband's position in the party and due to her involvement in politics for a long period. Moreover, she was active in politics even during the early days of her student life.

⁶⁷ Author's interviews with a respondent from a women organization, 2007.

⁶⁸ Author's interviews with a central leader of AL, 2007.

⁶⁹ Author's interviews with a central leader of AL, 2007.

⁷⁰ At present he is the President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (he took oath as the 19th President of Bangladesh on 12th of February, 2009).

From then on, she had several good friends and associates who were then engaged in working for different WOs. When AL came into power in 1996, the leaders of WOs used Ivy Rahman as a channel through which they could press their demands on Zillur Rahman, who was in charge of the Ministry of LGRD and Cooperatives. Most of the respondents commented in a way similar to this:

Since Ivy Rahman was the chairperson of the Bangladesh Women AL and the wife of Zillur Rahman, she had easy access to the party's top leaders and the prime minister. When we were not able to reach the prime minister, we communicated with her, who then in turn either conveyed our message to the prime minister or managed her appointments so that we could meet her. She also influenced her husband to convince the party forum with regard to the reforms of 1997, initiated for ensuring women's political participation. Ivy Rahman is no more today,⁷¹ but the female community recognizes her efforts intended for the betterment of women.⁷²

Or to this:

Sometimes, we used to meet Mr. Zillur Rahman through Ivy Rahman and let him know our demands for the greater participation of women in politics. He had an important role to play, since the matter was under the jurisdiction of his ministry. He then conveyed our message to the prime minister and other members of the Cabinet as well as in the party. Very often, we would submit memoranda to him in his office for affirmative action, which was necessary for increasing women's representation in the political process. Being in charge of the LGRD and Cooperatives Ministry, Mr. Zillur Rahman handled the matter very well.⁷³

Another respondent added that:

Zillur Rahman, who was in charge of the LGRD and Cooperatives Ministry, was personally convinced about the issue of women's political participation. Moreover, he was the husband of the president of the Bangladesh Women AL, Ivy Rahman, who was very active in fostering women's issues.⁷⁴

The opinions of the respondents from WOs were supported by political party leaders as well, as proven when a top leader of the AL expressed his opinion thus:

With regard to the enactment of the 1997 reform, I would like to recognize the contribution of Ivy Rahman, who was then the President of the Bangladesh Women AL and wife of the minister of the LGRD and Cooperatives Ministry. The issue of women's participation at the local government level falls under the jurisdiction of that ministry. Ivy Rahman played an important role, by influencing the prime minister, as well as the Minister of LGRD&C, which accelerated the enactment of the reform to a great extent. Moreover, the prominent leaders of WOs also had good relationships with Ivy Rahman. All these factors influenced the enactment of the 1997 Act.

⁷¹ Ive Rahman died in a grenade attack on a public meeting organized by AL on the 21st of August, 2004, which resulted in the death of an additional 21 party supporters.

⁷² The same opinion has been expressed by several respondents from different WOs; Author's interviews with the respondents of WOs, 2007.

⁷³ Author's interview with a leader of a WO, 2007.

⁷⁴ Author's interview with a leader of a WO, 2007.

The above statements indicate that both Zillur and Ivy Rahman played important roles during the process of the 1997 reform. However, one may question the ability of these two in influencing the process of any policy. Given Bangladesh's political culture, the party's chairperson nominates such leaders as the general secretary of the party whom he/she trusts most. In this regard, Zillur Rahman was considered a gentleman who did not have a strong voice. In addition, previous history did not establish him as a potent force in influencing any policies within or outside the party. Meanwhile, Ivy Rahman was certainly popular within the party, but she was lacking the stature that would allow her to shape policies. These facts may compel others to doubt; but concurrently, it is true that they offered wholehearted support to activists who were pressing for greater women's political participation in Bangladesh. Thus, it can be concluded that their contribution was one of the factors that influenced the AL government and accelerated the process of enactment of the Act of 1997.

4.6 Conclusion

The primary objective of this chapter was to explore the role of both the government and political parties during the 1997 reform process. Discussion in this chapter suggests that Bangladeshi political parties are not that proactive with regard to women's political participation. The reluctance of each political party toward women's political participation is evident from this chapter's discussion. Regarding each political party's role in the reform process, Chowdhury (1994a, pp. 51–52) pointed out that:

It is greed for regaining power that compelled BNP to remain silent on the issue of women's political participation. BNP's Constitution promotes equal status for women, but this refers solely for achieving greater respect and value for women as mothers and wives. Meanwhile, AL's Constitution does not include women's role in mainstream issues of human resources development, education, and other areas. However, women issues are put under a separate heading, "Women and National Development," thus reflecting their marginal status. Moreover, the religious fundamentalist BJI party wanted to promote the *Shariah law* and propagate a sharp public–private dichotomy by directing women's seclusion and subordinate status.

Regarding the government's role in the reform process, it has been found that since 1991 successive governments of Bangladesh were not so proactive in furthering women's issues. Despite some measures taken by both governments under the BNP and the AL, the lack of enthusiasm and commitment among them regarding gender issues remains persistent.

The BNP-led government did not take any proactive measures, other than initiating the 14th Amendment (increase in the number of reserved seats for women from 30 to 45) to the Constitution. This occurred despite that at this time, the head of the government was a woman, and they signed the PFA during the Beijing Conference in 1995. There were different factors that prohibited the BNP from taking some affirmative actions regarding women's political participation. Among

the most important ones was their alliance with the fundamentalist the BJI party that had a staunch opposition to women's participation in public arenas.

In contrast, the government under the AL took affirmative action by enacting the 1997 reform. This reform has at least opened up a new avenue for women to participate in larger numbers than before. However, the government did not take any initiative for enhancing women's participation in the Parliament. A good number of factors that influenced the previous AL government to ratify the said reform were the philosophy of the government, constitutional obligations, willingness of the prime minister, personal relationships of the PM with the leaders of WOs, and the contribution of both Zillur Rahman and Ivy Rahman.

Finally, it can be said that several ideological and individual factors played important roles in compelling the then AL government to enact the reform of 1997. Specifically, these were not the only factors that influenced the government to undertake such action. In fact, there were some other actors such as the continuous movement of WOs, activities of NGOs, roles of donors, and different international conventions. Generally, these actors are in favor of women's political parties that have directly or indirectly influenced the government. Hence, it is important to know the extent to which the government was influenced by these actors. In [Chap. 5](#), efforts are made to explore extent of these influences on the government in the enactment of the reform of 1997.

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Chapter 5

Other Players in the Reform Process: Accessing and Assessing Influence

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the role of the government and of different political parties in the process of enactment of the 1997 reform has been discussed. The main thrust of this chapter is to analyze the channels through which WOs, NGOs, donors, and international conventions influenced the Bangladesh government to enact the reform of 1997 and the extent of their influence. These actors have been chosen taken into consideration Howlett and Ramesh's (1995) actors and institutions in the policy process and sensing the ground realities of the modes of these actors' work for the cause of women all over Bangladesh. It is important to mention here that all WOs, NGOs and donor agencies selected for interview are based in Dhaka having countrywide networks. An important characteristic of this chapter is that the analysis is based on interviews with high officials from five leading WOs, seven leading NGOs, and two international donor agencies working in the country. The responses of the leaders of political parties has also been used to cross-check the arguments given by the different societal and international actors.

5.2 Women's Organizations

Before analyzing the role of WOs in the process of the enactment of 1997 reform, it is important to review briefly the history and functions of WOs in Bangladesh.¹ The origin of the Bengali Muslim women's movement started in the early part of the twentieth century with the establishment of a women's organization in Calcutta in 1916 called Anjuman-e-Khawateen-Islam. It was formed under the sponsorship

¹ It is important to mention here that WOs in Bangladesh are mostly voluntary organizations.

of Roquia Sakhaqat Hussain (1880–1932).² Pre-partition in 1947, and after that, in the Pakistan period, a number of WOs were established in East Pakistan (now called Bangladesh since becoming independent from Pakistan in 1971) with the active support from urban, elite groups—both male and female—but none were able to act as pressure groups or mobilize public opinion and achieve rights. A possible explanation for this is that these organizations did not have their base expanded to the rural areas where the majority of the population lived (Khan 1993). Furthermore, the objectives of these organizations in furthering women’s issues were not unified, which did not give momentum to their advocacy program.

After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, a few urban-based WOs started to function, concentrating on welfare-related activities.³ During this period, the mobilization of rural women was erratic and usually took place during election time only. Nevertheless, a number of changes had taken effect by 1990. First, WOs grew rapidly, multiplying in terms of number of organizations since the 1970s. Second, there was a rapid shift in orientation. Most organizations had focused their work on development in lieu of welfare with the intention to enable poor women to obtain access to credit, employment, income, literacy, health, and family planning. Third, these organizations had widened their activities in rural areas where they began to mobilize the rural women on a regular basis. The combined effect of these changes opened the door for many women to take part in regular group meetings and activities organized by WOs, which was impossible in the 1970s. Nowadays, thousands of women field workers are engaged in projects to provide poor women with development resources and services. Finally, WOs with no link to the grassroots levels started to establish links with NGOs to highlight the programs intended to raise consciousness among women at the grassroots. This collaboration with NGOs helped WOs to raise gender issues in other forms (Jahan 1991, 1995).

History tells us of a few success stories of the women’s movement in influencing State policies. In the 1950s, the Family Law Ordinance 1961 which restricted

² Roquia Sakhawat Hussain, popularly known as Begum Rokeya in Bangladesh, was a pioneer of the women’s liberation movement in South Asia. She was the founder of the Anjuman-e-Khateen-e-Islam (Islamic Women’s Association) during the colonial era. She established a school for Muslim girls in Kolkata in the early 1900s, and went from door to door to approach eminent Muslim families to send their daughters to school so that ordinary people of the Muslim community would do the same. She advocated for women’s economic rights, and educational, and personal as well as social liberation. For her, women’s liberation was a comprehensive issue of personal, social, cultural, and political freedom. See information on Begum (1880–1932), at <http://www.marxists.org/glossary/people/b/e.htm>, accessed on: February 25, 2013. Kamal (n.d.) in her writing on Begum Rokeya, argued that feminist thinking did not emerge exclusively from the West; rather, the women of this region under the leadership of Begum Rokeya initiated the process of feminist thinking at least a 100 years ago. She further stated that the women of this region “looked for alternatives for their life not in terms of conventional male-dominated concepts of individual and social life, rather very much from the point of view of the women themselves.”

³ Among these organizations, some of the prominent were Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), Women for Women, Bangladesh Jatiya Mahila Sangstha (BJMS), and Naripokkho.

polygamy, was passed by Ayub Khan (the then president of Pakistan), as a result of successful lobbying by the All Pakistan Women's Association. The other areas where women's movements gained some sort of success were the enactment of the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1983 and amendments to the Muslim Family Law Act of 1961, which helped women receive justice in cases of rape and dowry (Murshid 2004).

In the 1980s, the women's movement was not so successful. Movements gained partial success when they received commitment from the State to eliminate inequality, in accordance with the UN Resolution of 1976. Several articles (Articles 2, 13[a] and 16[b])⁴ were left out because they were against the Sharia (Islam 1987). The women's movements of the WOs were not able to influence the military dictators of Bangladesh, General Zia, and Hussain Mohammad Ershad, who relied heavily on religious sanctions for their legitimacy. WOs in Bangladesh remained vocal against the constitutional amendment in 1988, which made Islam the State religion. Women's movements were not able to prevent the government from amending the constitution, although a writ against the State was filed by Nari Pokkho, claiming that the Bill was contrary to the fundamental rights of women (Murshid 2004).

One may be curious to know about the relationship between women and the State religion. As a matter of fact, WOs fear that, if Islam becomes the State religion, more restrictions would be imposed on women. During the late 1980s, Oikkyobaddha Nari Samaj (United Women's Forum), which was a coalition of about 20 organizations, submitted their 17-point demand to the government.⁵ They were successful in combining the social and economic needs of the women in their agenda. In addition to the submission of demands, the United Women's Forum raised its voice against the 8th Amendment of the Constitution of 1988, through which Islam was made the State religion, and they also participated in the mass upsurge in 1990 that overthrew the dictatorship of President Ershad. Moreover, they also held public protests against the collusion of the State and religion.

Like the United Women's Forum, Naripokkho filed a writ petition before the Supreme Court to repeal a part of the 8th Amendment of the Constitution.⁶

⁴ "Article 2 stipulated that existing institutional structures such as the legal and judicial system as well as social norms and practices should be modified in conformity with the provisions of the document. Article 13(a) laid down the principle whereby women would have equal opportunities to take out loans and mortgages, negotiate contracts, and participate in sports and cultural activities. Article 16 provided for equal rights and responsibilities for women in relation to the family" (Murshid 2004, 127).

⁵ In the 17-point demand, the prominent ones were demands for equal rights, ratification of the CEDAW without any reservations, uniform civil code, increase of quota in the civil service, equal pay for female garment workers, implementation of the International Labor Organization legal rights like maternity leave with pay and other facilities, employment opportunities for landless and urban destitute women, and minimum pay for domestic helpers (Choudhury 2000).

⁶ The 8th Amendment Act which was passed on 7 June 1988 amended Articles 2, 3, 5, 30, and 100 of the Constitution. This Amendment Act (i) declared Islam as the state religion; (ii) decentralized the judiciary by setting up six permanent benches of the high court division outside Dhaka; (iii) amended the word 'Bengali' into 'Bangla' and 'Dacca' into 'Dhaka' in Article 5 of the Constitution; (iv) amended Article 30 of the constitution by prohibiting acceptance of any title, honors, award, or decoration from any foreign State by any citizen of Bangladesh without the prior approval of the president (Constitution of People's Republic of Bangladesh 2004).

Moreover, the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), through its own legal aid cells and dedicated workers, successfully highlighted women's agenda and pressured (as they claimed) the government to ratify the CEDAW (Chowdhury 1994). Another case of influence of WOs was the filing and winning of a writ petition in the high court in 1994 by Ain-o-Salish Kendro (ASK) and the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST). The writ challenged a circular of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Cooperatives (MLGRD&C) that sought to exclude female ward commissioners of the UP from key functions such as serving in law and order committees, issuing certificates relating to succession and nationality, and overseeing infrastructure projects in their areas. The ministry defended its decision based on the fact that women ward commissioners are elected from reserved seats, while their male counterparts are elected from general seats. However, the circular was declared illegal by the high court, which insisted that both male and female ward commissioners must get equal opportunities to perform their duties. This historic judgment placed male and female ward commissioners on equal footing (ASK 2005, cited in The World Bank 2008).

Since the 1990s, several WOs, such as the BMP, ASK, Nari Pokkho, Nari Progoti Sansgtha, and others have been working on women's agendas. Apart from mobilizing women-related issues,⁷ these organizations have expanded the scope of women's agenda to include many other developmental issues in the form of: debt crisis, environmental crisis, population control policies and programs, women's health issues, legal reforms, and enhancement of the participation of women in the political process. Moreover, many WOs have been receiving funds from the government, nongovernment organizations, and donor agencies to finance women's agendas. Under such circumstances, it is reasonable to explore the major channels of exerting influence on the Government and the extent of their influence.

5.2.1 Major Channels of Exerting Influence

Demonstrations, meetings, human chains, sharing of views, signature collection, exchange of views with members of Parliament, and submission of memoranda to appropriate authorities are the main channels through which women organizations advocate the issue of women's political participation. Apart from these, they publish their research findings and organize press conferences to publicize their concerns to the wider community. Legal actions are sometimes taken to combat the harsh decisions of the government that influence the rights of women. Face-to-face meetings with the minister in charge of women and children's affairs are another means to keep up the pressure.

As a matter of fact, women's organizations rely mostly on informal channels to exert their influence on the government. Advocacy programs of women organizations achieved their momentum in 1990, when democracy was restored in the

⁷ Issues concerning women include rape, dowry, violence, domestic abuse, and trafficking.

country for the second time, and the media became more “free.”⁸ From the 1990s onwards, the media have offered immense service to the advocacy programs of several WOs that is required for gender equality and greater participation of women in politics. Due to wide media coverage, these movements can attract the Government's attention easily. Zaman stated that,

In addition to the roles of women's groups and social activists, the media in Bangladesh have been playing an important role in recent years in raising awareness about violence against women. Although news about crimes and violence against women (e.g., rape, suicide, murder) was sporadically published by various newspaper before 1985, media coverage since then has created awareness about systematic violence against women, which was treated earlier, at all level, as individual acts (Zaman 1999, pp. 45–46).

5.2.2 The Extent of Influence on the Government

The question is, how influential are the WOs? As a matter of fact, WOs did not have any strong influence on the government in relation to the enactment of policies concerning women.⁹ Absence of any formal channel to interact with the government on women-related issues is one of the prominent causes of the low level of influence of their programs on the government. It does not necessarily mean that WOs did not have any sort of influence. In fact, the government sometimes accepts their suggestions and acts accordingly. Such an acceptance of the suggestions by the government can be perceived as an indication of influence on the government. However, even though they are able to convince the government, at times, at the policy making level, change often got stuck at the implementation level.¹⁰

In Bangladesh, when a girl or woman is raped by someone, her medical examination is usually conducted in district-level hospitals. This examination is not done at the rural medical centers even if the event takes place in the rural areas. Medical science suggests that the rape victim needs to be examined by the doctor at the earliest possible time; otherwise, the symptoms of sexual abuse may disappear.

During 2001–2002, Nari Pokkho organized a strong movement against the system of examining rape victims in district hospitals. It advocated that examinations should take place at the local level since it could take several hours to reach the district headquarters. Nari Pokkho was able to convince the responsible authorities

⁸ After independence in 1971, a parliamentary form of democracy was established in the country and continued until 1975 when the democratically elected prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was assassinated, with most of his family members, by a military group. From 1975 to 1990, the country remained under military rule of different types. In 1990, a mass upsurge overthrew the then military dictator (Hussain Muhammad Ershad), and the country returned to the path of democracy until 2006. From January 11, 2007 to January 5, 2009, the country remained under a peculiar kind of rule called a “military-backed caretaker government.”

⁹ Author's interviews with the majority of respondents from WOs, 2007.

¹⁰ Author's interviews with a group of respondents from WOs, 2007.

in charge of policy decisions on this issue, and it resulted in a circular in 2002 suggesting that these medical tests should be conducted at the *upazila* health center. However, one of respondents stated in 2007 that the decision had not yet been implemented, although several years had already passed since the circular was first issued.¹¹

Although the circular was issued, the government did not monitor its implementation properly. A number of reasons have been identified as the restraining factors to the implementation of the circular.¹² First, since it is a police case, the people responsible for conducting the tests show reluctance to conduct them. Once they receive such cases, they refer them to the district hospitals. Second, there is lack of adequate manpower in the health centers at the local level. In Bangladesh, doctors usually do not want to work at local-level health centers. Those who remain at the local level either have some other obligations or are forced to stay there. Third, doctors have a fear of being harassed if they write a report against someone with a strong political background at the local level. Fourth, due to the lack of adequate logistic support, doctors sometime refer such cases to district hospitals. These factors are similar to the findings of another study conducted by Prince (2001), wherein he identified an inadequate number of physicians, wrong treatment, negligence toward patients, absence from duty, unwillingness of the doctors to stay in rural areas and small towns, and lack of adequate supplies of medicines, equipment, beds, ambulance services, and proper referral services as the major problems of the health sector in Bangladesh. The example above is the hallmark of Bangladesh politics, suggesting that sometimes policy makers make regulations without considering their ability to carry them out. Policy makers confine their responsibility to making of the policies and they do not monitor the implementation of these once made.

Apart from the absence of formal channels¹³ to contact the government, there are three other factors that also hinder the process of the WOs' influence on the government, as well as impede their efforts to reach momentum. These three factors are (i) lack of coordination among the different WOs; (ii) difference of opinions among them; and (iii) problems relating to prioritizing issues.¹⁴ One respondent's view was as follows:

WOs are not united in pressing their demands. Sometimes, a meeting is held among WOs to decide the strategy of organizing movements. However, it is difficult to come to a consensus on what to focus on. This usually happens due to the fact that all WOs do not work on a single aspect of gender-related issues. Different organizations work on diverse issues that obstruct them from reaching a consensus. Each organization is coordinating its programs independently. If all organizations organized their movements collectively, then

¹¹ Author's interviews with a member of the governing body, Naripokkho, 2007.

