

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’ turnout, 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.

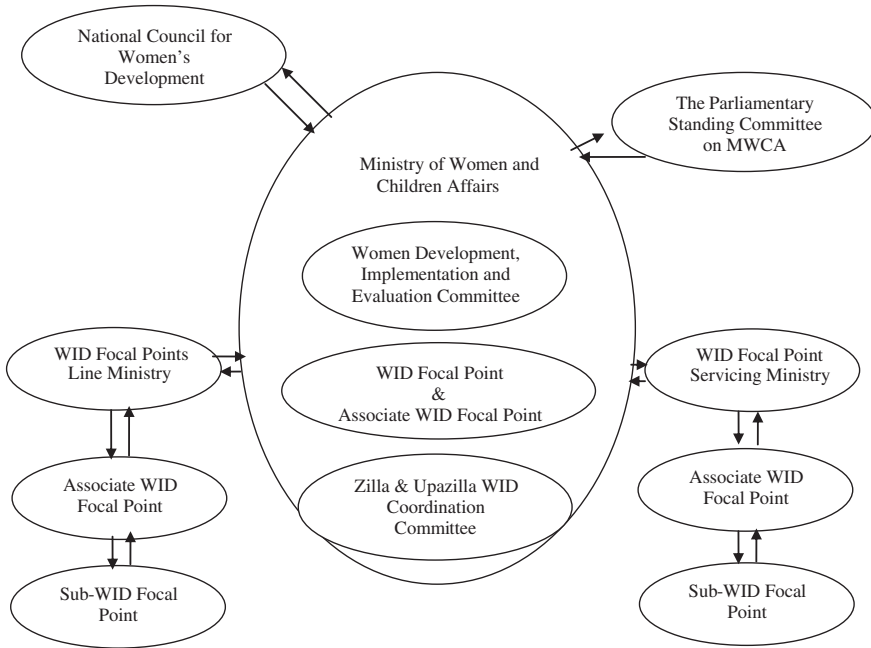
The validity of these claims is high, since the government was not confined within the enactment of the reform of 1997. It also took several other initiatives to turn the objectives of the PFA into reality. First, the government, in partnership with civil society, actors increased its investment in education 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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