¹² Author's interviews with a group of respondents from WOs, 2007.

¹³ Formal channels refer to the representation of WOs in government-sponsored committees where decisions on women's issues are made.

¹⁴ Author's interviews with a group of respondents from WOs, 2007.

their movements would have gained more momentum, which could have influenced the government to a greater extent.¹⁵

The discussion above substantiates that, since WOs do not have any formal channels to exert influence on the government, they have weak governmental influence. However, despite having no formal channels, these WOs keep pressing the government to initiate different affirmative actions to reduce discrimination against them.

Now, one may wonder whether WOs lodge protests against the government when their views are ignored. In fact, they prefer to go to the court instead of holding protests against the government.¹⁶ Such a situation happened in 2004, when several WOs went to court to protest against the decision of the government to reserve only 45 seats for women in Parliament. Joining hands with the opposition political parties, they demanded at least 64 reserved seats for women in Parliament and the introduction of direct election to these seats. However, the court ruled in favor of the government.

5.2.3 The Case of the 1997 Reform

Discussion in the preceding section substantiates that the extent of women's organization's influence on the government is not very strong. Thus, it is important to explore to what extent the AL Government of Bangladesh (1996–2001) considered the demands of the WOs during the enactment of the reform of 1997. As a matter of fact, it is claimed by the WOs that the reform of 1997 was enacted as a result of their consistent demands in favor of the greater participation of women in politics, despite the fact that there is no formal channel to influence the government. It is worthy to note that WOs mostly concentrate on women's participation in the national Parliament, rather than at the local government level, but this does not mean they did not organize any movement targeting women's political participation at the local level. Despite having varying degrees of intensity of their influence on the government, their claims seemed to have a strong ground when a vast majority of the leaders of WOs expressed their views regarding their role in the 1997 reform process thus:

WOs remained vocal on greater women's participation. They tried to convince even the prime minister several times. However, they were not very organized due to differences in ideology. Nevertheless, it is true that their movement for greater women's participation was taken into consideration during the enactment of the Local Government Reform of 1997.¹⁷

Above discussion leads us to argue that WOs had, and still have, a strong determination to make their voices heard in favor of gender equality in Bangladesh. Instead of measuring the impact of their movement, they want to continue their advocacy and awareness-building programs among the women community of

¹⁵ Author's interviews with a respondent from a women organization, 2007.

¹⁶ Author's interviews with the majority of respondents from WOs, 2007.

¹⁷ Author's interviews with a top leader from AL, Dhaka, 2007.

Bangladesh, so that women could make their voices heard by themselves. The majority of the respondents stated that:

Whether we can influence the government or not, whether our demands are accepted by the government or not, we shall remain engaged in building awareness among women, with the expectation that these women will eventually raise their voices for the fulfillment of their demand as a community. When that happens, it will be difficult for any government of Bangladesh to ignore or bypass their demands.¹⁸

It is important to mention here that, like other organizations in Bangladesh, WOs are also politically divided, which impedes them in reaching a consensus when they sit together to decide on the agenda for organizing movements in favor of gender equality. When these organizations sit together to decide on a particular issue regarding women, they try to preserve the interest of the Party they are allied with, instead of preserving the interests of women. This attitude of the organizations sometimes destroys the spirit of the movement that ultimately ends in failure. Apart from political division, the changing pattern of WOs has also weakened the strength of their movement in favor of gender equality in Bangladesh. One women's activist, now an academician, expressed the following:

From its inception, *Bangladesh Mahila Parishad* (BMP) was a voluntary organization with the main objective of raising its voice against gender discrimination in the society. However, this organization has changed its pattern in the course of time. It is now accepting funds from donors and carrying out project-based activities.¹⁹

Since women organizations accept funds from donors nowadays, they need to accommodate different interests in their objectives. As a result of changing attitudes, these organizations fail to organize strong movements, unlike in the past. Despite having political divisions or changing philosophies, there are ample examples wherein WOs are able to organize successful movements in protest of discrimination against women.

One such example was the formation of the *Sammilita Nari Samaj* (Consolidated Women's Forum) by several women's groups, including NGOs funded by international donor agencies in the wake of the brutal rape and murder of Yasmin²⁰ in

¹⁸ Author's interviews with the majority of respondents from WOs, 2007.

¹⁹ Author's interviews with an academician and renowned women activist of the country, 2007.

²⁰ Yasmin, a 14-year-old girl, worked as a domestic helper in Dhaka. She was picked up by three policemen in their patrol car as she was on her way to her mother's house in Dinajpur district. The police officers assured Yasmin that she would be able to reach home safely. Instead, they brutally raped and strangled her, and dumped her body by the roadside. The next morning, her body was recovered by villagers who then reported it to the police station. In the meantime, it was found that Yasmin was escorted by those three policemen the night before. The public suspected that she was raped and murdered by the policemen. The situation went beyond the control of law enforcement agencies since a full-scale judicial inquiry was demanded by the agitated public. Despite all-out efforts of the police administration to fabricate the story by labeling Yasmin a prostitute, the situation went beyond their control very shortly when a mass protest and demonstration, supported by women's groups, was arranged, and some people threw stones at the police station. In response, the police opened fire which ultimately killed eight persons and injured more. The nation was shocked since the prime minister had gone out of the country to attend a conference in Beijing without solving the problem (Zaman 1999).

Dinajpur district in 1995. The forum strongly criticized the prime minister's inability and irresponsibility in not being able to punish those responsible for her death. Questions were raised about the PM's attendance at the Beijing conference to solve the problems of women when a young woman had been raped and murdered by the police. Finally, the PM was compelled to meet the mother of Yasmin, accepted the seven-point demands of the people of Dinajpur, and to order authorities to take necessary action against the suspects. The case of Yasmin was an example of a successful mass movement. The movement (especially the women's movement) was an outburst of protracted injustice, exploitation, and brutality entrenched in the socio-economic and political structure of Bangladesh (Zaman 1999).

Finally, it can be said that the contribution of the movements of WOs in furthering women's issues cannot be ignored. With regard to influencing the Government of Bangladesh to enact the 1997 reform, it is very difficult to measure the extent of influence; however, it can be argued for sure that the government was certainly influenced by the demands of the WOs for introducing a direct election for the reserved seats. That was first demanded in writing by the Oikkyobaddha Nari Samaj in 1987. Choudhury (2000) appraised the contribution of the movements of WOs for the advancement of women in Bangladesh.

There is no doubt that WOs in Bangladesh have played, although belatedly, a commendable role in creating awareness and political consciousness among the female population of the country. They have acted as *fora* for women's leadership training as well as channels to bring women's voices to the fore. The fight against fundamentalism and patriarchy, although feeble, has been raised and recognized. Moreover, through seminars, workshops, and writings, they have highlighted the alarming lack of women's participation in shaping public policy, which affects their everyday lives. However, their constant demands for power sharing and participating in the decision making processes of the country have been met with intermittent and slow response from the male-dominated governmental order. There has not been any women's national coalition that can put women's agenda on the national table. No organizations or coalition of organizations exist that actually promote potential women candidates to contest high public offices. The politicization of the organizations is also detrimental in creating such a coalition. However, on the whole, their contribution in making women's voices heard can hardly be over-emphasized (Choudhury 2000, pp. 571–572).

Like WOs in Bangladesh, issues of women's participation in politics have been advocated by WOs in other countries in the world, which ultimately gained immense success. For instance, the Women's National Coalition (WNC) expressed its commitment for ensuring women's representation in the Parliament when South Africa became a democratic state in 1994. As a result of its persuasion, the African National Congress reserved a 30 % quota of women on electoral lists. Once a large number of women had been elected, women's groups, NGOs, and other civil society organizations combined their efforts to press women's demands into the policy process, which ultimately resulted in the enactment of three important statutes by the first democratic Parliament of

South Africa (Basu 2003, p. 43).²¹ The subsequent section deals with the role of NGOs in influencing the government to enact the Act of 1997.

5.3 Nongovernmental Organizations and Women's Political Participation

Before analyzing the role of NGOs, it is important to note that women are the main stakeholders of most NGOs in Bangladesh.²² At the same time, it is also worthwhile to state that most NGOs in Bangladesh carry out microcredit programs, which are considered to be the main means of empowering women. Economic self-dependence is perceived by NGOs as one of the important preconditions of women empowerment. It is believed that women will strive for other aspects of empowerment (political or social) only when they become economically self-dependent. Hadi asserted that

Credit programs can be a means to women's empowerment. They begin by organizing poor rural women into small groups. The group formation among women helps generate peer group support and solidarity. Through meetings, the awareness process starts. By selecting a specific income-generating project, they are given training. The concept of time and regularity becomes important as strict discipline in weekly savings is established. Issue-based meetings are a forum where each credit group member must participate. They choose issues that are important to their lives such as immunization of children, family planning, school issues, legal issues, and others. Through the credit group, the women have access to money. The money borrowed from the NGO helps them raise their position toward their husband and other household members, and their self-confidence is increased. As a result, their practical needs are largely fulfilled, and their strategic needs are recognized by the family and the community, as both their conditions and positions begin to change (Hadi 1997, p. 2).

Although most NGOs carry out microcredit programs, the focus has shifted to women's awareness building in some cases.²³ Moreover, a few NGOs implement programs particularly for elected women members at the local government level. One such NGO is Steps Toward Development, aimed at ensuring gender equality at all levels. The organization implements programs to bring awareness to ordinary

²¹ These statutes were (i) the Termination of the Pregnancy Act of 1996 that offered women access to abortion on broader and more favorable terms than in the past, (ii) the Domestic Violence Act of 1998 that provides protection against abuse for people who are in domestic relationships of various kinds, and (iii) the Maintenance Act of 1998 which substantially improves the position of women dependent on maintenance from former partners (Basu 2003, 43–44).

²² An assertion on the exact number of NGOs in Bangladesh is very difficult to make since these organizations are not registered under one particular authority. Many of these organizations even operate without any registration at the central level. Approximately 45,000 NGOs have taken their registration from the Ministry of Social Welfare. However, as potential recipients of foreign funds, 1,882 NGOs had been given registration by the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) till 2004 (World Bank 2006).

²³ These NGOs are Proshika, Steps Towards Development, Caritas, and others.

women and sometimes to elected representatives of the UPs. In addition, this organization works on good governance issues, where it tries to highlight the issue of women's political participation as an important prerequisite for good governance. Like this organization, there are other organizations that are working for the cause of women's political participation. Initiatives of this organization for ensuring greater women's participation are discussed below.

5.3.1 Initiatives for Greater Women's Political Participation

Although women are the focal point of most NGOs in Bangladesh that carry out microcredit programs of different types, efforts have been made to explore critically the initiatives of NGOs toward ensuring the greater participation of women in the political process. As a matter of fact, NGOs in Bangladesh are committed to upgrade the subordinate status of women in the society by providing them with microcredit.²⁴ Of course, there are some NGOs that are highlighting the issue of women's political participation in their activities.²⁵ These organizations are carrying out different projects to build awareness among women, with the expectation that they would be conscious about their civil and political rights, which would ultimately help them to raise their voices by themselves. For example, the Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh (ADAB)²⁶ played a proactive role in national politics during the mass movement in the mid-1990s.²⁷ In the election of 1996, ADAB coordinated a democracy awareness education program through which 15,000 trainers ran awareness-raising workshops across the country. This program contributed to an impressive voter turnout of 74 % in the election of 1996 (Ashman 1997). Another such example is the effort of the NGO Gono Shahajjo Sangstha (GSS, People's Help Organization) to encourage its landless members to run as candidates in the UP election in Nilphamari district. Although this program experienced brutal confrontation from the local landlords, it succeeded in encouraging its members (Hashemi 1995).²⁸ These activities of the NGOs usually build awareness among the women members with regard to their

²⁴ Author's interviews with the majority of the respondents from NGOs, 2007.

²⁵ Author's interviews with a group of respondents from NGOs, 2007.

²⁶ ADAB was the leading umbrella organization of NGOs in Bangladesh.

²⁷ In 1996, a political crisis occurred in Bangladesh, when all the opposition political parties boycotted the parliamentary election, raising the demand for a free, fair, impartial, and credible election under a "nonpartisan caretaker government." Ignoring the opposition's demand, the government decided to go for an election, which was only contested by the candidates of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). However, the government lasted only for 15 days, as continuous mass movements compelled it to promulgate an Act on a "nonpartisan caretaker government" and resign from power.

²⁸ Different forms of confrontations that occurred included burning down NGOs' schools, attacks on staff and members, and going on house-to-house searches to seize books and publications (Hashemi 1995).

involvement in the political process on one hand, and create immense pressure on the government to make necessary changes in their policies regarding women's participation on the other hand.

To be more specific, most of the NGOs implement different programs that indirectly support the issue of women's political participation.²⁹ For instance, the BRAC implements an education program in which women are preferred to participate. Through this program, they have been able to establish 35,000 schools all over Bangladesh where 75 % of the students and 100 % of the teaching staff are women.³⁰ Authorities of the BRAC perceive that once women become educated, they will be conscious about their political rights. Moreover, the BRAC officials indirectly encourage their women borrowers to run in the local government elections. Apart from the BRAC, a respondent from the ASA said³¹:

Although we do not have any program directly related to the issue of increasing women's political participation, informally, we work for the issue. While some of our group members run for UP election, our field-level workers influence other group members to cast their votes in favor of these running members. It is an indirect way of influencing.

A high-level official from Grameen Bank expressed that³²:

We do not have any special program for enhancing women's political participation. Basically, we provide microcredit to women with the intention to make them self-reliant. We strongly believe that once women become self-reliant, their opinion will be respected in the family and societal level. Also, if the process continues, these women will automatically strive for political participation.

On the other hand, there are some other organizations who are implementing some programs related to the issue of women's political participation. For instance, Caritas has three institution building programs: namely, Development Extension Education Services (DEES), Integrated Community Development Programs (ICDPs), and Gender and Development Program (GDP). The GDP is especially committed to the empowerment of women. Through these programs, Caritas organizes men and women, facilitating them to build their own people's organizations and encouraging them to participate in local government activities and in elections. Similarly, Steps Toward Development organizes almost the same type of program. According to an official, "We have carried out several programs on the elected women's representatives at the local level through which we intend to explore the real scenario of the nature of participation. Sometimes, we try to build their capacity so that they can carry out their duties properly."³³ Similar to the two previous organizations, Proshika also undertakes different programs that

²⁹ Author's interviews with the majority of respondents from NGOs, 2007.

³⁰ Information was collected from a top-level official from BRAC.

³¹ Author's interviews with a respondent from ASA, 2007.

³² Author's interviews with a respondent from Grameen Bank, 2007.

³³ Author's interviews with a respondent from Steps Towards Development, 2007.

are closely related to the issue of enhancing women's political participation in Bangladesh. For instance, all the programs of Proshika,

... tend to build organizations since all its achievements and activities emanate from the concepts and methods of organization building. The poor people living in rural and urban areas are encouraged to organize themselves into primary groups popularly known as *samitis*,³⁴ and form group federations at the village, union, and upazila levels, and thus building a broad organizational network. The process constitutes the basis of participatory development and spurs on the acquisition and strengthening of human, socioeconomic, and cultural resource bases of the poor. After their formation, the groups go through a process of empowerment involving various savings plans and human and skills development training, and engage themselves in different income-generating activities with credit from Proshika. The group federations play an effective role in achieving greater alliances among the poor and protecting their interest at all administrative levels. The federations undertake various socioeconomic programs in a participatory method to strengthen their capacity. So far, 149,016 primary groups have been formed of which 97,562 are women groups. There are currently 18,231 group federations working actively in Proshika.³⁵

Thus, it can be said that the above programs of Caritas, Steps Toward Development, and Proshika are oriented toward creating awareness among their stakeholders. It is true that these programs are not just particularly designed for women, but women are primarily included in these programs. Thus, the outcome of these programs will affect men and women alike. These activities of NGOs can certainly build awareness among women. Now it is important to know what the impact of these programs of NGOs is on the enactment of the Act of 1997. The following section tries to answer this question.

5.3.2 NGOs and the 1997 Reform

NGOs did not have any direct influence on the government during the enactment of the reform of 1997. However, it is certain that these NGOs exerted some sort of indirect influence on the government. For instance, the awareness-building programs of NGOs increased the level of awareness of women in some cases and helped them to raise their voices on their own. For instance, the executive director of Caritas said, "Caritas does not exert influence directly on the government to initiate reform. However, the people organized and trained by Caritas have exerted influence on the government to initiate reforms, by raising their voices."³⁶ Apart from building awareness, NGOs publish their research findings and organize press and media conferences to attract the attention of the government. Moreover, they submit memoranda to responsible authorities whenever they obtain significant

³⁴ *Samitis* are cooperative organizations.

³⁵ People's Organization Building Program, Proshika, available online at http://www.proshika.org.bd/pob_n.htm, accessed on 23/03/2008.

³⁶ Author's interviews with the executive director of Caritas, 2007.

findings from their research. However, lack of coordination among NGOs, and their political role, hinders the process of organizing awareness development programs properly.³⁷ These factors have weakened the strength of the awareness development programs. One respondent said, “Even though we are mobilizing women nationwide, we fail to organize them properly due to lack of coordination among ourselves.”³⁸ Despite having problems of coordination, NGOs always try to influence the government to initiate reform indirectly. Choudhury (2000) rightly asserted that:

The NGOs’ shift on women in the democratization process has been remarkable. Their initiatives have been instrumental in heightening political awareness at the grassroots level during the UP Election of 1997. Besides the high level of women’s voters’ turnover, the percentage of women candidates was higher in NGO-involved areas than the ones which were not under their concerns. The ratio has been 12.43 per cent and 9.97 per cent, respectively. The majority - winning candidates were also from various NGO group members who gave them crucial support by providing finance and campaigning during the election (Choudhury 2000, p. 573).

Finally, it can be said that the contribution of NGOs in the field of women’s development in Bangladesh cannot be ignored. Although they did not exert any direct influence on the government to enact the 1997 reform, there is hardly any disagreement on the fact that NGOs have done a lot for the women community in Bangladesh that will have a long-term effect on their empowerment. The success story of NGOs like Grameen Bank, BRAC, ASA, and others is now recognized worldwide. The time will come when women will raise their voices, protest against all kinds of gender discrimination, and demand greater political

³⁷ It has been widely alleged that some NGOs in Bangladesh were involved in national politics government (2001–2006) identified some NGOs that were involved in AL politics and harassed them in different ways. Some of the badly affected NGOs during that regime were Proshika, PRIP Trust, and Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangha (BNPS). Soon after the 2001 elections, authorities blocked the donor funds for Proshika and placed the organization under investigation for alleged financial irregularities. However, there were serious concerns about the investigation’s lack of transparency. The donors expressed their concern to the Government that they saw no grounds for blocking the NGO’s entire program while the investigation was underway, as this would cut off thousands of people from benefitting from the assistance provided by the donors. However, the NGO’s funds remained blocked. The authorities not only blocked the funds but also harassed the high officials of the organization in different ways. PRIP Trust, an NGO working to “facilitate the growth of the human and institutional potential of the development actors in civil society, government, and the business sectors” was also a target of harassment by the BNP government. It was also accused of being involved in political activity outside its function as an NGO. Its funds were frozen and subjected to a series of investigations by one agency after another that went through their entire files and records each time. The government was not able to substantiate its allegation of PRIP Trust being involved in political activity, and the allegations of mismanagement of funds was not corroborated through the independent audit of its records by a number of donor agencies. Other NGOs faced similar harassment, including the BNPS, a rights-based organization that works with the women’s movement against violence and promotes socioeconomic and political empowerment of women (information was collected from the various reports of Amnesty International Canada available at www.amnesty.ca).

³⁸ Author’s interviews with a respondent from NGOs, 2007.

participation. The following section seeks to explore the role of donors in the process of women's political participation in general and the enactment of the 1997 Act in particular.

5.4 Donors and Women's Political Participation

In the early 1970s, international feminist movements urged the State and international development agencies to "integrate" women into the development process. However, the strategies of this movement started to change in the post-Nairobi period when "integration" was replaced by "mainstreaming" as a strategy to promote women's concern within development institutions (Razavi and Miller 1995). Mainstreaming means bringing women into the center stage of development, especially at the macro level, to deal with concerns such as adjustment, environment, and poverty alleviation (Anderson 1990, cited in Razavi and Moller 1995). International development institutions continued their role as promoters of mainstreaming in two ways. First, they promoted women within their own procedures, and second they advocated for the inclusion of women in the development institutions of developing countries (Razavi and Moller 1995). Thus, it can be said that the efforts of mainstreaming women in the development process is one of the priorities of international development institutions and donors.

Before discussing the role of donor agencies in the process of the 1997 reform, it is important to explain the nature of the aid-dependent economy in Bangladesh, which is one of the poorest countries in the world.³⁹ Due to the nature of an aid-dependent economy, no finance minister of Bangladesh could frame a budget without first being assured of aid pledged at the Paris consortium meeting in April of each year (Sobhan 2003). This history of external aid dependency has made Bangladesh one of the strongest cases demonstrating the dominant local presence of global and South Asian donors.

Donors' interests have changed in the course of time. Although they started at influencing policies through the Structural Adjustment Policy, their interests are

³⁹ The gross domestic product (GDP) of the country in 2000 was estimated at \$48 billion at 1995 prices, which was almost equal to Bill Gates' (owner of Microsoft) current personal assets of \$40 billion. It is really unfortunate to think that the wealth of a nation with a population of almost 150 million is equal to the wealth of just one man. The growth in real per capita income of Bangladesh was not much above zero during the periods 1949–1950 and 1976–1977. The per capita income did not increase since the annual rate of growth in GDP was 2.7 % in this period as compared to the rate of population growth at 2.6 %. The present economic situation is also not encouraging. The GDP growth rate was 5 % from 1991 to 2000. The annual population growth rate is 1.5 %, while malnutrition and maternal mortality rates are still among the highest in the world. The present national poverty rate is 35.6 % in which 77.8 % of the total population lives on \$2 a day. The richest 20 % of the population earns 42.8 % of the total income, which is indicative of the widening gap between the rich and the poor (Jamil 2007).

currently concentrating on the issues of governance such as concern for democracy (Aminuzzaman 2007).

The administrative and political cultures of the aid recipient country, as well as the status of the target groups of people, are not considered by the donors when imposing their conditionalities. Islam (2005) asserted that while the share of Bangladesh in aid flow has been decreasing, the autonomy of the country has been restricted by the increase and widening of conditionalities. Such claim has been supported by a Dutch government study that pointed out that “donor agencies ‘owned’ development projects more than the governments or community organizations that truly represent the aid beneficiaries” (Oomen 1994, p. 61). The study also mentioned that “assistance programs/projects are conceived, executed, monitored, and evaluated mainly in lines with the official and informal objectives of donors” (ibid.: 61). Furthermore, Aminuzzaman asserted that

... donors have their own mechanism to loose coordination in the name of local consultative groups (LCG)⁴⁰ to synchronize the governance and reform programs. While the LCG coordinated external aid, it does not offer an enabling environment for in-depth dialogue with broader stakeholders on sectoral issues and cross-cutting themes. The donor agencies reported that they utilize the group for policy influence, and they do ensure that their voice is heard (Aminuzzaman 2007, p. 3).

In this kind of situation, policy making in Bangladesh is dominated by the preferences of the donors in many occasions. Sobhan (2007, p. 31) rightly pointed out that

... while this dependence on aid, in quantitative terms, has visibly declined in Bangladesh during the 1990s, the dependence on policy advice from donors still remains strong. The psychology of dependence on donors has become ingrained in the psyche of military, political and bureaucratic decision makers in Bangladesh who remain firmly convinced, even today, that donors hold their political lifeline in their hand.

Under such circumstances, it is reasonable to ask the extent to which donor agencies influenced the government during the enactment of the reform of 1997.

5.4.1 Means to Ensure Women’s Political Participation: The Donor’s Perspective

The situation of Bangladeshi women in the political process is in the “improving” stage, which means that the status has not yet improved as the process has only started.⁴¹ It is to be pointed out that women in Bangladesh are still lagging behind in many respects. Despite having an increase in the literacy rate for women and in

⁴⁰ The Local Consultative Groups (LCG) is a forum for development dialogue and donor coordination. It comprises 32 bilateral and multilateral donors and the secretary of the Economic Relations Division (ERD) of the Government of Bangladesh.

⁴¹ Author’s interviews with the donor agencies, July 2007.

their participation in productive and economic activities in recent time, the social norms, rules, discriminatory laws, and behavior and attitudes of the society, especially of men, still impede women's participation in decision making. Since women's status in the political process has not improved, the donor agencies conveyed their deep concern to increase women's participation in politics. For them "reservation of quotas" and "awareness building" are two of the most important means through which women's participation in politics can be enhanced at present. One respondent said⁴²:

At this point in time, it is very difficult for women to enter politics and compete with their male counterparts since the society is dominated by patriarchy and Islamic values. That is why affirmative action in the form of reservation of quotas and provision of direct election for women need to be implemented at all institutions from the local to the central government level. Although the process has started at the local level, it should be extended up to the national level soon.

Another respondent pointed out that⁴³:

Women's participation can be ensured by making them aware of their rights and responsibilities. It is also important to raise greater awareness among the general public on the importance of women's participation in politics. In addition, necessary reforms in the legal framework and a congenial political environment have to be created to promote greater women's political participation in Bangladesh.

Under the above circumstances, it is important to explore the extent to which institutions matter to women's political participation. For the donors, an institution is very important in women's political participation in the context of Bangladesh. As a matter of fact, women's participation in the political process is extremely difficult unless an institutional provision is made. One respondent said, "At first, it is important to offer scope for women's participation and the process of creating scope for women's participation needs to be initiated at the institutional level."⁴⁴ On the question of the necessity of changes in the institutional design for enhancing women's political participation, one respondent expressed a "positive" view by saying that, "If we want to create scope for participation by women at the institutional level, changes should be brought in the traditional design of institutions with an intention to make it more women friendly."⁴⁵ On the other hand, the respondent, expressing negative news, said that⁴⁶:

It is not easy to answer merely yes or no because there are a number of factors, such as socio-economic, political, and cultural factors of a particular community, that we have to take into account for advocating in favor of institutional changes. Women should take the most proactive role in advocating changes in institutional design, including reforms in existing laws, which means that women need to be aware of their rights for pressing such demands.

⁴² Author's interviews with a respondent from USAID, July 2007.

⁴³ Author's interviews with a respondent from UNDP, July 2007.

⁴⁴ Author's interviews with an official from UNDP, July 2007.

⁴⁵ Opinion expressed by a high official from UNDP; author's interviews, July 2007.

⁴⁶ Opinion expressed by a respondent from USAID; author's interviews, July 2007.

Considering the importance of women's political participation, it is important to explore different mechanisms to bring about changes in the institutional design. In fact, "reform" and "revolution" have been identified as two important mechanisms to bring changes in the institutional design. It is mentioned that "revolution" is not a peaceful way of transforming institutional design and that the women of Bangladesh are not powerful enough to organize any movements through which they can force the government to bring changes in institutional design; hence, "reform" is the only suitable means.⁴⁷ However, one respondent further said that "in order to bring changes in the institutional design, the existing legal framework needs to be reformed, for which a strong policy advocacy and a parallel popular demand have to be created."⁴⁸ Once it is concluded that reform is one of the most important means to bring about changes in the institutional design, it is reasonable to ask why the government initiates reform. For the donors, generally, the government initiates reforms only when there is a popular demand for them to bring about positive changes within institutions. Moreover, the government initiates reforms to face the challenges of the times. In some cases, the government initiates reforms after having been influenced by various factors.

5.4.2 Donors and the Case of the 1997 Reform

Since the government shoulders the responsibility of enacting reforms, donors always try to impose their own thinking on the governments of countries like Bangladesh. From this perspective, it is important to explore the extent of influence of donors on the government with regard to the enactment of the reform of 1997.

As a matter of fact, the donors did not have any direct influence on the Government of Bangladesh on the issue of the enactment of the reform of 1997. One respondent said that "Actually, donors did not influence the process of the 1997 reform directly. They basically offered funds and technical assistance to the government and NGOs in order to build the capacity of women at all levels. But at the same time, the donors remained vocal in the inclusion of more women at all levels."⁴⁹ Another respondent mentioned that "although donors do not influence the reform process directly, as development partners, they have the privilege to access the different levels within the government structure, which might enable them to influence the government."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Summary of opinion expressed by the officials from UNDP and USAID; Author's interviews, July 2007.

⁴⁸ Author's interviews with an official from USAID, July 2007.

⁴⁹ Author's interview with a UNDP official, July 2007.

⁵⁰ Author's interview with a USAID official, July 2007.

It is important to mention that the donors usually do not provide support to the government directly related to enhancing women's political participation. However, they offer logistical support to the government for building the capacity of women at different levels.

For instance, the UNDP started a project with the Government of Bangladesh in 2003 that aimed to offer training to the trainers of the Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre (BPATC), which, in turn, offered training to civil servants. The UNDP held the belief that, if the trainers are not trained properly through modern methods and techniques, they would not be able to offer quality training to the civil servants. Under this project, the UNDP also tried to look at the issue of gender sensitization in the organizational environment by reviewing the curriculum of the BPATC and ensuring the inclusion of gender issues in the curriculum to make it women friendly.⁵¹ Apart from carrying out such projects, donors sometimes offer funds to different international organizations and NGOs to implement different gender advocacy programs relating to women's political participation. One respondent pointed out that, "although donors do not provide direct support to the government, they offer support to policy advocacy for reforms to ensure women's participation in the political process through their projects implemented by international organizations and NGOs."⁵² One of the examples of a successful capacity-building program was undertaken by the Asian Development Bank (ADB),⁵³ in which it was found that, after training was offered to the elected women members of UPs, 80 % of them attended the monthly meeting of the UP regularly as compared to the previous 40 % attendance. The findings of the report also suggested some improvements in the attitudes of the chairman working with the women (ADB 2004). It was stated in the report that,

After the capacity building and gender sensitization training, the overall attitude of the Chairman working with the women has improved. For example, there are 13 standing committees in the UP, and there is a provision for women to become the chairpersons of committees like health and family welfare, small and cottage industry, and women's affairs. In the previous years, elected women representatives were not included in these committees. After the training, the women members negotiated their rights with the UP chairman to be included in the standing committees in all the 141 UPs in the project (ADB 2004, p. 40).

⁵¹ The case was discussed during author's interviews with a UNDP official, July 2007.

⁵² Author's interviews with a USAID official, July 2007.

⁵³ ADB's Regional Assistance Project 6008 entitled "Gender and Governance Issues in Local Government in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan" was implemented for over 18 months from July 2002 to February 2008 and was jointly funded by ADB, the Japan Special Fund, and the Canadian International Development Agency. In Bangladesh, the project was implemented by two NGOs (BRAC and Sushilan) that were responsible for building the capacity of 16 upazilas, 1 municipality, and 141 UPs in the district of Khulna, Bagerhat, Jessor, and Sathkhira. A total of 451 women representatives participated in the project (ADB 2004).

The discussion above signifies that the donors had some indirect influence on the then -government with regard to the enactment of the 1997 reform, which was manifested through the different projects implemented through their support. The next concern is to explore the process through which donors exert their influence on the government to initiate specific policies.

It is discovered that, as the development partners, the donors have access to the different levels of government offices of Bangladesh. Therefore, they can initiate dialogues at the top policy level. For instance, donors usually sit with the government in the Bangladesh Development Forum, once a year, to discuss key development issues and related policies.⁵⁴ Aside from the Bangladesh Development Forum, there is another forum, where the implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP)⁵⁵ is discussed. During discussions on the implementation of the PRSP, the donors can influence the government with their views and may even try to impose some conditionalities on the government.”⁵⁶

Donors can have some indirect influence on the government, but it is extremely difficult to measure the extent of their influence. However, efforts are being made to explore the mechanisms the donors use to exert indirect influence. It is found that different donor agencies use different mechanisms to influence the government. According to the respondent from USAID, “We certainly believe that we have been successful to some extent to influence the government. Through our Democratic Local Government Program (DLGP)⁵⁷ we have developed Bangladesh

⁵⁴ The Bangladesh Development Forum provides the donor community an opportunity to hear the Government’s development priorities and learn about Bangladesh’s future strategic directions. Like all other development forums in the region, no pledges of financial assistance are made in this forum.

⁵⁵ The member countries prepare the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) through a participatory process that involves domestic stakeholders as well as external development partners including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The PRSPs, which are updated every 3 years through annual progress reports, describe the country’s macroeconomic, structural, and social policies and programs over a 3-year or longer horizon to promote broad-based growth and reduce poverty, as well as the associated external financing needs and major sources of financing. Interim PRSPs (I-PRSPs) summarize the current knowledge and analysis of the country’s poverty situation, describe the existing poverty reduction strategy, and lay out the process for producing a fully developed PRSP in a participatory fashion.

⁵⁶ Author’s interviews with a USAID higher official, July 2007.

⁵⁷ The Democratic Local Governance Program (DLGP) is a USAID-funded project designed to increase the efficiency and transparency of selected rural and urban local governments in the northwest and southwest areas of Bangladesh. In addition, the program works to advance the legal and functional independence of two local government associations (BUPF and MAB) founded to represent the interests of rural and urban local governments, respectively. The program is implemented by RTI International, a North Carolina, US-based nonprofit international organization. The DLGP is working with 85 local governments—15 municipalities and 70 union parishads—to create more efficient, more independent, and more responsive local institutions (Increasing Transparent and Accountable Governance in Bangladesh, available online at http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pdaccp655.pdf, accessed on May 13, 2013).

Union Parishad Forum (BUPF) and Municipal Association of Bangladesh (MAB).⁵⁸ Through these organizations we are doing advocacy with the government."⁵⁹ With regard to the advocacy for enhancing women's political participation in Bangladesh, the respondent said:

Currently, USAID Bangladesh does not have any direct project on women's political participation, but there are policy advocacy components under our local government and political party strengthening programs. These programs encourage women's political participation through imparting training for women groups at the local level and midlevel women leader of political party.⁶⁰

On the other hand, the respondent from the UNDP said, "UNDP is basically working for capacity building of women. One of the successful examples was the Local Governance Development Fund Project, Sirajganj, Bangladesh.⁶¹ Now we want to replicate the experience of that project all over the country."⁶² Upon the completion of the Sirajganj project, the UNDP signed another agreement with the Government of Bangladesh on September 17, 2007, on the use of a portion of US\$18.12 million for strengthening UPs. This phase of the project covers 388 UPs in six districts (Narsingdi, Feni, Habiganj, Barguna, Satkhira, and Sirajganj) of Bangladesh. The project is almost similar to the Local Governance Development Fund Project, Sirajganj.

The above information confirms that the donors did not play any direct role during the enactment of the 1997 reform. However, their involvement in several local government development projects provided them the scope to work with the government, wherein they tried to motivate the government on some particular issues. On the other hand, they could exert indirect influence on the government through their Democratic Local Government Projects, aimed at building the capacity of the members of local government units. These capacity-building programs helped to raise the level of awareness of the members and chairmen, uniting them in raising their voice against any kind of discrimination. With regard to the role of the donors in furthering gender issues in Bangladesh, a World Bank Report (2008, p. 27) stated that:

⁵⁸ The BUPF is an association of UPs or rural local governments, while the MAB represents the *pourashavas* or the municipalities or urban local governments. These associations were created with the support of the DLGP's predecessor to oppose further erosion of the authority of urban and rural governments by an expanding central state. Both associations now face serious challenges in achieving sustainability and decreasing their almost total dependence on foreign assistance.

⁵⁹ Author's interviews with a high official from USAID, Bangladesh, July 2007.

⁶⁰ Author's interviews with a respondent from USAID, Bangladesh, July 2007.

⁶¹ The Sirajganj Local Governance Development Fund Project (SLGDP), which was jointly funded by the UNDP and the UNCDF, and implemented by the Local Government Division of the Ministry of Local Government Rural Development and Cooperatives of the Bangladesh government, began in July 2000 with an estimated completion date of December 2005. The project aimed at promoting decentralized participatory planning and local governance in Bangladesh. (New Age, 20/09/2007).

⁶² Opinion expressed by a respondent from UNDP. Author's interviews, Dhaka 2007.

International multilateral and bilateral agencies have historically played a substantive part in engaging with the government and in encouraging NGOs to further gender equality. Many of the policies in Bangladesh have been enriched by this engagement, as Bangladesh's experience has enriched the knowledge base of these agencies. Funding for programs for women's advancement similarly has been adequate. Even today, international agencies play an important part in financing NGOs and government agencies, undertake monitoring and evaluation, and provide opportunities for two-way learning and technical support.

Drawing a conclusion from the experiences of these two cases is difficult; however, it is reasonable to assume that they are indicative of a more general trend.

5.5 International Conventions and Women's Political Participation

The issue of women's political empowerment is now internationally recognized. It is widely discussed in the international arena that women's political empowerment is one of the major issues that can bring the backward and neglected half of the population (women) to the forefront. This is the reason why women's political life and rights are enshrined in full in Article 7 (Part II) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in the Declaration of the UN. In Article 7 of the Beijing Program adopted in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in the 15th of September, 1995, the work procedures for women's political empowerment in decision making were analyzed. Article 21 of the Universal Human Rights Declaration of the UN states that "everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives" (United Nations 1998).

Like other UN conferences, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was more than just a conference (Eyben 2006). It was a conference that represented an international movement, where commitments for empowering women everywhere in the world were made by some 17,000 participants from 189 countries. In addition to this number, over 30,000 participants who gathered in Huairou for the NGO Forum shared the commitments and set an agenda for partnership for the implementation of the Platform for Action (Huq et al. 1997). Negotiation among the diverse sets of women's constituencies was a difficult task in case of the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA), as compared to previous conferences, because the lobbies of religious women were more organized than before, and they threatened to destabilize the north-south convergence that emerged as an opposition to neo-liberal fundamentalism (Kabeer 2005). Despite having obvious divisions, the PFA expressed a holistic and transformative vision for the future (ibid.) and called for the integration of gender perspectives in all policies and programs (Huq et al. 1997). The PFA came up with the declaration that,

The principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality,

development and peace. A transformed partnership based on equality between women and men is a condition for people-centered sustainable development (United Nations 1995).

It focused on concrete measures to be adopted to address 12 critical areas of concern that covered different arenas of social life and singled out the complex causalities underlying gender inequality and women's subordination across the world.⁶³ They were accompanied by strategic objectives and actions focusing on the government but included the recommendations made by NGOs, political parties, international institutions, and others. Like many other countries in the world, the Government of Bangladesh signed the PFA without any reservation. The concern about the "inequality between men and women in sharing of power and decision making at all levels" of the PFA is highlighted in this project. In the context of the present book, efforts have been made to explore the steps followed by the Government of Bangladesh to implement the PFA and to ensure equality between men and women in power sharing. Due to the existence of strong patriarchy and a male-dominated societal structure, the institutional design was not conducive to ensure women's political participation in Bangladesh. It was inevitable for the government to bring about change in the institutional design, to implement the PFA in spirit and in principle. To bring about changes in the institutional design, reform was the only option left for the government. Under such circumstances, it is reasonable to explore the extent to which the then Government of Bangladesh was influenced by the PFA during the enactment of the reform of 1997.

It is confirmed that the PFA had an influence on the then Government of Bangladesh to initiate the reform, since it was the government's obligation as a signatory to the Beijing declaration. This claim seems to have strong ground when several top level AL leaders have been found expressing their opinion in the following way⁶⁴:

Of course, the Beijing conference influenced us a lot. Although the Conference was attended and signed by the BNP government, they did not take any initiative to ensure women's political participation even if they committed to implement the PFA in full. But we took the initiative once we took over the power since we believe in women's greater participation.

⁶³ These 12 areas of concern include (i) the persistence and increasing burden of poverty on women, (ii) inequalities and unequal access to education and training, (iii) inequalities and unequal access to health care and related services, (iv) violence against women, (v) inequality in economic structures and policies in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources, (vi) inequality between men and women in sharing of power and decision making at all levels, (vii) the effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women, including those living under foreign occupation, (viii) insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women, (ix) lack of respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of the human rights of women, (x) stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media, (xi) gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment, and (xii) persistent discrimination against and violence of the rights of the girl child (Huq et al. 1997, pp. 55–56).

⁶⁴ Author's interviews with top-level AL leaders, 2007.

Another group of respondents were of opinion that “since PFA was accepted in an international arena and Bangladesh government expressed their commitment to implement it; it became an obligation to us. Moreover, we were also interested to enhance women’s participation in politics.”⁶⁵ These arguments of the leaders of political parties have been well supported by the respondents from other categories. A few eminent women activists and an academician expressed that⁶⁶:

Actually, the issue of the political empowerment of women came into consideration of the international community since Beijing. Bangladesh was a signatory to the Beijing Declaration without any reservations, and it committed to the full implementation of the PFA. That is why it had been an obligation for the then government to steer the issue of women’s political participation to adherence.

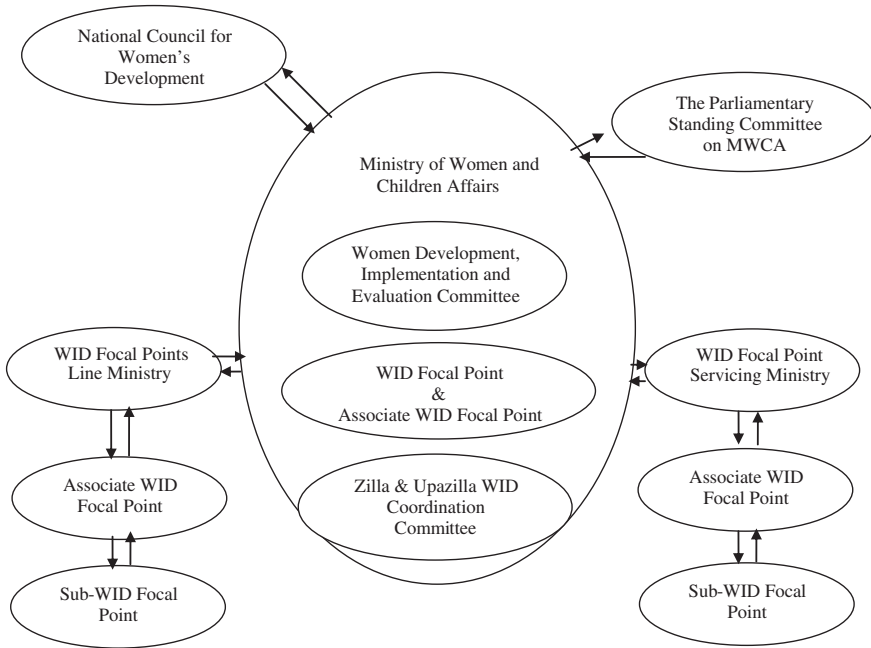
The validity of these claims is high, since the government was not confined within the enactment of the reform of 1997. It also took several other initiatives to turn the objectives of the PFA into reality. First, the government, in partnership with civil society, actors increased its investment in education and health with a special focus on girl children. Second, the barrier for women to participate in all areas of national development was overcome when the national defense force opened its doors to the women of Bangladesh. Third, women were mainstreamed into the development process by pursuing special programs for female education, female employment, and provisions for credit facilities for women. Primary education was made compulsory, and female education was vigorously encouraged. In addition, stipend programs for girls in secondary schools were introduced, which made Bangladesh the pioneer in this regard (Khan et al. 2005). Continuing its commitment to the Beijing PFA, the Government of Bangladesh set up comprehensive national mechanisms and institutions for the advancement of women. Table 5.1 shows the structure of these mechanisms.

The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs was made the nodal ministry, with the responsibility of coordinating the implementation of the national policy on women. The National Council for Women Development, under the chair of the prime minister, was formed at the highest level. The council comprises the representatives of various ministries at the ministerial level and members of the civil society. Parliamentary standing committees were formed to advise the government to take specific initiatives for women’s development, after reviewing different development programs for women. Women and Development (WAD) focal points were established in different ministries of the government to oversee the concerns of women in the programs of the government. They are responsible for (i) formulating sectoral plans, keeping in mind gender concerns; (ii) preparing lists of priority projects for women for inclusion in the annual development plans; (iii) reviewing and modifying ongoing projects with a view to incorporate adequate gender concerns in sectoral programs and projects; (iv) ensuring a gender-sensitive reporting system; (v) collaborating with other sectors and central agencies to

⁶⁵ Author’s interviews with five top-level AL leaders, 2007.

⁶⁶ Author’s interviews, Dhaka 2007.

Table 5.1 Comprehensive national mechanism and institutions for the advancement of women



Source Adopted from Khan et al. (2005)

achieve WID sectoral goals; and (vi) monitoring and reporting on their sectoral activities and constraints in achieving these goals.

An Implementation and Evaluation Committee comprising representatives from all focal point ministries and Divisions of the government and civil society organizations, was setup in 1996. The committee was chaired by the minister in charge of the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs, whose main responsibility was to coordinate and evaluate programs relating to the advancement of women, review the identification of problems and challenges, and suggest guidelines for future implementation. To review all empowerment- and advancement-related activities of the district administration, district council, pourashava, and local government, district-level coordination committees were formed. These groups were organized as registered groups to strengthen self-reliant women’s groups at the grassroots level (Khan et al. 2005).

The discussion above helps us to come to a conclusion that there is enough reason to say that the PFA of the Beijing conference was in the minds of the decision makers during the enactment of the reform in 1997. It is very difficult to measure the extent of the influence of PFA on the government, but it can be said that it has made the government consider such an initiative that could enhance women’s political participation, at least at the local government level. In the context of Bangladesh, the PFA can be treated as the basis to go forward and eradicate gender discrimination

from the society. Even the issue of the elimination of gender-based discrimination has been treated as one of the important prerequisites of poverty reduction initiatives by the Government of Bangladesh. It has been stated in the National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction (GOB 2005, p. 148) that:

Within a comprehensible, value-based and sustainable social and economic development framework, gender-based discrimination has to be eliminated and efforts towards that end must form an integral part of poverty reduction initiatives... [I]t is a key issue to address, given that women are subject to growing discrimination in society although considerable progress has taken place in the area of women's advancement during thirty-three years of the independence of Bangladesh. Inclusion of women's advancement and rights as a special issue is essential for three reasons: to uphold fundamental human rights because women's rights are also human rights; to achieve efficiency in poverty reduction and to achieve sustainable development.

Finally, it can be said that the Beijing conference displayed the diversity of the international women's movement at its best, more than any other women's conferences. It was able to bring grassroots organizations from across the world to the same platform. For example, a national umbrella organization was setup in India as part of the Beijing process that succeeded in drawing the attention of WOs and groups that did not take part in this type of international processes before. As a consequence, the discussion on gender equality and negotiation on strategies for change in the Asia-Pacific regional process were participated by almost 800 WOs from India. The functions of this network continued even after the conference was over, and this gave courage to many organizations to face the challenge of controversial issues (Kabeer 2005).

In the case of Bangladesh, the movement of WOs gained momentum after the Beijing conference, and it started to influence the government to take the necessary initiatives for the implementation of the PFA, which ultimately resulted in the enactment of the 1997 reform, along with other affirmative action to eradicate gender-based discrimination. It was not just about the Government of Bangladesh attending and ratifying the Beijing conference, but it was also about the government expressing its solidarity with the worldwide movement for women's advancement, by attending all succeeding world conferences for women's rights. For instance, it also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), initially with some reservations on a few of the Articles.⁶⁷ However, most of the reservations were withdrawn, except for Articles 2 and 16(1)(c) that talked about (i) granting women the same status and rights as men in the arena of the family, and (ii) protecting women against

⁶⁷ Initially, there have been reservations on at least four articles including 2, 13 (a), 16(1)(c), and 16(1)(f) (The World Bank 2008, p. 27).

discrimination in the public arena, particularly in the legal sphere.⁶⁸ Despite having some reservations on a few of the articles, Bangladesh's position was among the top 10 countries to ratify the Optional Protocol on CEDAW. A World Bank Report (2008, p. 27) stated that:

... to the government's credit, however, it did allow Bangladesh to be among the top ten countries to ratify the Optional Protocol on CEDAW. The Protocol allows women to approach the International Expert Committee for Justice if they feel their rights have not been protected within guidelines of their nation's commitments to women's rights. Ratification of the Protocol reflects, at least in theory, the Government of Bangladesh's intent to assure women's access to justice.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter tries to explore the role of the different societal actors in the process of the enactment of the reform of 1997. The above discussion leads us to the conclusion that WOs played an important role in furthering women's issues in Bangladesh. Since the country's independence, several WOs remained active in calling for legislation in favor of women and campaigning for affirmative action against discrimination on women at all levels, including their greater participation in the political process. Although WOs did not exert any direct influence on the government to enact the reform of 1997, they exerted indirect influence on the government that certainly compelled the government to consider the issue of women's political participation at the local level. It was found that women were the focal point of the majority of NGOs responsible for eradicating poverty through microcredit programs. It is important to mention here that NGOs' microcredit programs in Bangladesh had achieved tremendous success and attracted the attention of the international community. However, only few NGOs implemented some projects in which they tried to build awareness among women. This is why they did not exert direct influence on the government during the enactment of the 1997 reform. However, NGOs worked indirectly for women's greater participation in politics. For instance, the respondents from several NGOs said that they encouraged their other group members to cast their votes in favor of their group members.

With regard to donors' role in the process of the 1997 reform, it is important to note that their influence in policy making is universal, since the Government of Bangladesh depends on them, to a large extent, to finance its development budget. However, it is found that the donors did not exert any direct influence on the process of the reform of 1997. They exerted indirect influence, by supporting

⁶⁸ One of the possible interpretations of this reservation is that the Government of Bangladesh considered the sentiment of the majority of Muslims, guided by the *Shariah* laws, which do not accept the equal rights of women and men in the family domain and in property sharing. No one in the Government of Bangladesh wanted to contradict these views by ratifying those Articles. This reflects the Government's conservative approach toward women. From another perspective, it can be said that decision of the Government was governed by political gain rather than the welfare of women.

the government in implementing capacity-building programs for women. They also provided funds to various local government projects, to build the capacity of the local members and chairmen of the UP. Sometimes, the donors encouraged the NGOs to carry out projects for the advancement of women and offer them funds.

On the other hand, several movements of WOs, and the PFA of the Beijing Conference, had left enough impact on the government to think about the issue. This claim seems to have strong ground, since the Government of Bangladesh attended all conferences on women and ratified several declarations that reflected the government's intention to ensure the welfare of women. This does not mean that the government was influenced only by these two factors. The Act was enacted as a result of the direct and indirect influences of the different actors. In the next chapter, an attempt is made to ascertain the impact of the reform of 1997 on women's political participation in Bangladesh.

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Chapter 6

Elected Women Members in the Union Parishad

6.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters, the roles of different State, societal, and international actors in the process of the enactment of the Act of 1997 have been discussed. The main concern of this chapter is to assess the impact of the 1997 reform on women's political participation in the UP level in Bangladesh. The 'impact' of reform in this book refers to an assessment of the changes that are observed with respect to the two stated objectives of the 1997 Act: namely an enhanced avenue for women to participate in politics, and especially through participation in the UP elections, and an enhanced role played by women in the UP decision making. More specifically, an attempt is made to look into the improvements among women with regard to their involvement in the decision-making process in the UP. Along with ascertaining the role of the reform on women's involvement in political decision making, the progress of women in their economic choices and societal freedom is also important to discuss, since they receive honoraria and are required to be involved in societal affairs, as part of their capacity as representatives of the people. The analysis in this chapter is based on interviews with a sample of 107 elected women members from 36 UPs of 9 *upazilas* in Rajshahi district. Moreover, the views of 72 male members and chairmen of 36 UPs have also been considered to substantiate the arguments of the women members regarding their male counterparts.

6.2 Impact of the 1997 Reform on Women's Political Participation

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important aims of this research is to analyze the impact of the reform of 1997 on women's political participation in the local government in Bangladesh. Since economic and societal freedom is related

to the political participation of women in the UP, this section will explore the economic sovereignty of the women members and discuss their societal freedom and involvement in the decision-making process in the UP.

6.2.1 Economic Sovereignty or Freedom

Elected women members of the UP receive an honorarium of BDTK 1,500 (equivalent to US\$ 18.29 in an exchange rate of 1US\$ equals to BDTK 82) each month. Since the majority of women members (about 62.29 %) in the study area belonged to the lower-income group, whose monthly income was within the range of BDTK 3,000 to BDTK 4,999, the honorarium worth BDTK 1,500 could make a significant impact on the families of the women members. Thus, the impact of the 1997 Act on the economic sovereignty of the women members is explored from two perspectives: freedom in spending money and their role in family decision making. The first perspective deals with the exploration of the purpose the income (amount of money the women members earn from their capacity as an elected member) is spent and who spends it. Simply put, did the women members spend their income according to their own choice or was it spent by other members of the family?¹ The second perspective deals with the evaluation of the role of the women members in family decision making.

6.2.1.1 Freedom in Spending Money

In practice, the income of the women members was spent for the maintenance of their family, which included expenses for food, schooling of children, and others.² Although money was spent for the family, women members did not reserve the freedom to spend their income on their own accord.³ Therefore, one may ask: who spent the money? In fact, the husbands of the married women members usually decided how and for what purpose the money would be spent, while it was the male heads of the family (usually the father, elder brother, or young sons) who decided for the unmarried, divorced, and widowed women members. Such finding is corroborated by the finding of Chowdhury (2009)'s study where it was found that despite having belongingness to the upper class, a group women parliamentarians did not have control over their own earnings. Thus, they failed to spend money for political purposes. It does not necessarily mean that none of the women members enjoyed the freedom of spending. Of course there is a group of women members, who came from

¹ Other members mean the father, brother, husband, son, and others.

² All respondents expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

³ More than half (61.88 %) of the respondents expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

economically well-off families, who enjoyed freedom of spending.⁴ This is an indication of the fact that there is a close relationship between economic condition and freedom of spending. Such reality demonstrates that the reform of 1997 has, to some extent, failed to ensure the women's choice of how to spend their money, if such spending decisions is strictly controlled by the male heads of their families.

6.2.1.2 Role in Family Decisions

In a country like Bangladesh, on many occasions, financial status determines the extent of power and authority exercised by an individual in family matters. For instance, in the societal setting of a joint family, decision making tends to be dominated by those who provide more money for the maintenance of the family. Since the income of the women members was spent for the family, it was expected that the women's voice would be heard in the decision-making process.

The importance of women in the family decision-making process has increased to certain level. In such cases, prestige, power, and importance in decision making depends to a large extent on the money they earn, since these women were totally kept away from the decision-making process before being elected as members of UPs.⁵ However, there is still a large group of women members whose positions in their family's decision making have remained unchanged, even though they earn the same amount of money.⁶

Now a pertinent question is: to what extent the importance of women members has increased in family decision making? In fact, the extent of their importance has been described into three categories: "role of a decision maker," "role of an information provider," and "role of a spectator."⁷ However, it is very difficult to describe the status of women members in these criteria. Although some women respondents played the role of "a decision maker,"⁸ a majority either played the role of "an information provider" or of "a spectator."⁹

This situation indicates the low level of self-esteem of the women members, since the opportunity to provide information to the male members, or to sit in a meeting where decisions are made, was conceived as an increase in their importance in family matters. These situations signify women member's lower levels of expectation, indicating that they highly appreciate any kind of respect shown to

⁴ Less than half (38.32 %) of the respondents expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

⁵ More than half (52.34 %) of the respondents expressed such a view; author's interviews, 2007.

⁶ About half (47.66 %) of the respondents expressed such view; author's interviews, 2007.

⁷ The first category suggested that women members played the most dominant role in the family decision making process, while the role of women in the second category was to supply information when required. The third category suggested that they could sit in the decision-making process without any power to express their opinion.

⁸ About a third (33.33 %) of the respondents expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

⁹ About a third (29.41 and 37.25 %) expressed these view respectively, author's interviews, 2007.

them. However, despite having an increase in the importance of women members in family matters, the intensity of importance is not strong enough to conclude that a substantial change has been made in women's status at the family level. It also confirms the domination of patriarchy in the Bangladeshi society, where decisions in the family are made by the males in most cases. In the case of a married woman's family, the final authority in making decisions is the husband or the father-in-law, while the father or the elder brother dominates the decision making in the family of an unmarried woman member. Similarly, in the case of a divorced or widowed woman member, the decisions in family matters are made by the adult males of the family or the male heads of the family.

6.2.2 *Societal Freedom of the Women Members*

In a patriarchal state with male-dominated societal structures, women's free movements are not accepted. Moreover, Islamic values restrict women's participation in the public arena. However, the Act of 1997 has offered women an avenue to make them involved in local government politics and dedicate themselves to the well-being of the local community. Since the membership of women in the UPs demands greater mobility and interaction with community people, it deserves exploration of the extent to which elected women members have gained societal liberty as part of their capacity as the people's representatives. Societal liberty of women members has been explored using different variables like (i) societal acceptance, (ii) constraints from religion and fundamentalism, (iii) use of purdah, (iv) freedom of movement, (v) access of general people to women members, (vi) incidents of *fatwa*, (vii) education and access to information, (viii) participation in nonfamily group activities and NGO activity, and (ix) changes in attitude.

6.2.2.1 Societal Acceptance

Levels of acceptance of the women members by the society vary significantly. As a matter of fact, society has not yet accepted women as their representatives. A large group of people did not accept women members as their representatives, while another group accepted them with reservation, since they did not have any alternative choice but to accept them. Only a small group of respondents accepted them wholeheartedly, which is not representative of the total population due to its small number.¹⁰

Now one may wonder: who were those people who accepted women members wholeheartedly? One possible explanation is that these people belonged to the progressive sections of the society, who uphold the spirit of secularism and equal

¹⁰ Over half (53.27 %), over a third (34.58 %), and just over a tenth (12.15 %) of the respondents expressed these views respectively; author's interviews, 2007.

rights for all, but their number in the society is very small. Thus, it can be asserted that patriarchy still dominates the Bangladeshi society, which is not ready to accept women taking part in the public arena. The synthesis of opinion of the majority of women members are as follows¹¹:

The male members of the society did not accept women who took part in the political process. They teased us and showed a neglecting attitude during our election campaign. Sometimes, they prevented us from carrying out election campaigns and organized public meetings, and issued “*fatwa*” saying that taking part in activities outside the home was a violation of Islamic rules. At the same time, it is important to note that we found some people who were women friendly, but their number was too few to counter the other group.

Since elected women members were not accepted by the majority of the population in their locality, it is important to analyze whether this nonacceptance created any hindrance on the part of the elected UP members, in terms of carrying out their responsibilities. As a matter of fact, starting from the elections to fulfilling their responsibilities in the UPs, the elected women members suffered from different types of hindrances.

Resistance first started from their families, when it was made public that they wanted to run in the UPs election. It was perceived by the family members that their participation in the local government politics would reduce their prestige in the society, since Bangladeshi society does not accept women's participation in activities outside the home. Thus, the male members of the family used all sort of mechanisms to prevent them from running in the election. After failing to restrict the women from running in the election, family members imposed restrictions on their movement. In most cases, they canvassed and asked for votes for their women. Even after the election, the women members' movements outside the home were restricted by their families. However, some women members received encouragement from their family members as well. These families were relatively educated and had a progressive and secular, political ideology.¹² However, their number was found too small to be representative of the total population.

Aside from resistance from their families, women faced serious impediments from cultural norms and fundamentalists as well. Sometimes, mullahs¹³ issued fatwas against women who intended to contest in elections. In most cases, secular forces are too weak to resist the fatwas.

Moreover, the husbands' of women members were found to attend meetings of the UPs on behalf of their wives, suggesting to many that the wives were ignorant about politics at the local level.¹⁴ This is an indication of the subordinate status of

¹¹ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

¹² Author's interviews, 2007.

¹³ Mullah is a term used for someone who is known or believed to be learned in religious matters.

¹⁴ This case substantiates the subordinate state of women in Bangladesh, where they are perceived as needing the help of their husbands to be capable to do anything except taking care of their families.

women in Bangladesh, where they are perceived to be capable of doing nothing except taking care of their families. Mukhopadhyay and Meer (2004), who found same findings in their research, stated:

Husbands of the women representatives were of the view that their wives had come into political office on the basis of their (the husbands') position in society and not on the basis of any attributes of the women themselves. Husbands informed the gathering that since their wives had domestic responsibilities and it was not the correct thing for a woman to be out of the home at night, they (the husbands) officiated at public functions for their wives. That these men could appropriate their wives' political office was possible because of deeply ingrained ideas that women are not autonomous agents but rather the property of men (ibid.: 96).

Of course, there are some women members who did not encounter problems, either during the election or when fulfilling their duties once elected. Therefore, it is imperative to find out underlying causes of a smooth entry of this group into the political process. The truth is that these women belonged to the group with higher power, prestige, and education, who had made advancements in every sphere of the society. Aside from this group, women from political families also faced less problems than the other groups. Sometimes, the political image of their family members (i.e., husband, father, father-in-law, or other members of the family) helped them to win in the election. Thus, the possibility of winning the election was found higher for women candidates coming from political families having wider support in the locality.¹⁵

6.2.2.2 Religious Constraints

Bangladesh is close to being 90 % Muslim, and its state religion is Islam.¹⁶ Patriarchic domination is seen in Islamic practices when it concerns the sexual division of labor and responsibility. They, in effect, sanctify male dominance. According to these practices, the man is the earner, and the woman is the server of a man. As the server of the man, the woman should remain within the house. Restriction has been imposed, by religion, on the movement of women outside the house (Murshid 2004). Mukhopadhyay (2003, p. 34) pointed out that “as one husband said, this is a Muslim country; she (a women member) is a woman so she could not go out in the evening. He (the husband) sees his wife’s responsibility as caring for the children.” Women are instructed to wear the purdah while they go outside their homes, so they can hide themselves from others. Huque and Akhter

¹⁵ It does not mean that all women candidates from political families who ran in the election won. It still depends on how popular their family members are. However, candidates from political families have some advantages since they are more mobile than the others and have a broad network in the society.

¹⁶ Muslims constitute 89.5 % of the population of Bangladesh. Among the rest of the population, Hindus constitutes 9.6 %, while Buddhists and Christians constitute 0.7 and 0.3 %, respectively (Religion in Bangladesh, available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Bangladesh, accessed on February 25, 2013).

(1987) asserted that, in Bangladeshi society, religious orientation starts in the family, even before the child is born. They described the process of a child's socialization in religious values as:

During pregnancy, mothers, especially in the rural areas, are found to devote more time than usual to religious duties. It is believed that such activities will help in making the child a religious and honest person. Formal attempts at socializing a child in the values of Islam start from the moment of birth. A male member of the family recites the Azan (call for prayer) as soon as a child is born. If the newborn is a male, the Azan is recited loudly. For a female child, it is whispered in her ear. The purpose is to put the names of Allah and the prophet in the child's ear immediately after birth. In selecting a name for the child, the parents are very cautious in deciding on an Islamic name for the child (usually with Arabic or Persian roots) with the right meaning. The teachers at madrasas (religious schools), imams (people who lead prayers in mosques), and other religious leaders are generally consulted.... (Huque and Akhter 1987, p. 209).

In this kind of religious environment, it is important to explore whether the women members face religious constraints or not. In fact, the women members faced different kinds of religious problems such as "restriction on mobility," purdah, fatwa, and others. It was asserted by the women members that religion imposed a ban on their movements, forcing them to wear the purdah. Moreover, religion did not allow them to sit with a man and move freely with them.

However, some women members did not face any religious difficulties while fulfilling their responsibilities as members of the UP.¹⁷ Now one may wonder why this section of women members did not face any religious problems, while the majority suffered from different religious restrictions. Indeed, this group of women was religious minded and abided by the rules of the religion. Thus, nobody asked them in the name of religion to follow religious rules.

Aside from religious constraints, the elected women members were the victims of fundamentalists as well. As a matter of fact, the fundamentalists tried hard to prevent the women's involvement in the public arena by imposing a ban on their movement, forcing them to wear purdah, and so on.¹⁸ Once women violate these restrictions, through participating in politics, fundamentalists sometimes organize public meetings to fatwa against them. Apart from these mechanisms, the fundamentalists also create pressure on the husbands of the women members to divorce them. Halder expressed almost similar views by pointing out that: "Muslim women generally face tremendous opposition, and are often criticized by religious fundamentalists, on the ground that there is no provision for women to be State leaders under Islam" (Halder 2004, p. 32).

With this perspective, it is important to explore what happens to women members from other religions. It is evident that non-Muslim women members faced less religious restrictions in the process of taking part in the political process, since their movement outside the home and their participation in the public arena are not severely restricted in religions like Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism. Again,

¹⁷ Author's interviews, 2007.

¹⁸ Authors interviews with the majority of the women members, 2007.

the number of elected women members from other religions in the study area was too small to leave any positive impact on the community.¹⁹ Such findings corroborated with those of Mukhopadhyay's study, in which it was claimed that "Hinduism neither precludes nor deems it unnatural for women to participate in politics and to exercise legitimate power" (Mukhopadhyay 1982, p. 23).

It is important to mention here that the majority of the women members did not have the courage to raise their voice against fundamentalists, even if they had been victimized by them on many occasions. One may ask why. One possible explanation lies in the fear of having fatwas issued against them. Aside from this fear, they did not receive support from their male colleagues in the UP to face the challenges of fundamentalism.

Now a pertinent question is: what is the role of the families of the women members in this regard? In reality, the families of the women members do not want to engage in any kind of confrontation with the fundamentalists. Thus, they always discourage their women from going against the fundamentalists, in order to avoid any confrontation with them.

However, a portion of women have challenged the fundamentalists. Probably, this group of women members came from families with a strong power base in the locality. The fundamentalists even considered their background before issuing any fatwa against them. However, this group is not in a position to represent the total number of women members, since the number is well below that of those who did not go against the fundamentalists.

6.2.2.3 Use of Purdah

According to stringent Islamic rule, women should use the purdah to hide themselves from others. Prevalence of a strong Islamic culture in the Bangladeshi society has been found since the majority of women members wear purdah.²⁰ However, diversification was also found in the mode of use of purdah. A larger group of women was found wearing it while going outside their home and the rest was found wearing it all the time.²¹ This situation signifies that women are somehow obligated to use it due religious values.

Under such conditions, one may wonder about the reasons for wearing purdah by women councilors while going outside their homes. In fact, some women use it for personal reasons, meaning that these women grew up in religious families and have upheld religious values from the very beginning of their childhood.²² Others

¹⁹ Among the 107 elected women members in the study area, only three were Hindus, while the rest of the 104 women were Muslims.

²⁰ More than half (62.63 %) expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

²¹ A little above half (55 %) and below half (45 %) responded respectively; author's interviews, 2007.

²² 35 % responded in this way; author's interviews, 2007.

either use it for religious reasons or due to pressure from their families.²³ This situation also signifies that the women members' personal choices are overridden by religious restrictions, which is indicative of the existence of strong Islamic values in Bangladeshi society.

Now, we must consider the channels of fundamentalists' interaction with the women who do not wear the purdah. In fact, women members who do not use purdah encounter severe criticism from fundamentalists. Crossing the boundaries of criticisms, the fundamentalists sometimes declare women as non-Muslim²⁴ due to their unwillingness to put on the purdah.

6.2.2.4 Freedom of Movement

In the rural areas of Bangladesh, women's freedom of movement is restricted by their families. Women are not allowed to go outside alone, especially in the evening. Even at day time, they need to be accompanied by male members of the family. However, it does not mean that this is the case all over the country. In the cities, women are seen coming out of their homes alone, even in the evening.

In this kind of social system, it is important to explore whether the women members of the present study are allowed to move freely in their localities or not. In fact, the majority of the women members did not have the freedom to move freely in their localities, while a smaller group of women did have this freedom.²⁵

What types of resistance did women members face while moving alone? To be honest, the family acted as the main obstacle in the way of mobility of women. It is due to the fact that incidents of verbal harassment, physical assault, and rape are very common in Bangladeshi society, when women move about alone. Such occurrences forced their family members to be less flexible in allowing them to enjoy the freedom of movement. This situation exemplified two important characteristics of the Bangladeshi society: (i) lack of security for women in the society, and (ii) women are still perceived to be objects of sexual amusement.

It is interesting to note that, despite being a member of the UP, the majority of the women members still need permission from the heads of their families before departing from their homes at night. This indicates the dependence of the women members on the males. In fact, their choices and freedom are restricted and controlled by the male members of their family. However, there is a group of women (34.58 %) who do not need prior permission before they leave home. This only happens when the women are educated and come from politically conscious and high-class families.

Under this circumstance, it is important to ask whether women showed the courage to go outside, breaking their shackles. In fact, the great majority of them

²³ 30 and 35 % responded respectively; author's interviews, 2007.

²⁴ People who do not believe in Islamic values or do not abide by the rules of Islam are called non-Muslims in Bangladeshi society. Sometimes, people from other religions are called non-Muslims as well.

²⁵ Author's interviews, 2007.

(82.86 %) did not have the fortitude to go against their male family members. Given the societal setting of Bangladesh, it is common that women members would not want to create trouble in their family life by breaking family rules. Sometimes, when they show the courage to break free, they are subjected to mental and physical torture. However, only a small number of women, having higher education and financial dependence, sometimes try to break free. In such cases, it is education and economic solvency encouraged them to show such resilience.²⁶

Under the above circumstances, it is reasonable to ask: how did women members fulfill their responsibilities? One possible explanation lies in the fact that women members are required to be accompanied by one of their family members when they go outside.²⁷ It does not necessarily mean that none of the women members moved freely alone. Of course, there is a group who enjoy the right of free movement. However, they feel insecure when they go off on their own.²⁸ This situation indicates that the ordinary women in Bangladesh do not enjoy their individual mobility. Of course, one may wonder why did these women suffer from such insecurity? In fact, a number of factors have contributed to have such a feeling. First, the majority of the women in Bangladesh (with some exception) are not used to individual mobility. Thus, it will take a few years for them to get used to it. Second, the women are treated as objects of sexual amusement in the society. When a woman moves alone, there is a great possibility of being insulted by males. Moreover, the existence of criminal elements is frequently presented in every society. If young women move on their own, there is a possibility that they may be raped. Thus, the movement of women on their own is always risky.

Of course, there is another group of women members who enjoy the freedom to move independently outside their homes. This group of women members belongs to the upper class of the society with more power, prestige, and money than those in the middle and lower class. Thus, they are likely to be safe from teasing and harm, since the bad elements are well aware of the fact that they will be in great danger if they do anything to them. However, it does not mean that these women are not subjected to insults, teasing, and disturbance. It is just that the number of such cases is very few.

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that mobility of women members has been significantly affected by their membership in the UP, which means that the extent of their individual movement outside their homes increased sharply after they got elected to the UP.²⁹ According to the women members³⁰:

Nowadays, some people convey their regards when we go outside. However, this is not true in every case. We are still neglected by a large group of people, who are against

²⁶ Author's interviews, 2007.

²⁷ 60.75 % respondents expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

²⁸ 39.25 % respondents expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

²⁹ 54.21 % women members expressed this view; author's interviews, 2007.

³⁰ Summary of views expressed by women members; author's interviews, 2007.

women's political participation. This is just the beginning of our involvement in politics. In the future, people will, of course, receive us cordially. We are very much optimistic about this.

The above statement reflects the optimism of the women members regarding their future. The progress has started in the last few years. If it continues for a few more years, the women will show their courage to break the shackles imposed upon them by patriarchal and male-dominated societal values, and only then will women be socially accepted.

6.2.2.5 Access of the General Public to Women Members

Once elected, a woman member becomes the representative of the population of her constituency, since she is elected based on a universal adult franchise. Thus, every citizen of that locality deserves the cooperation of the women members. To get the cooperation of the woman member, the citizens should have easy access to her. As a matter of fact, the citizens of the women members' constituencies have easy access to their women members whenever required.³¹ A few women members expressed experiences similar to the following³²:

Of course they (people) come to us, but only after exploring all other avenues. In fact, a man finds it morally defeating if he goes to a woman for the solution of a problem. Indeed, a man who has deep patriarchal values always finds it difficult to come out from such a mental setup.

The above statement signifies that the general public use go to the women members, but how many of them are men and how many are women? In fact, more females than males use to meet the women members for assistance. Despite continuous encouragement from the women members, not many males usually meet with them for assistance.³³ This attitude of the women members signifies their eagerness to provide services to the community. Moreover, a vast majority of the women members consider offering their assistance to those in need as part of their responsibilities as the people's representatives. Although enthusiasm is there among the women members to offer help to the people in their locality; there was a question about the attitude of the family members in allowing people in any time.³⁴ If we go into more detail, it is found that families of the majority of the

³¹ 81.31 % women members expressed such view; author's interviews, 2007.

³² Authors' interviews with women members, 2007.

³³ 72.90 % of the women members want people to meet them; author's interviews, 2007.

³⁴ The finding of the study identified one important cultural practice, which is the societal habit of going to a member's residence to seek help rather than to lodge a complaint or seek help at an office.

women members do not want people to come to their home at any time.³⁵ A vast majority of women members stated views thus³⁶:

Our family members become annoyed if people always come to us. They always insist us not to get seriously involved in the community as well as UP activities. They perceive that, if we get involved in so many issues, we will not be able to spend enough time on family matters. The above discussion indicates that, despite having strong resistance from their families, the elected women members of the UP demonstrate commitment and eagerness to serve the community. Moreover, they extended their support to the people in need, even if they are not wholeheartedly accepted by them. These findings are the hallmark of the egocentric character of the males in Bangladesh.

6.2.2.6 Incidents of Fatwa

Another form of oppression and violence against women in Bangladesh is the fatwa. Since 1991, the number of cases of fatwa has been increasing. A study conducted by BMP showed that a total of 66 incidences occurred in 2006 alone, and women were the victims of the fatwa in most cases (New Age 2007).³⁷

The women members of the study area have a clear understanding about the term fatwa.³⁸ One possible explanation for this lies in the fact that the area of study of this research was only the nine *upazilas* of the Rajshahi district (a divisional headquarter), which is located within a short distance from the divisional headquarters. Moreover, Rajshahi is an education city,³⁹ with a comparatively higher literacy rate than its adjacent areas.⁴⁰ This is why the dominance of fundamentalism in these localities is comparatively weaker than in other areas of Bangladesh. In fact, fundamentalists are more active in localities where the majority of the population is illiterate. On the other hand, a group of women members who have less understanding about the term fatwa can *become* the victims of exploitation by fundamentalists. A vast majority of women members consider

³⁵ 63.38 % opine such views.

³⁶ Author's interviews with women members, 2007.

³⁷ A case of fatwa in Bangladesh caught the attention of the international community when a small group of people in the name of Soldiers of Islam announced a prize of BDTK 50,000 (1 US\$ = 82 Taka) for the execution of writer Taslima Nasreen (who wrote several novels criticizing Islam) in September 1993. The fatwa was issued on the ground that her works were insulting to Islam (Shehabuddin 1999, p. 1012).

³⁸ Author's interview with the women members, 2007.

³⁹ Three important educational institutions are located in the district headquarters of Rajshahi: Rajshahi University (RU), Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (RUET), and Rajshahi Medical College (RMC).

⁴⁰ Compared with the other divisional cities in Bangladesh, literacy in Rajshahi is relatively high. The rate of literacy in the six divisional cities is 35.2 % in Dhaka, 32.2 % in Chittagong, 37.2 % in Rajshahi, 45.8 % in Khulna, 47.7 % in Barisal, and 33.6 % in Sylhet (Manzoor et al. 2003, p. 5).

fatwa a threat to society, despite a smaller group expressing opposite views.⁴¹ Women expressing negative views either have a low level of awareness on this issue or are believers in fundamentalism.

Women who consider *fatwa* as a threat to society do not usually show enthusiasm to protest against it.⁴² In fact, they either do not want to become involved in a confrontation with fundamentalist groups or they are restricted by their own Islamic values. However, there is a group of women who consider *fatwa* as a threat and sometimes raise their voices against *fatwa*.⁴³ The women members from this group said⁴⁴:

We know that the *fatwa* is very bad for mankind. It is a mechanism that fundamentalists use for exploiting women. When we hear that *fatwa* has been issued to a woman, we go there and make a formal protest. We try to build awareness among women and encourage them to raise their voice against *fatwas*.

The above statement signifies the concerns and efforts of the women members against *fatwa*. Although a majority of women understand the term *fatwa*, it is reasonable to ask to what extent they are successful in reducing the exercise of *fatwa* in their respective localities. In fact, women members have not been successful in reducing the rate of exercise of *fatwa* in their localities, since they fail to receive support from common women in their protest. Thus, their voices do not leave enough impact to reduce the use of *fatwa* in the society.⁴⁵

6.2.2.7 Education and Access to Information

Education is one of the most important means to make women knowledgeable, skilled, and self-confident in their participation in the ongoing development process of the country (Villaluz 2000). However, most Bangladeshi women are illiterate and lack information on the political process such as whom to lobby for policies, how to respond to women's interests, and even how, where, and who to vote for (Kabir 2003). The lack of adequate information makes women ignorant about their right to vote, run in the elections, and become members of political parties and social networks. Consequently, they lose interest in participating in all political activities (Vijayalakshmi 2002; cited in Mukhopadhyay 2005).

It is important to note that a vast majority of the women members consider education important for the successful implementation of duties and responsibilities of elected members of the UP. Women members who consider education important

⁴¹ Author's interviews, 2007.

⁴² Author's interviews, 2007.

⁴³ Author's interview, 2007.

⁴⁴ Opinion expressed by majority of the respondents who protested against *fatwa*; author's interviews, 2007.

⁴⁵ Author's interviews, 2007.

point out that, due to the low level of education, most of them remain ignorant about their rights and privileges as elected women members. They do not even know how decisions are made in the UP and what the criteria for distribution of projects are. Furthermore, their ignorance allows the male members and chairmen of the UP to exploit them. Thus, they perceive that they could have dominated the decision-making process of the UP had they been better educated.⁴⁶ Women members expressing positive views similar to the following⁴⁷:

If we had been educated, we could have a better understanding of our duties and responsibilities, and help out in the projects and committees. If we had been knowledgeable, it would be difficult for the chairmen and other male members to exploit us. If they tried to exploit us, we would have raised our voice. We would even complain to higher authority.

Like education, access to information is also related to the performance of the women members (i.e., newspaper, television, the Internet, and others). Thus, it is important to explore the state of women's access to various modes of information. As a matter of fact, the majority of women members do not have access to information.⁴⁸ A few important factors need explanation before discussion of the issue of the women members' lacking access to information.

First, the educational background of the respondents was very low, which means that they will not make an effort to read the newspapers.⁴⁹ Moreover, the availability of newspapers at home is related to the economic status of the families they come from.⁵⁰ Since a vast majority of the women belong to low-income group, the families of the women members cannot afford to buy newspapers and keep a television at home. Although a small group of women members have televisions in their homes, due to their low level of education, they do not have any interest in watching the news or educational programs. Thus, whenever they find the time, they remain busy in watching entertaining programs instead.

The case of obtaining information from the Internet is even more difficult, because the IT sector of Bangladesh is not as developed as that of Western

⁴⁶ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁴⁷ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁴⁸ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007. Findings suggest that only 12.15 % of women have access to newspapers, while the number having access to television and internet is 19.63 and 00 % respectively.

⁴⁹ Educational background of the women members are: Primary level: 27.10 %, secondary level (VI–X): 37.38 %, SSC: 23.63 %, HSC: 10.28 %, graduation: 1.87 %, and post-graduation: 00 %.

⁵⁰ The highest number of women members (67.29 %) belongs to the lowest income group (BDTK 3,000 to BDTK 4,999), while the percentage of women members who belong to the lower-middle class (BDTK 5,000 to BDTK 7,499) and middle class (BDTK 7,500 to BDTK 9,999) income groups are 21.50 and 2.80 %, respectively. The rest of the 8.41 % of women members belongs to the relatively higher income group with a monthly income of 10,000+. It is important to mention here that there is a wide income gap between rural and urban areas in Bangladesh. A person with a household income level above TK 10,000 is considered to be in the rich class in rural areas, while a person with the same income level is considered to be in the middle class in the urban or city areas. Thus, this group of households (TK 10,000+) may comprise the richest 10 percent of the total population of rural areas.

countries. For instance, as of 30 June 2012, the penetration rate of Internet users in Bangladesh is 5 percent, while it was 83.6 percent, 78.1 percent, and 83 percent in the UK, USA, and Canada, respectively. Even the penetration rate of Internet users in Malaysia was higher than that of Bangladesh, at 60.7 percent.⁵¹ These statistics signify that the development of Internet service in the country remains at its formative stage, and has not yet extended to the rural areas. Moreover, computers are essential to access the Internet and these require a good amount of money to buy and technical skills to operate. The elected women members lack both of these requirements, and this means that operating a computer or using the Internet is more of a dream than a reality to them. However, they have a strong desire to improve from their weaknesses. It is perceived that, to be able to improve themselves, the women members need substantial government support. It is also pointed out that, if the government intends to further the issue of empowering women, they should offer technical and functional support to the women members. Otherwise, the women members would not be able to prepare themselves to face the challenges of the new millennium.

Under the above circumstances, it is reasonable to ask whether membership in the UPs has increased women members' access to different means of information. In fact, membership to the UPs does not have any impact on their access to information. However, positive impacts have been noticed, within a small group of the women members, who usually read newspapers during their stay at the UP, which eventually has turned out to become a habit.

6.2.2.8 Participation in Nonfamily Group Activities and NGOs

Local government representatives are required to take part in different nonfamily group activities, since they represent the people of their constituencies. However, it is found that a vast majority of women do not take part in nonfamily activities.

Why? In fact, resistance from their families was the main reason for nonparticipation. It does not necessarily mean that none of the women members take part in these activities. A group of women members have been found participating in the different nonfamily group activities in the form of inaugurating some of the programs organized for building social awareness and sports competitions in their constituencies, attending meetings to resolve problems between contending groups which is generally called *Salish*,⁵² and others. However, their participation remains mostly restricted to those held during the day, as they are not allowed to

⁵¹ Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics, available online at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, accessed on 05/05/2013.

⁵² *Salish* (informal adjudication) is a social practice in rural Bangladesh. Many of the local offenses or disputes are settled in the local *salish* even before they can be brought to the courts of law for adjudication. *Salish* indeed plays a very prominent role in the rural society. It helps maintain law and order as well as peace. *Salish* is normally participated in and administered by *matbars* (rural leaders) and UP chairmen and members.

go outside at any other time.⁵³ This, in fact, signifies the extent of the restrictions imposed by the families of the women members on them.

Apart from participating in nonfamily group activities, it is essential to look into the extent of the women members' involvement in the activities of NGOs, since women are the main targets of most NGOs in Bangladesh. One encouraging fact is that the majority of women members get them involved with the activities of the NGOs. Crossing the boundaries of taking part in these activities, these women remain engaged in encouraging other women to participate NGO activities. Even they extend their assistance to the officials of NGOs when they face problems in their locality.⁵⁴ Now one may wonder why do a group of women members not take part in the activities of NGOs? The possible reason is that they belong to conservative families who do not want them to take part in NGO activities. In addition, they come from relatively well-off families who do not find it necessary to participate.

6.2.2.9 Changes in Attitude

It was expected that membership in the UP would increase the women members' level of confidence, and that this would manifest in a change in their attitude. Thus, it deserves exploration whether their participation in the UP has indeed changed their attitude or not, and if it has, what are specifically these changes. In fact, women's involvement in politics has brought some changes in the attitude of the majority of the women members. Of course, there is another group of the women members, who remain under the control of their families and do not have any aspiration to exercise their rights and break free from the influence of their families.⁵⁵ Women members, expressing positive views, stated⁵⁶:

We can now talk to our male counterparts outside of our homes, which was previously restricted. Some changes have also taken place in our mobility. Before being elected as members of the UP, we were not allowed frequently to leave our homes, but now, we are sometimes allowed to go out if it is required. It is important to mention that we need to be accompanied by one male family member for security most of the time. Nevertheless, we are happy that we can go outside. Sometimes, people show us respect since we are their representatives. All these changes have brought feelings of satisfaction which were previously absent among us.

The above statement indicates the low level of expectations of the elected women members but also signifies their happiness at getting any kind of recognition. However, this attitude will not help improve their situation in the society. They will have to be demanding to achieve equal shares and ensure equality

⁵³ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁵⁴ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁵⁵ Author's interview with the women members, 2007.

⁵⁶ Summary of the opinions expressed by majority of the respondents interviewed. Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

between men and women. They will have to raise their own voice. Due to these low expectations, the women members' male colleagues deprive them from getting an equal share in projects and committees.

6.2.3 Involvement of Women Members in the Local Government Decision Making

Before discussing the involvement of the women members in local government decision making, it is necessary to find out the perception of the women members on their new roles—to answer questions like: who inspired them to run in the election?, did they face any hindrance from their family during the campaign? and did they encounter problems in acting both as a wife or a daughter in the family and as UP members?.

6.2.3.1 Perception of Women Members Regarding Their New Role

It is encouraging to note that an overwhelming majority of the women members have been found enthusiastic about being elected as members of the UP. However, some of them have found difficulty in ensuring coordination between family activities and activities of the UPs. Even a vast majority of them have experienced strong resistance from their families when they aspired to run in the election.

However, a small group of the women members, belonging to political families, have received support and cooperation from their families. In fact, male members of these families have inspired their women to run in the election, with the expectation that they would serve their interests, once they got elected through utilization of their political network.⁵⁷ Through influencing the women members to act according to their direction, they would ultimately be able to establish their control on the local government institutions.

In general, the family members of elected women members have tried to impede participation of the majority of the women members in the election. The situation is usually severe in joint families headed either by fathers-in-law or mothers-in-law. In Bangladeshi society, older people are the ones who are mostly conservative and religious minded. Since 89.70 % of the total population of the country is Muslim, the people strongly adhere to Islam. The male heads of families believe that Islamic values command the women to put on the "*purdah*" and stay home to take care of the children and family members. However, a number of women members have received wholehearted support and cooperation from their husbands, despite the strong resistance from their fathers-in-law or mothers-in-law. However, the support of the husband does not reduce the extent of resistance,

⁵⁷ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

since the families are headed by the fathers-in-law or mothers-in-law, whose decisions in family matters are final. Furthermore, the husbands of the women members do not protest the decisions of their parents, since questioning the decisions of older people is perceived as *beyadobi* (impudence) in Bangladeshi culture.

Under these circumstances, women members have struggled to participate in the local government elections. Now another concern is to explore the types of resistance the women members had to tolerate? “Threat of divorce” has been perceived by majority of the women members as one of the strongest forms of resistance, used by family members to discourage them from taking part in the election. Aside from this, the elected women members tolerate different types of physical and mental torture (beating, misbehavior, and others).

Despite the threats and torture, however, they are still contesting in the election and getting elected, which is indicative of their strong desire to be involved in local government politics. The Act of 1997 has definitely created an atmosphere in which the women are able to show their courage to take part in the local government political process, by challenging the resistance of their families.

At this point, it is reasonable to ask whether the women members encounter problems in coordinating their different roles as wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and people’s representative. It is also important to know if the families waive some of their responsibilities so they can balance their existing family responsibilities with their new ones as people’s representatives. As a matter of fact, the women members do not usually get any form of waiver from their familial responsibilities. Thus, the majority of them face the serious challenge of juggling between their multiple responsibilities. As a result, they do not find enough time to spend for the activities of the UP. They cannot even ensure their attendance in most of the UP meetings, since they need to prepare food for their families, send their children to school, and clean the house before they can leave.

6.2.3.2 Working Environment of the UP

To a large extent, the performance of an employee depends on the environment of the organization where he or she works. Thus, it is important to explore the nature of the working environment of the UP, where the elected women members interact with male members and chairmen. In fact, the working environment in the UP is not “women friendly” since a vast majority of the women members expressed their views negatively on this criterion. A small group of the women members perceive that they work in a friendly working environment. The group belongs to the relatively higher strata of the society, with political influence in the locality. But the majority of them perceive that they work either in a hierarchic or neglecting environment.⁵⁸ “Hierarchic” working environment means that the chairmen and the members from the general seats perceive their status as higher than that of the

⁵⁸ Author’s interviews with the women members, 2007.

elected women members.⁵⁹ “Neglecting” working environment means that their presence in the UP is usually ignored by their male colleagues.

Another important concern is to explore the nature of attitude of the male colleagues of the elected women members in the working environment that is not considered women friendly. As a matter of fact, the male colleagues of the women members do not usually want to accept their female colleagues. Of course, there are a very few exceptions, who are generally treated as ‘open minded’, meaning that they accept the women members cordially. Apart from this group, the males’ attitudes can be grouped into conservative, reactive, and vindictive. All these variables are indicative of negative attitudes toward the women members.⁶⁰

This situation leads us to a conclusion that women legislators work in an adverse circumstance in which the majority of the people—their peers, families, and constituents—appear to oppose them. The question is: why do the male colleagues react negatively to the women members? One possible explanation is that patriarchy, the male-dominated social structure, and a conservative mental perspective are ingrained in the males, preventing them from accepting the women members as their equals. This finding corroborates with the finding of the study conducted by Mukhopadhyay and Meer (2004), where it was found that the male colleagues of elected women members did not want them to participate actively in the activities of the UP. The following example signifies this attitude of the male colleagues to the elected women members.

Hasnehena: A Case of Dismissiveness

Hasnehena, a UP member said that “After my oath I went to the chair and asked him to assign me some work. The chair become annoyed and said that the government has brought out the women from their houses to create unnecessary trouble in the UP. [He said] ‘What will you do in the UP?’ Go upstairs and sit with my wife and spend your time. I will not find any work for you. No specific work is mentioned in the manual for women’ (Mukhopadhyay and Meer 2004; cited in Mukhopadhyay 2005, p. 33).

If we contextualize the situation of Bangladeshi women as compared to those from other South Asian countries, it is evident that the situation is almost the same. For instance, several studies made on the state of women in *panchayati raj* (local government) in India revealed that women have not been cordially accepted by their male counterparts. In addition to patriarchy, women in India are also facing the problem of the caste system. Although the 73rd Constitutional Amendment created a provision for the inclusion of lower-class women in the panchayati system, there were several instances that they (*dalit*)⁶¹ were excluded from public office by

⁵⁹ The UP is composed of a chairman, nine members from the nine general seats, and three women members from the three reserved seats for women. In most cases, the members elected from the general seats are males.

⁶⁰ Author’s interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁶¹ Dalit, literally meaning oppressed, is the name given to castes traditionally considered untouchable by upper castes.

council practice and procedures (Mukhopadhyay 2005). Goetz (2004) cites the case of Chaggibai (a Dalit woman) who was exploited by the upper class leader while fulfilling her duties as a *sarpanch*.⁶²

Chaggibai: A Story of Victimization

Chaggibai was elected as sarpanch of Rasulpura *panchayat*, Rajasthan, in 1995, a chair reserved not just for a woman, but for a dalit. Chaggibai, a member of the tiny Bhil group, part of the Dalit community there, was encouraged to run for the sarpanch position by members of the Rawat caste group, the elite caste 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 strongman, who had always run 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 meetings in secret and from his own house, ordered them all to go home. Chaggibai mobilized the local dalit and female community in the subsequent months 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 building 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 the 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 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 simply 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 2004, p. 197).

Just like the women in Bangladesh and India, Pakistani women in local government bodies experience the same situation. A study conducted by Reyes (2002) on Pakistani women councilors revealed that male counterparts ignored the women councilors who did not have offices, tables, and chairs in the council. Moreover, no monetary benefits were given to women to bear the expenses of their food and transportation. They were not even allowed to take part in the meetings of the council, and their projects did not receive budget allocations (Reyes 2002). These findings corroborated with the findings of another study, conducted by Rizvi (2005), who found that they (women) are grappling with a deeply patriarchal social setup that

⁶² A *sarpanch* is a democratically elected head of a village-level statutory institution of the local self-government called the *gram* (village) panchayat in India. He, together with the other elected *panches* (members), constitutes the gram panchayat. The sarpanch is the focal point of contact between government officers and the village community.

does not allow women councilors to function effectively. The list of complaints is long. To name a few: no travel allowance for women to attend council and assembly meetings; no office space where they can be contacted; contrary to the vision of the devolution of power plan, low or no representation in various committees, particularly budgetary committees; marginal employment of women in local government institutions (Rizvi 2005; cited in Mukhopadhyay 2005).

6.2.3.3 Perspectives of the Males

Since the attitudes of the male colleagues of the women members have been identified as “conservative,” “reactive,” and “vindictive,” it is imperative to look into the perception of the male members and chair about their women colleagues and their participation in politics; otherwise, there is enough room for anyone to challenge the findings of this study.⁶³ In fact, the overwhelming majority of the male colleagues of the women members do not want the number of participating women to increase. It does not necessarily mean that all the males have the same feeling. A group of the males who hold positive views about increasing the numbers of the women members in the UPs have expressed their views as follows⁶⁴:

It is good that more women are coming out from their homes and getting involved in local government activities. Since women constitute half of the total population, their increased participation needs to be ensured in the decision making process. The Act of 1997 has opened a forum for women where they can express their miseries and raise their voices against any type of discrimination. Moreover, common women can also express their views through their representatives. In due time, women will be able to prepare themselves to be involved in the activities of political parties, which would develop future leadership in the women community.⁶⁵

The majority of the males expressing negative views have identified different shortcomings of the elected women members. First, since society and religion do not permit women to take part in the public arena they (women) should not involve themselves in local government politics. This view of the males lacks strong ground, and it is not reason enough to keep the women away from the political process. It only reflects the influence of patriarchal domination and religion in them. Second, women members lack proper knowledge to implement the activities of the UP. They usually do not express themselves in the UP meetings. Some of them do not even talk in front of the other members. This argument holds that, since the educational qualification of the majority of the women members was very poor, and they are not used to taking part in a public forum, they cannot be effective UP members. However, it is not true that all women lack the knowledge

⁶³ In order to explore the male members' perception, two males (chairman or member) from each of the 36 UPs were interviewed.

⁶⁴ Author's interviews with the authors, 2007.

⁶⁵ Summary of the opinions expressed by some of the males; author's interviews, 2007.

and do not speak in the meetings. There were qualified women members; only, they were very few. Third, women members do not attend the meetings and Salish of the UP regularly since they have to finish all household activities first before leaving the home. This is why they come in late most of the time. Furthermore, if emergency meetings are called at night, to resolve urgent problems, they will not be able to attend, since their mobility outside the home at night is restricted by strong familial rules. These arguments are true to some extent, since the women members' primary responsibility is to take care of the family, and taking part in the UP activities is just secondary.

The next concern is to know the male members' perception of the performance of the elected women members of the UP. Specifically, how do they evaluate the performance of the women members in the activities of the UP? In fact, male colleagues perceive the women members as inefficient and incapable of fulfilling the responsibilities of an elected member. The males believe that the women members are not capable of undertaking even half of the activities that the male members can do since they are not strong enough physically to compete with them.⁶⁶ These claims seem to be valid, as these corroborated with the findings of a study conducted by Mukhopadhyay and Meer (2004), where they found that women could not demand equal rights to public office, since they lacked the skills and interest to perform in public office efficiently.

Do the male colleagues encounter problems while working with the women members in the UP? One interesting fact is that, although the majority of the male members and Chair perceive the women to be inefficient and incapable of carrying out their assigned responsibilities in the UP, they do not face any problem while working with them. A good number of the male members and chair said something like, "we think that, since the Government brought them (women) into the UP through introduction of a provision in the Act, they should come to the UP, spend some time there, and then go home. We don't need to think much about them."⁶⁷ These comments from the males reflect their neglecting attitude toward the women members, which also signifies the strong influence of patriarchy in the society, in which the women do not receive due respect. On the other hand, there is a group of male members that encounter problems while working with the women. This group of the males is more conservative and does not believe in women's freedom and taking part in the political process.⁶⁸ Thus, the discussion above proves the perception of the women members on their male colleagues to be correct to some extent since the males think the women are inefficient and incapable of fulfilling their assigned responsibilities as elected members of the UP.

⁶⁶ Author's interviews with the male chair and members, 2007.

⁶⁷ Summary of the opinion expressed by 45 out of the 72 male members and chair who do not encounter any problem working with the women members, Author's interviews with the males, 2007.

⁶⁸ Author's interviews with the males, 2007.

6.2.3.4 Project Distribution

To develop their rural communities, the UPs implement different project-based development activities. Each year, they undertake a number of projects, to be carried out by their members. Thus, it is necessary to explore the nature of women's representation in the implementation of different projects. Specifically, do the women members receive equal share in the distribution of various projects? In fact, the projects are not distributed equally among all members of the UP. In most cases, the women's share in the project distribution remains smaller than that of the general members' (usually made up of males), despite the fact that these women members' constituencies are three times bigger than the male members'.⁶⁹ This kind of discrimination in project distribution reflects the women's subordinate status in the UP. A view expressed by a group of women members follows:

In most cases, our allotment of projects is similar to that of general members', despite the fact that our constituencies are three times bigger than theirs. If we demand extra allotment or submit additional proposals, the chairman would not consider them. In emergency situations, the projects are distributed among male members only, and we are kept in the dark.⁷⁰

However, a small group of the women members have expressed their views positively, meaning that they do receive an equal share in the project distribution. How come it happened to this group of women members and not to the others? There are instances that the elected women members who come from political families, and have a good relationship with the Chairman and other male members, usually receive an extra allocation of the projects. But the number of such cases is too few to be representative of all women members.

Since it has been established that there is discrimination in project distribution, the next concern is to find out whether the elected women members raise their voices against this kind of discrimination or not. It is really unfortunate to state that a vast majority of the women members do not show the courage to object to this kind of discrimination. Of course, there is an exception as well, since a small group of the women members are found objecting to the injustice of unequal project distribution. However, protesting against the discrimination does not mean that the UP usually considers their complaint. As a matter of fact, the protest of the women members against the discrimination in project distribution is not entertained by the chair and the male members.⁷¹

One noticeable fact is that, since the majority of the women members are first timers as members of the UP, they are not familiar with the dynamics of UP politics. Moreover, due to poor educational qualifications of the women members, the male members and chair always get the upper hand and rule over them. This

⁶⁹ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁷⁰ Summary of opinions expressed by most of the respondents; author's interviews, 2007.

⁷¹ A vast majority (78.13 %) of the women members asserted that their protests are "never considered" while only a small group of respondents replied "always considered" (6.25 %) and "sometimes" (15.63 %); author's interviews, 2007.

finding is corroborated by the findings of another, conducted by Shamim and Kumari (2002) indicating that the male members and the Chair of the UP become annoyed whenever the elected women members demand their equal share in projects or talk about any misappropriations. Whenever this happens, the male colleagues try to teach them a lesson so that they remain silent in the activities of the UP. The following case substantiates this situation:

Khadiza Khanom: Conflict with the Chair

Khadiza Khanom, an elected member from reserved seat of Chakmerpull of Cox's Bazar, came from a well-known family. Being a widow, she received normal support from her educated son. However, Khadiza gathered miserable experiences as women UP member. At the meetings the chair misbehaved with women when they talked about their rights. The chair misappropriated government allotments with the help of his muscleman. No one had the courage to protest against the chair's illegal activities for fear of being harassed by his muscleman. However, Khadiza published all the chair's illegal activities in the newspaper. The Chair became angry and published false news in the newspaper about Khadiza, to smear her image. The deputy commissioner of Cox's Bazar helped to minimize the dispute between the two and compelled the chair to apologize to Khadiza. The Chair, however, felt insulted but there was no change in his behavior toward Khadiza. Khadiza felt the necessity of the interference of the higher authority to solve the problem (Shamim and Kumari 2002, p. 51).

The analysis above signifies that the activities of the UP are mostly dominated by the male members and chairmen, in which the elected women members are only silent partners, without anything to say.

6.2.3.5 Participation of Women Members in Committees

In Chap. 3, it was noted that, in addition to the existing committees, eight implementation committees needed to be formed in each UP to implement eight projects worth BDTK⁷² 25,000 (equivalent to US\$ 305)⁷³ a year. A circular from the Local Government Department of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (LHRD&C) had made changes in the structure of the project implementation committee. The changes that were made included the following: (i) The chairman or a member should not be a chair of more than one project committee; (ii) one-third of these committees must be chaired by women members; and (iii) women members who would not be able to act as chair of the project committees (due to the reservation of one-third quota) must be a member of these committees.⁷⁴ The circular put much emphasis on the inclusion of elected women members in the committees. However, legal provisions do not ensure the

⁷² BDTK is the local currency.

⁷³ 1 US\$ equals to BDT. 82.

⁷⁴ See Chap. 3 for more details about the committee system.

women members' representation in the committees. As a matter of fact, the majority of the elected women members do not get the right share in the committees as prescribed by the law.⁷⁵ The majority of the women members express this view⁷⁶:

The male chairmen and members cannot bypass us in the committees that have been particularly created for women, but they do not offer us equal membership in other committees. There is always the tendency to keep us away from everything. They want us to gossip and spend time conversing with one another. They do not have faith in us. Another important thing is that they believe if we participate in the activities that were previously carried out by them; their supremacy in the society would be reduced.

The above statement confirms that elected women members do not get enough membership in the committees of the UP, which is a type of discrimination against them. Another important fact is that the male members of the UP perceive themselves to be the sole authority in local government bodies, and they do not want to share this authority with the others.

6.2.3.6 Participation of the Women Members in Party Politics

Since the main objective of the 1997 reform was to ensure the participation of women in the political process, it is also important to know the perception of the women with regard to their involvement in party politics. One encouraging fact is that the majority of the women members have been found involved in party politics in the form of either supporters or activists of the four leading political parties in Bangladesh.⁷⁷ However, despite having party affiliation, the majority of the women members do not participate in the election campaigns for the National Parliament. With regard to their mode of participation, the women members try to reach out to the voters and convince them to cast their votes in favor of their candidates. Aside from this, they sometimes participate in rallies organized by the candidates.

How successful are the women members in motivating voters? As a matter of fact, in most cases, they have not been found successful in doing so.⁷⁸ However, this claim cannot be substantiated, since it is very difficult to measure whether a voter has been persuaded by an election campaign or not. There is also no formal mechanism that can measure the extent of the women members' influence on the voters. However, there is a counterargument that women voters are sometimes more influenced by women campaigners rather than male ones. Since the majority of the women living in rural areas are illiterate, there is a possibility that they can be influenced by women representatives.

⁷⁵ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

⁷⁶ Summary of the opinions expressed by the respondents who expressed negative views regarding membership in the committees; Author's interviews, 2007.

⁷⁷ AL (37.38 %), BNP (23.36 %), JP (14.02 %), and BJI (6.54 %); Author's interviews, 2007.

⁷⁸ Author's interviews with the women members, 2007.

It is also important to mention here that, although the candidates of the Parliamentary election seek assistance of the women members, they are prioritized by them unlike the chair and male members of the UP.⁷⁹ These findings signify that the women are not yet considered equal to the male members and chair at the local level.

6.2.3.7 Participation in UP Decision Making

The principles of democracy and good governance suggest that the decision-making process must be participated in by all concerned. Like in central-level decision making, the decision-making process in the UP should also be participated in by both men and women. Since the Act of 1997 was intended to ensure the greater participation of women in the decision-making process of the UP, it is important to explore the extent to which the elected women members influence the decision-making process in the UP. This is unfortunate to state that the decision-making process is not at all influenced by the elected women members since majority of the women members have either identified the extent of influence as “lesser influence” or “no influence”. None of them have been found claiming the extent of their influence as “greater influence” or “moderate influence.” However, why did the women members respond in such a way, despite claiming themselves to be successful in the earlier question? The reason is due to the lack of understanding about their role in the UP. If any of their opinion is considered even once in a UP meeting, they perceive it as already influencing the decision making.

It is important to note that the composition of the UP has made the women members the minority in the decision-making body, as it is composed of one chair, nine elected members from the general seats (most of them are usually males), and three elected women members from the reserved seats. Thus, decisions in the UP are made based on the majority vote, which means that any decision needs seven votes from 13 members. From the position of the minority, it is very difficult to influence the decision-making process when patriarchy dominates societal values. Aside from being the minority in the UP, their identity as “women” also acts as an impediment to their opinions being accepted in meetings. Moreover, the reluctance of the chair and male members also contribute to the ignorance of the women members in the decision-making process. Thus, their role can be considered as only “ornamental.” Under this situation, the women members must tolerate different forms of harassment if they fight for their rights. Sometimes, their male colleagues spread rumors about them or try to humiliate them in the society, expecting them to feel ashamed and be passive in the UP activities in the future. The argument drawn here is corroborated by the findings of another study conducted by Shamim and Kumari (2002), where it was indicated that conjugal life of an elected woman came under serious threat when she dared to fight for her rights and argued with the chair. The following example proves this:

⁷⁹ Author’s interviews with the women members, 2007.

Aparna Rani: Story of Smear Tactics

Aparna Rani was an elected woman UP member of Moulvibazar. Her husband, who was a Primary School Teacher, encouraged Aparna to compete in the UP election. During the early stages of her tenure in the UP, Aparna did not face any problem. But the situation changed when she started to be vocal than other women members and often argued with the chair, which took a serious turn. The chair did not support of her active participation in the meetings and tried to teach her a lesson. A friendly male colleague used to help Aparna in performing different UP activities. The chair spread rumors using Aparna's friendly relationship with her male colleague. This horrified Aparna's married life as she was almost hated in the society. Finally she had to leave the UP (Shamim and Kumari 2002, p. 55).

This case illustrates how women are treated by their male counterparts in offices. They are not only neglected but often face serious challenges in their family life that force them to lose interest in participating in politics. Thus, it is obvious that extending the scope of participation of women through the introduction of quota does not ensure their active participation in the decision-making process. To ensure their full participation in this regard, it is necessary to overcome the rigid social and cultural barriers that women face.

6.3 Conclusion

The above discussions lead us to come to the conclusion that not much improvement has been made on the economic freedom of the women members as a result of the enactment of the Act of 1997. The amount of money that the women members earn by virtue of their position is spent for the maintenance of their families, which is eventually spent by the male members of their families instead of themselves. They do not even have the freedom to determine what the money should be spent on. It does not necessarily mean that no improvement has been made in the role of the women members in the family decision making. In fact, a steady increase has been noticed in the role of the women members in the family decision-making process. Of course, they have not yet reached the level where they can dominate family decisions, but at least, they are consulted in some cases by the male members of their families and participate in the decision-making process, wherein their main responsibility is to provide information when required. When it concerns women's societal liberty, one encouraging fact is that the society has slowly started to accept women as members of the UP. There has been a slow increase in the mobility of women members outside the home. After being elected as women members, they can at least afford to go outside with the permission of the male heads of their families, but they need to be accompanied by a male family member. Another encouraging fact is that some people have started to show respect to the women members when they convene outside, and sometimes, they come to them for assistance when they need help.

With regard to the women members' involvement in the activities of the UP, no significant improvement has been pointed out. In fact, the women members work in a stubborn environment where their male colleagues perceive them as inefficient and incapable of carrying out their responsibilities. They are always treated unequally during project distribution and membership distribution in the various committees of the UP. They are even slighted by the law, since it specifies that the women members' share in the distribution of projects should be equal to that of the male members, even if they have constituencies three times bigger than that of the latter. In such a situation, the women members feel reluctant to object to discrimination because they will have to tolerate different kinds of mental torture from their male counterparts if they will protest. Furthermore, their position as a minority has made them unsuccessful in influencing the decision-making process of the UP. Last but not least, it is encouraging to note that the Act of 1997 has created enough enthusiasm among women who, despite the different setbacks, have started to come out of their homes and take part in the politics of the local government. In the course of time, they will be able to earn the right to equal share in all respects and then strive to participate in central-level politics.

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Chapter 7

Conclusion

7.1 In Summary

In the preceding chapters, an effort was made to explore the context of the enactment of the Act of 1997, the role of different actors in the reform process and the impact of the reform on the state of women's political participation in Bangladesh. Based on the discussion in the previous chapters, what is the contribution of the book? By combining the policy and gender issue in a single study, the book has described policy dynamics of a particular reform aiming at enhancing participation of women in the local government decision making and its impact on the state of their participation in the context of Bangladesh. Before we proceed through pointing out major findings of this book, it is important to have a brief discussion on the justification for application of different theoretical models.

For making an impact study, it is important to know its process first. In this regard, in order to understand the impact of an affirmative action (the Act of 1997) on the state of women's political participation, it is essential to comprehend in what context the action was taken.

From this perspective, the different theoretical issues have been examined in order to understand the subject matter of the research. It is argued that rule-based and historical institutionalisms are the two important concepts that are important for understanding the issue of women's political participation. As a matter of fact, rules determine the role of an individual in an organization. In the context of the present research, the reservation of seats for women and an introduction of direct election came into effect through the enactment of new rules that has brought change in the structure of the UP. The role of the individuals—who will do what, how, and when in the UP—is also determined by the rules. On the other hand, the historical development of an institution leads us to know more about its development. An analysis of the changing pattern of the UP's structure helps us to understand the reform process and the state of women in the local government in different time frames, which justify the importance of institutions in enhancing women's political participation in Bangladesh. Hence, an institutional approach

provides an applicable background to describe women's political participation in the local government in the context of the present study.

The context of the reform reminded us of John Kingdon's model of agenda-setting in which he asserted that new policy windows are opened as a result of an interaction between the problem stream, the policy stream, and the political stream. Kingdon (1984) also suggested that changes in the political stream (through shifting ideology) and in the nature of the problem also contribute to the opening of a new policy window. With regard to the enactment of the 1997 reform, several actors interacted in the policy process, and their interactions contributed to the development of a new policy agenda that required reform.

Moreover, there was a change in the government (AL) in 1996. Specifically, the new Government's ideology was different than that of the previous government (BNP), and the issue of women's political participation had attracted the attention of the international community after the Beijing Conference in 1995. All these factors contributed to the enactment of the 1997 reform. Thus, it can be said that Kingdon's model of agenda-setting provides an applicable background to the context of this research. Moreover, Howlett and Ramesh's (1995, 2003) classification of actors in the policy process is also applicable in identifying the actors involved in the 1997 reform, as this reform was an outcome of the influence of different State (the Government), societal (political parties, WOs, and NGOs), and international (donors and international conventions) actors. The subsequent sections briefly discuss the role of different actors in the dynamics of the reform and the impact of the reform on the state of women's political participation followed by some prescription to breaking the shackles.

Political parties in Bangladesh are not proactive with regard to women's political participation. They are, to some extent, reluctant with regard to women's political participation. Sometimes political parties highlight the issue of women's political participation in the Party agenda only to attract the attention of the international community and women voters. For instance, although the AL and BNP highlighted the issue of women's political participation with greater importance in their respective election manifestos of 1996 and 2001, they did not take enough proactive measures to enhance women's participation except that AL enacted the reform of 1997 and the BNP brought in the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. Moreover, fundamentalist political parties like the BJI always remain busy in resisting the rise of women's political participation. More importantly, political leader's lack of knowledge about women's issues forces them to remain reluctant. None of the Parties usually carry out any particular advocacy program for the women, to train them and raise their level of awareness. Finally, absence of a democratic culture within the party offers top leaders the opportunity to make arbitrary decisions over party matters, where there is hardly any scope for the party members to challenge such decisions. This arbitrariness reduces the extent of the party's influence on the government. Given this political culture, the party's control on the government remains limited, since the head of the party holds the position of head of the government, allowing him or her to exercise supreme power over the Cabinet and over the party.

Since 1991, successive democratically elected governments of Bangladesh have not usually shown enough enthusiasm and commitment to foster the issue of women's political participation. Although the BNP government (1991–1996) signed the PFA of the Beijing conference in 1995 they (1991–1996) did not make any sweeping policy to enhance women's political participation in order to gain political advantages. Due to having an alliance with the BJI, the BNP government did not want to create friction among its political friends, who do not believe in women's political participation, by being proactive toward women's issues. Also, the BNP did not want to disappoint the voters, who were mostly Islamic minded and patriarchal, as they did not believe in women's political participation. By signing the PFA in 1995, the government only tried to attract the attention of the international community.

On the hand, a number of factors influenced the then AL leadership to enact the reform of 1997. As one of the progressive political parties, ideologically, the AL is more flexible than the BNP and the BJI with regard to women's political participation. Once they took power in 1996, the government wanted to establish a powerful local government in Bangladesh, with the UP as the focal point of development. Accordingly, the Local Government Reforms Commission was formed to recommend ways to establish a powerful local government. Realizing the importance of increasing women's political participation, the Commission, along with other recommendations, suggested the reservation of three seats for women in each UP and the provision of direct election to fill those seats. The AL government accepted the recommendation, in letter and in spirit. Aside from the Commission's report, some constitutional obligations were important, since several Articles of the Constitution [Articles 9, 10, and 28(2)] suggested that women should be given the opportunity to take part in all areas of the society, and any discrimination against them should not be allowed. These Constitutional suggestions motivated the then AL Government. Another point is that the then prime minister (Sheikh Hasina) was willing to create opportunities for women, allowing more of them to participate in the political process. Moreover, the leaders of leading WOs in Bangladesh, who were advocating greater women's political participation, had a good relationship with Sheikh Hasina who offered them easy access to push their agenda. They also asked the assistance of Ivy Rahman (the then president of the Women AL) and her husband (Zillur Rahman who was the Minister of LGRD&C and the general secretary of the AL) to push the agenda in the government level as well as within the AL. All these factors finally contributed to the development of women's political participation as an agenda of the government, resulting in the enactment of the 1997 reform. Aside from the influences of these factors, the movements of WOs and the role of NGOs, donors, and international conventions directly or indirectly influenced the issue of the enactment of the 1997 reform.

WOs in Bangladesh usually implement various advocacy programs for the betterment of women in the community. To eliminate gender discrimination in the society and ensure both gender equality and the greater participation of women in the political process, WOs remain vocal by pressuring the government to initiate various reforms. However, no formal channels exist through which they could

interact with the government or exert influence over it. Thus, they had to highlight the issues and attempt to convince the government through informal channels. They sometimes used their informal social relationships in a professional manner. For instance, several leaders of WOs used their relationship with the then prime minister to convince her to take necessary steps toward enhancing the political participation of women. It is certain that efforts of women organizations made an impact on the Government, compelling it to consider women's political participation at the local government level.

Women are the main target groups of most of the NGOs in Bangladesh. These NGOs implement microcredit programs with the expectation that women would become independent, and their opinions would be respected in the family and in the society if these women were economically well-off. Some NGOs in Bangladesh work indirectly toward women's political participation. They mostly work to build awareness among women, while some carry out programs to build the capacity of elected women members of the UP. Awareness-building and capacity-building programs are intended to make women aware of their rights so they can raise their voices against gender inequality. Since the NGOs' involvement with the issue of women's political participation is indirect, the extent of their influence on the government was limited. Aside from building awareness among women, NGOs also try to draw the government's attention by publishing their research findings, organizing press conferences, and submitting memoranda to the responsible authorities. Although NGOs did not directly influence the government to initiate the 1997 reform, they still believed that their stakeholders (women) would soon raise their voices independently and compel the government to initiate further reforms to ensure their greater participation in the political process.

The government of Bangladesh is dependent on the donors for financing of its development budget. Thus, there is enough room for the donors to influence the government's policy. However, donor's influence in policy making depends on the nature of the policy. When it concerns women's political participation in Bangladesh, not all donors are concerned about the issue. Donors who are working on the issue perceive that women's participation in the political process has been in transformative phase that is yet to cross the satisfactory level. Donors view that, given the conservative societal system; the enactment of reforms fostering women's political participation is one of the most important means to enhance their participation. Since donors' main responsibility is to provide funds and technical assistance to the government and NGOs to build women's capacity at all levels, they did not directly influence the government in the process of enactment of the reforms in 1997.

However, it is true that donors have been successful in exerting some indirect influence on the Government through their several local government projects. Among the donor agencies, the UNDP and USAID provide funds to the local government to be implemented either through the government or NGOs. The UNDP funded the Sirajganj Local Governance Development Fund Project (SLGDP) that was implemented by the Local Government Division of the Ministry of Local Government Rural Development and Cooperatives, which achieved tremendous

success in mobilizing local resources and ensuring popular participation in local government decision making. The project was also successful in increasing the involvement of women members in the activities of the UP. Furthermore, the USAID funded the Democratic Local Governance Program (DLGP), which was designed to increase the efficiency and transparency of selected rural and urban government bodies in the northwest and southwest areas of Bangladesh. Thus, it can be concluded that the donor agencies mostly work to strengthen the capacity of the UPs and the people involved in the process of its governing. Usually, the donor agencies use a bottom-up approach in their project implementation. They hold the belief that the demand for change should start from the bottom, which means that the stakeholders should make themselves heard. Although the donor agencies are not in a position to influence the government directly during lawmaking, their involvement in different local government-strengthening projects allows them to sit with the government and attempt to convince them to initiate affirmative action for the women of Bangladesh.

Although donors' influence on the government during enactment of the reform of 1997 was insignificant, influence of different international conventions, particularly the Platform for Action (PFA) of the Beijing Plus Five Conference that took place in China in 1995—on the Bangladesh government to enact the 1997 reform was immense. The impact of the Beijing Conference is reflected through the setting up of a comprehensive national mechanism and institutions for the advancement of women by the Bangladeshi government. As an immediate outcome of the Beijing conference, the government began allowing women to enter the national defense force. Furthermore, special programs for female education, female employment, and provisions for credit facilities for women were undertaken to ensure mainstreaming of women into the development process. Primary education was made compulsory, and the education of females was vigorously encouraged. In addition, stipend programs for girls in secondary schools were introduced. The implementation of these programs made Bangladesh a pioneer in this regard. These government activities indicate that the AL government of Bangladesh was influenced by the Beijing conference of 1995 when it enacted the reform of 1997.

The reform of 1997 was a breakthrough in enhancing women's participation in Bangladesh. The concern, however, is whether the government enacted the reform only to impress the international community, or whether the government was really sincere in enhancing women's political participation.

It is difficult to discern this as empowerment without capacity building is meaningless. The government enacted the Act of 1997, but it did not take the necessary action to build the capacity of the elected women members. Thus, at this stage, we can question the government's motives.

Whatever these motives might have been, the reform has opened up wide avenues for more women to participate in local government bodies. Now, the question is: what impact did the 1997 reform have on women's political participation? In other words, did these provisions ensure women's representation in decision making? Or did these provisions only ensure their attendance in the UP? The state of affairs of women's representation in politics is perhaps not satisfactory because of

the domination of male members, and their role in the public world of politics is taken for granted. Moreover, male members use their support networks to influence the decision-making process; the existence of “de facto politics” impedes the participation of women in politics even though several successive Governments have introduced quotas.

As already mentioned, one of the major contributions of this book is to have an assessment of the impact of the 1997 reforms on women’s economic sovereignty, societal liberty, and their involvement in the decision-making process in the UPs. With regard to economic freedom, the women do not enjoy the freedom to spend their earnings. In most cases, their money is spent by the male heads of their families. In fact, the women are not allowed to determine spending priorities, which is also done by the male heads of their families. However, women coming from economically well-off families are granted the right to spend their money. Despite these shortcomings, one encouraging fact is that there has been a significant change in the women’s role in family decision making since the 1997 reforms. After being elected as the women members, they can sit together with male members while deciding on particular issues of the family, but their role remains restricted to providing information only. This means that they can only speak when they are asked for information, and they are not allowed to express their opinions on family matters. Under such circumstances, it can be concluded that women in Bangladeshi society continue to have low status, with the rights and privileges that are restricted and contingent upon their financial condition.

Unlike economic freedom, there has not been any significant change in the state of women’s social liberty, since society has not yet accepted them wholeheartedly. The attitude of the majority of males toward them is conservative, and they do not believe in women’s participation in the public arena. Along with males’ domination, religious fundamentalists try to impose restrictions on women members through issuing *fatwas*. Moreover, driven by Islamic values, women are required to use the purdah for external mobility that makes it very difficult for them to participate in activities outside family functions. Thus, external mobility of the women members remains restricted, not only at night but also in the daytime, by requiring them to be accompanied by a male member of their family. This is an indication of the inferior status of women in Bangladesh.

In the midst of darkness, one encouraging fact is that people, although few in number, have started to come to the women members to seek their assistance, despite the fact that women are not accepted by the majority of males in the community. Among those who ask for assistance, the majority of them are mostly ordinary women. This does not mean that men do not approach them. Of course, few males do approach for the assistance of the women members, but only after having explored all alternative avenues for solving the problem. Men usually find it humiliating to come to a woman for a solution to a problem. Patriarchy prohibits them from seeking assistance from a woman. Despite having problems from the family members and lack of access to various means of information, the women members have the willingness to participate in different programs, like inauguration of social awareness-building program and sports competitions, attending

meetings to solve problems between contending groups (which is generally called *salish*) and participation in the activities of NGOs. All these activities have brought some positive changes in the attitude of the women members. Although the Act of 1997 has not increased women members' social liberty to a great extent, their satisfaction level has remained relatively higher. This is either due to the fact that, in a society where deprivation and victimization are prevalent, the women feel already satisfied and encouraged if they gain something, no matter how little it may be, or, to the fact that their level of understanding is very low, so they do not know the potential levels of satisfaction well.

With regard to the involvement of women in the decision-making process of the UP, the book has come up with some interesting findings.

First, despite facing strong resistance from their families when running in the election, women have been found enthusiastic and happy to be elected as members of the UP. However, they find difficulty in balancing their roles as wife, mother, and people's representative.

Second, women members of the UP work in a negative environment, without receiving full cooperation of their male colleagues, who think themselves superior and possess conservative attitudes which usually stem from patriarchy and male-dominated societal values. On the other hand, the male colleagues view the women members as inefficient and unable to carry out their responsibilities properly.

Third, due to a neglecting attitude of the males and absence of clear law governing the roles and responsibilities of the women members and their share in the distribution of projects, the women members do not get their equal share in the distribution of UP projects, despite the fact that their constituencies are three times larger than those of the male members. Crossing the boundaries of discrimination, the males sometimes distribute the projects in the absence of the women members. Such discrimination persists over a long period of time due to lack of proper knowledge about women members' rights and responsibilities, which is supported by the finding of the ADB (2004) study, saying that more than 70 % of women councilors of the UP are not aware of their rights and responsibilities as representatives, while more than 80 % lack the confidence in their ability to conduct meetings.

Fourth, discrimination is not only common during distribution of projects but also during distribution of membership in different committees. The law is problematic again in this regard since it does not specify anything regarding the women members' share in committees. However, the government, through several circulars, has provided instructions to set up new committees, to be chaired by the women members. Since their membership is not guaranteed, they are sometimes bypassed during the distribution of membership in the committees.

Fifth, there is enthusiasm among the women members with regard to their participation in national politics. Going beyond the role of supporters, the women members get involved in the campaign during the national elections. However, they do not receive equal importance from the candidates that the males do, which is indicative of women's unequal status in the society.

Sixth, the women members' voice is not heard in the decision-making process of the UP, although the principle of democracy and good governance requires the participation of all concerned. There is hardly any scope for the women members to influence UP decision making. They sometimes object to some misdeeds, but they are not heard out. Thus, the women members remain as the minority in the UP whose role in decision making is ornamental only.

The reservation of seats through legislation is a controversial issue, in Bangladesh and elsewhere. However, it is beyond doubt that, as quotas have been implemented, popular political culture has gradually become more accepting of women in politics. Women's issues have been nurtured well in emerging democracies, where the governments of these countries have shown commitment to women's increased representation, which plays a crucial role in advancing women's political representation. In fact, women's enhanced political representation depends to a large extent on the political will of the government instead of the economic standing of the country or any other economic factor (Tripp 1994). For instance, Mozambique, the poorest nation in the world, made a remarkable improvement in the area of female legislative representation, as compared to many advanced industrialized countries.

Aside from Mozambique, higher female representation in Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa, and several other African countries has been accounted for the initiation of party quotas and reserved seats (Tripp 1994). In South Africa, the women have made a noteworthy political advancement through the introduction of quotas, brought about by the enactment of reforms in existing laws. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) has played an important role in furthering women's issues. Thus, 89 of the 117 women in the National Assembly and the Senate are from the ANC party. Nowadays, women constitute 25 % of the legislature in South Africa, which represents a striking break from the previous apartheid regime wherein they comprised less than 3 % of the legislature (Tripp 1994). The women's movement has gained momentum through the process of democratization in industrialized countries as well. In Turkey, women's rights and the diversity of women's voices gained momentum through the processes of economic transformation and democratization (Kardam and Ertürk 1999; Caha 2010). Like that of other countries in the world, the emerging democracy of Bangladesh began its momentum toward the end of 1990 with the overthrowing of the autocratic rule by a mass movement. Since then, the enhanced participation of women in the political process has become an issue of concern for the government.

Inequality against women in the Bangladeshi society is common. Along with sociocultural obstacles, structural deficiencies and attitudinal problems are the major obstructions to the greater participation of women in the political process. Most societal institutions are designed in such a way that they offer very little scope for women to participate in them. Jahan (1988: 200) asserted that "... all Bangladeshi social institutions permit, even encourage the demonstration of unequal power relations between the sexes." In such a restricted situation, taking part in the public arena is more of a dream for the women members than a reality. The reservation of seats for women at local government levels has increased

the number of women in politics, but it has not ensured their full representation in decision-making process yet. However, there are reasons to be optimistic about this, as the imposition of quotas has helped change the popular political culture, gradually, to become more conducive to women's participation in politics. The battle for women's *active* participation in the political process has just started, and elected women members still have a long way to go to make more than just their physical presence felt in decision making.

7.2 Breaking the Shackles

To break the shackles, women will have to take the lead role. However, it is also important to make the political system women friendly, in order to improve the situation of the women. Strulik (2003, p. 19) asserted that “the best way to break the barriers is not to make women fit into the political arenas; it is to make the political system more women friendly.” On the other hand, Rao and Kelleher pointed out that, in order to bring changes in the status of women, these reforms should be made at the different levels (personal and social) of formal and informal relations. They mentioned four clusters of change, related to one another, that can be effective in ensuring overall changes in the status of women: (i) men and women's individual consciousness (knowledge, skills, political consciousness, and commitment), (ii) women's objective condition (rights and resources, access to health services and safety, and opportunities for voicing out), (iii) informal norms such as inequitable ideologies and cultural and religious practices, and (iv) formal institutions such as laws and policies (Rao and Kelleher 2005). Thus, providing opportunities for many women to take part in the UP has ensured only one part of mainstreaming women in development, while the other parts should ensure: that they have some leverage in relation to political decision making; their consciousness level must be raised; their access to all kinds of resources must be increased, and there must likewise be a change in cultural and religious values. At the same time, it is important to guarantee the incorporation of gender-related issues in the legal, social, and political agendas.

The capacity-building programs of the government of Bangladesh, although conducted in a limited scale, and NGOs have increased the level of confidence of elected women members to some extent, but this does not mean that they have done everything to prepare the women to carry out their responsibilities. It is also important to educate males to make them understand the importance of women in politics. Otherwise, nothing encouraging will happen with regard to the active participation of women, since the attitude of males contributes predominantly to the emergence of problems already encountered by the women members while in the UP.

The Act of 1997 has created opportunities for women to enter politics, but their position in the decision-making process still remains as “proxy” candidates, instead of real ones with knowledge and confidence, capable of realizing the

importance of their position and exercising their rights in the UP. Thus, changes should be made in the socio-cultural values and traditions that permeate the society; otherwise, it will take many years to recognize the active presence of one-third of the women members in the decision-making process in the UP. A sense of equal partnership must be cultivated among the women to make them overcome the trauma of fulfilling their traditional role, which is to take care of their families, since women these days should carry on multiple roles as a mother, home manager, and working manager at the same time. However, the rate of this transformation is slow in rural Bangladesh due to the domination of patriarchy, age-old customs, and traditional practices (Szyber 2005). Specific recommendations can be considered to initiate further reforms aiming at ensuring greater female representation in the political process in Bangladesh.

First: Cultural norms and perceptions have stereotyped women's role to be in the family domain only. It is therefore essential to bring changes to these cultural norms by initiating appropriate cultural, educational, and informational policies. Discrimination against women should be made clearly unacceptable. In doing so, the first step should be to redesign the educational curricula to highlight the significance of women's participation in development at all levels (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific 1993). Another mechanism is to use various media sources like television, radio, and newspapers to make policy makers and administrators realize the importance of gender equality and to stimulate women to reorganize their roles and affirm themselves as equal partners of men in all sectors (Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics 2000; Haque 2003).

Second: It is the responsibility of the Government to initiate reforms through constitutional and legal provisions intended to ensure gender equality in every area. The government has already passed a number of laws including the Local Government (UPs) (Second Amendment) Act of 1997 and created the WID focal point to oversee the concerns of women in the programs of the government. However, some laws are not enacted efficiently. For instance, the Act of 1997 does not specify the duties and responsibilities of elected women members in the UP. Even if they are elected by constituencies three times larger than those of the general members, the law does not talk about their share in project distribution and membership in project committees. Thus, the law needs to be more specific and fair, and additional legal measures need to be passed in order to implement the enacted legislation effectively. Moreover, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs should shoulder the responsibility of nurturing the issues of women in every sector.

Third: The government has the legitimate power to initiate policies for ensuring women's political participation. Since political parties form the government, women's representation in legislative and executive bodies greatly depends on their representation in political parties. Thus, the major political parties of Bangladesh should offer a scope for greater women's participation in their parties' leadership and organizations. The first thing that political parties can do is to introduce the female quota in political parties. These measures can easily be implemented in the political parties in Bangladesh since both the largest political parties are directed

and steered by two women who hold supreme power over the parties. All that is necessary is the strong political will and commitment of top leaders.

Fourth: Since WOs have remained vocal about greater women's political participation and discrimination against them, they need to remain united rather than politically divided. Their concerted efforts will compel the government to initiate affirmative policies for women whenever necessary.

Fifth: Since NGOs in Bangladesh have wide network and coverage down to the local level, they should carry out more awareness development programs. If common women become aware of their rights, they will strive for participation in the political process, and this will create enthusiasm among women, which will in turn put pressure on the government to take more affirmative action to increase their participation.

Sixth: The monitoring of the implementation of several conventions' declarations by international organizations like the UN, ratified by member States, needs to be strengthened. Otherwise, the ratification of conventions will not be translated into reality by the governments involved.

Seventh: The "empowerment of women" without capacity building is meaningless. The then government passed the Act of 1997, but they did not take the necessary action to build the capacity of women. Thus, capacity-building programs for elected women members need to be implemented all over the country. These programs will make the women aware of their rights, duties, and responsibilities as women members. Once aware, they will want to participate actively in the UP's decision-making process and raise their voice against any form of discrimination. This protest will send a message to their male colleagues that elected women members are not mere "ornaments"; rather, they are their equals. Moreover, capacity-building programs should include the male members as well, to make them understand and recognize women's rights and the rules of the UP, which will ultimately influence their attitudes.

Eighth: The enactment of policies does not ensure women's greater political participation. Policies should be implemented properly and efficiently, and this requires adequate funding. Without adequate budget allocations, policies aiming at empowering women or ensuring their greater participation will not go beyond oratory. Thus, political will must be reflected both in policies and resources to support women empowerment effectively (Villaluz 2000).

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Appendix

বাংলাদেশ গেজেট
অতিরিক্ত সংখ্যা
কর্তৃপক্ষ কর্তৃক প্রকাশিত
সোমবার, সেপ্টেম্বর ৮, ১৯৯৭

বাংলাদেশ জাতীয় সংসদ
ঢাকা, ৮ই সেপ্টেম্বর, ১৯৯৭/২৪শে ভাদ্র, ১৪০৪

সংসদ কর্তৃক গৃহীত নিম্নলিখিত আইনটি ৮ই সেপ্টেম্বর, ১৯৯৭(২৪শে ভাদ্র, ১৪০৪) তারিখে রাষ্ট্রপতির সম্মতি লাভ করিয়াছে এবং এতদ্বারা এই আইনটি সর্বসাধারণের অবগতির জন্য প্রকাশ করা যাইতেছে।

১৯৯৭ সনের ২০ নং আইন

Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance, 1983 এর অধিকতর সংশোধনকল্পে প্রণীত আইন
মোহেতু নিম্নবর্ণিত উদ্দেশ্যসমূহ পূরণকল্পে Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance, 1983 (Ord. LI of 1983)
এর অধিকতর সংশোধন সমীচীন ও প্রয়োজনীয়:

সেইহেতু, এতদ্বারা নিম্নরূপ আইন করা হইল:-

১। সংক্ষিপ্ত শিরোনাম:- এই আইন Local Government (Union Parishads) (Second Amendment) Act, 1997 নামে অভিহিত হইবে।

২। Ordinance LI of 1983 এর Section 5 এর সংশোধন :- Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance 1983 (LI of 1983), অতঃপর উক্ত Ordinance বলিয়া উল্লিখিত এর Section 5 এর

(ক) sub-section (1) এর পরিবর্তে নিম্নরূপ sub-section (1) প্রতিস্থাপিত হইবে,
যথা:-

“(1) Union Parishad shall consist of a Chairman and twelve members including three members exclusively reserved for women”.

(খ) sub-section (3) এর পরিবর্তে নিম্নরূপ sub-section (3) প্রতিস্থাপিত হইবে,
যথা:-

“(3) There shall be reserved-three seats exclusively for women members in each Union Parishad, hereinafter referred to as reserved seats, who shall be elected by direct election on the basis of adult franchise in accordance the provision of this ordinance and the rules;

Provided that nothing in this sub-section shall prevent a women from being elected to any of the nine general seats provided for in sub-section (1)”.

৩। Ordinance LI of 1983 এর Section 6 এর সংশোধন:-উক্ত Ordinance এর Section 6 এর sub-section (1B), এ “other than members of reserved seats” কমাগুলি ও শব্দগুলি বিলুপ্ত হইবে।

৪। Ordinance LI of 1983 এর Section 7 এর সংশোধন:- উক্ত Ordinance এর Section 7 এর sub-section (1), এর clause (b) এর শেষে “and” শব্দটি বিলুপ্ত হবে এবং clause (c) এর পরিবর্তে নিম্নরূপ clause গুলি প্রতিস্থাপিত হইবে, যথা:-

“(c) in the case of Chairman, his name appears on the electoral roll for any ward in the union;

(d) in the case of a member including a members of reserved seats, his name appears on the electoral roll of the concerned wards.”

৫। Ordinance LI of 1983 এর Section (18) এর সংশোধন:- উক্ত Ordinance এর Section 18 এর পরিবর্তে Section 18 প্রতিস্থাপিত হইবে, যথা:-

“18 Wards- (I) For the purpose of election members, other than in reserved seats, the union shall be divided into nine wards.

(I) For the purpose of election members in reserved seats, the union shall be divided into three wards.

৬। Ordinance LI of 1983 এ নতুন Section এর সন্নিবেশ:- উক্ত Ordinance এর Section 20 এর পর নিম্নরূপ নতুন Section 20A সন্নিবেশিত হইবে, যথা:-

“20A Delimitation of wards of reserved seats.- For the purpose of election to the reserved seats, the Thana Nirbahi Officer shall cause the nine wards, delimited under the section 20 to be regrouped into three wards and shall publish the list of such wards in the official Gazette.

৭। Ordinance LI of 1983 এর Section 22 এর সংশোধন। উক্ত Ordinance এর Section 22 এ “other than in reserved seats”, কমাগুলি ও শব্দগুলি বিলুপ্ত হইবে।

৮। Ordinance LI of 1983 এর Section 23 এর সংশোধন। উক্ত Ordinance এর Section 23 এ “other than in reserved seats”, কমাগুলি ও শব্দগুলি বিলুপ্ত হইবে।

৯। Ordinance LI of 1983 এর Section 24 এর সংশোধন। উক্ত Ordinance এর Section 24 এ “other than in reserved seats”, কমাগুলি ও শব্দগুলি বিলুপ্ত হইবে।

১০। Ordinance LI of 1983 এর Section 25 এর সংশোধন। উক্ত Ordinance এর Section 25 এ “other than in reserved seats”, কমাগুলি ও শব্দগুলি বিলুপ্ত হইবে।

খোন্দকার আবদুল হক
ভারপ্রাপ্ত সচিব

(English Version)¹

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The following Act adopted by the Government has been endorsed by the President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh on 8 September, 1997 (24th of *Bhadro*, 1404) and is hereby published for general information.

The Act 20 of 1997

An Act made further to amend the Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance, 1983

¹ The Act has been translated from Bengali to English by the author.

Whereas it is expedient further to amend the Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance, 1983 (Ord. LI of 1983) for carrying out the purposes hereinafter appearing;

Thus, the following Act is formulated:

- (1) Short Title: This Act will be called as the Local Government (Union Parishads) (Second Amendment) Act, 1997.
- (2) Amendment of Section 5 of Ordinance LI of 1983: In the Section 5 of the Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance, 1983 (hereinafter Ordinance),
 - (a) sub-section (1) will be replaced by the following sub-section (1)
 - (1) Union Parishad shall consist of a Chairman and twelve members including three members exclusively reserved for women.
 - (b) sub-section (3) will be replaced by the following sub-section (3)
 - (3) There shall be reserved-three seats exclusively for women members in each Union Parishad, hereinafter referred to as reserved seats, who shall be elected by direct election on the basis of adult franchise in accordance the provision of this ordinance and the rules;

Provided that nothing in this sub-section shall prevent a women from being elected to any of the nine general seats provided for in sub-section (1).
- (3) Amendment of Section 6 of Ordinance LI of 1983: In the sub-section (1B) of Section 6 of the Ordinance, “other than members of reserved seats” comas and words will be deleted.
- (4) Amendment of Section 7 of Ordinance LI of 1983: In the last part of clause (b) of sub-section (1) of Section 7 of the Ordinance, the word “and” will be deleted and clause (c) will be replaced by the following clause, such as:
 - (c) in the case of Chairman, his name appears on the electoral roll for any ward in the union;
 - (d) in the case of a member including a member of reserved seats, his name appears on the electoral roll of the concerned wards.
- (5) Amendment of Section 18 of Ordinance LI of 1983: Section (18) of the Ordinance will be replaced by Section (18), such as:

18 Wards- (I) For the purpose of election members, other than in reserved seats, the union shall be divided into nine wards.

(I) For the purpose of election members in reserved seats, the union shall be divided into three wards.
- (6) Inclusion of a new section in the Ordinance LI of 1983: The new Section 20A will be included after Section 20 of the Ordinance, such as:

20A Delimitation of wards of reserved seats:- For the purpose of election to the reserved seats, the Thana Nirbahi Officer shall cause the nine wards, delimited under the section 20 to be regrouped into three wards and shall publish the list of such wards in the official Gazette.
- (7) Amendment of Section 22 of Ordinance LI of 1983: In Section 22 of the Ordinance, “other than in reserved seats”, commas and words will be deleted.

- (8) Amendment of Section 23 of Ordinance LI of 1983: In Section 23 of the Ordinance, “other than in reserved seats”, commas and words will be deleted.
- (9) Amendment of Section 24 of Ordinance LI of 1983: In Section 24 of the Ordinance, “other than in reserved seats”, commas and words will be deleted.
- (10) Amendment of Section 25 of Ordinance LI of 1983: In Section 25 of the Ordinance, “other than in reserved seats”, commas and words will be deleted.

Khondokar Abdul Huque
Secretary (In-Charge)

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